

1-2-2018

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Recommended Citation

Shyamala, B. Ph.D. and S., Shwetha S. (2018) "Relevance Of Ancient Indian Methods Of Environmental Protection In The Present Day Scenario," *International Review of Business and Economics*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 37.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/irbe/vol1/iss3/37>

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39. RELEVANCE OF ANCIENT INDIAN METHODS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN THE PRESENT DAY SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

“The greatest shortcoming of human race is our inability to understand the exponential function”

-Albert.A.Bartlett

In a bid to achieve the twin goals of boosting economic growth and ending extreme poverty, nations have exploited the existing resources without understanding the true cost of its depletion. They are confronted with a resource scarcity crisis as they are unable to satisfy the unlimited wants of human beings with the limited resources. Resources have been used, abused and misused over and above their rate of replenishment. At this juncture, it becomes imperative for nations to understand the concept of “Sustainable Development”. Sