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## Rituals of preservation

### Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water

Reviewed by APARNA VAIDIK

“We are not the ones killing the forests and hills to make money. Why should they kill us? We are the sons of the forest. We follow the rules of the forest gods. They are angry at the men who come from outside. It happens like this—we are walking through the forest. Suddenly a branch snaps and falls in our path. But there is no wind, no breeze, so why did the branch fall? At once we know that we are being warned. We do not venture any further and turn back.”

—Mahasweta Devi, ‘The Forests of Jharowa’, in *Hauntings*, Katha, Delhi, 2000.

The compelling narrative of Mahasweta Devi reveals the way traditionally ecological concerns have been inter-twined with and sanctified by religion in India; and whenever the ecological boundaries have been transgressed nature has struck back to avenge itself. This story serves as a point of entry into the debate on the role of religion in ecological preservation. The present volume picks up the thread of the debate where this story leaves off. *Hinduism and Ecology*, an eclectic collection of articles on traditional Hindu concepts of nature, Gandhian philosophy, Indian forests and rivers and on the role of ritual practices in developing the environmental ethic, enters the debate with two central questions. First, whether religious imagery, symbolism and practices (specifically that of Hinduism in this case)—given the state of ecological degradation—can be deployed for the purpose of environmental protection; and the second question is regarding the efficacy of the alternatives hitherto offered for environmental protection, i.e. national parks, biodiversity reserves and sanctuaries.

The answer to the first question is at best a contested one in the volume. Scholars, such as, O.P. Diwedi and K.L.Seshagiri Rao, taking a romantic view of the relationship between ecology and religion, unequivocally endorse the all-consuming importance of religion in the preservation of nature. Failing to problematize the supposed harmonious relationship between religion and ecology, they are of the view that damage to the environment in India in spite of the eco-friendly tradition and ideology of Hinduism, is because of the influence of alien cultures and values, and the forces of materialism, consumerism, individualism and corporate greed. And yet there are authors who see the contemporary ecological depredations as the result of Hinduism prescribing certain forms of social behaviour which are of a “highly individualistic character” and its advocacy of separateness of the “sacred or the spiritual from the profane or utilitarian”. Authors such as Anil Agarwal and Lance E. Nelson feel that a re-examination of Hindu religion is absolutely vital and that all religious traditions must undergo some degree of reconstruction if one wishes to establish a harmonious relationship between man and nature. Parajuli & Apffel-Marglin take this argument even further by saying that no one religion can really become the “rallying point of ecological orientation” given the state of religious conflict in the subcontinent.

However, by dismissing the role of religion in entirety or by focusing only on those aspects of religion, which have hindered ecological preservation, one would be making the mistake of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Classical ecological beliefs have not only had a mythological/historical but have a contemporary importance as well. Some of the authors who have undertaken an ecological reading—distinct from a romanticized view of the role of religion—of religious and classical texts, such as, Lance E.Nelson (*Bhagwad Gita*), David Lee (*Ramayana*), T.S. Rukmani (*Abhijnan-asakuntalam*), Philip Lutgendorf (*Mahabharata and Ramayana*) MaryMcGee (*Arthasastra*) and Laurie L.Patton (*Rig Veda*) try to illustrate the continued relevance of classical beliefs and their role in spreading ecological awareness. For instance, David Lee argues that since the epic *Ramayana* tells us about the natural history of the forests and the classical attitudes toward nature, its contemporary popularity

could be used to make it an excellent vehicle for popularizing messages about nature and the preservation of the natural history. Similarly, T.S. Rukmani feels that the religious texts can play a constructive role in moulding the thinking of those engaged in the developmental process, especially the non-governmental sector. Mary McGee and Ann Grodzins Gold take it further and consider the way the religious texts could provide paradigms for government protection and management of environment and could also contribute toward the historical knowledge regarding ecosystems. The ancient river systems and forests are also repositories of Indian culture and itihasa as displayed by Chris Deegan while exploring the contours of culture and history, which intersect in the Narmada region.

So what comes through quite clearly in most of these articles is the fact that, unlike the West, the relationship of the Indians with their ecology or the “non-human collectivities” (as Parajuli and Apffel-Marglin term it) has been definitely mediated by religion and not by secular ideologies. Most of the Indian festivals and rituals are in actuality the “articulating moments” of peoples’ ecological consciousness, as Vijaya Nagarajan demonstrates in her study on Kolams and the ritual of marrying trees as generators of auspiciousness in southern India as does Madhu Khanna in her article on the Durga Puja. Moreover, most of the modern environmental movements such as the Chipko movement and the Narmada Bachao Andolan—discussed in an interesting way in the present volume (by George A. James and Pratyusha Basu & Jael Silliman respectively)—have also displayed significant ethical and religious dimensions. Even Gandhi who cannot be categorized as an environmentalist had a definite ecological vision of life which was, as persuasively shown by Vinay Lal and Larry D. Shin, grounded on what Gandhi understood to be the “ecological wisdom of India’s epic and religious literature”.

However, historically the diktat of religion has run both ways—for the protection and the destruction of nature. The sanctification of the destruction of nature by religion has been explored by Laurie L. Patton through her textual reading of Rig Veda. According to her, the idea of balanced harmony and the destruction of nature both can be read into the Vedic injunctions on nature. This was because the killing and distribution of the animal, following its sacrifice into the fire, “was part of a larger understanding of human harmony with natural forces”. This sheds light, according to her, on how “as inherent processes in nature, decay and violence are necessary for nourishment, and creativity requires a movement between life and death”; and how these insights derived from the sacrificial process are never incorporated into “our ecological sensibilities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries”.

What much of modern environmentalism and scientific ecology has overlooked is the co-existence of processes of life and death, destruction and growth and the fact that in South Asia ecological knowledge has become so very firmly embedded in the indigenous religious beliefs and practice that it is nearly impossible to mark the division between the two. There has been a constant attempt to draw a line between the two realms, where ecology is representative of ‘nature’ and religion of human society and ‘culture’. With this phenomenon is connected the second question of the viability of secular alternatives such as national parks and sanctuaries for ecological preservation. A feature of this mode of ecological preservation has been to wrest out the realm of ‘nature’ from everyday activity and life—a life where ecological unconcern and excesses are justified. Some scholars in the volume quite rightly argue that ‘nature’ is not separate from daily activity and it is when nature is rendered thus that its exploitation begins. The development of scientific ecology and the adherence of modern leaders to western-style technological modernization and social concepts of secularism, therefore, are actually at the root of this schism between nature and man. This is also much of the reason behind the pollution of the sacred rivers of India as is revealed by the discussion on the rivers Ganga and Yamuna by David L. Haberman and Kelly D. Alley respectively. Madhu Khanna quite succinctly captures the root of the problem—“The imbalance in our ecosphere is rooted in the pollution of the psychosphere.”

Broadly two solutions to this problem can be culled from a reading of the various contributions in the volume. Anil Agarwal, William F. Fisher, Larry D. Shin and Parajuli & Apffel-Marglin—acknowledging their debt to Gandhian ideas—cast their vote in the favour

of participatory, local democratic systems and local level communal organizations, which according to them should be the real stakeholders in the business of ecological preservation and conservation. It is felt that such an initiative would reduce the dependence of common people on the centralized state system and give them a say in the formulation of development and environmental policies. This is most relevant in the case of the tribal communities living along the Narmada River, who have had, as Pratuysa Basu and Jael Silliman show, little or no say, not only in the framing of the policy for the dam, but also in the agitation against the dam.

The second solution is the restoration of 'moral ecology' or 'ecological morality' (as opposed to scientific ecology), which, according to Parajuli & Apffel-Marglin recognizes our "moral responsibility toward non-human collectivity" where the relationship between the humans and their ecology is marked by "regenerative cyclicality and mutuality". In other words, it recognizes our dependence on nature for sustenance and acknowledges the mutuality inherent in this relationship. Further, in Mary McGee's view environmental laws and ecological activism be it of Kautilya's King in the Arthashastra or the modern Indian government grows out of or is compelled by a "moral imperative rather than by a scientific or legal imperative", and a restoration of such a morality which acknowledges the practical dependence of human beings on nature and spiritually respects all the life forms, is what is required. In both the solutions religion plays a significant role of providing the binding force between human and the nonhuman collectivities, bringing us full circle to Mahasweta Devi's Forests of Jharowa.

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Aparna Vaidik is Associate Professor of History, Ashoka University, Rajiv Gandhi Education City, Kundli, India.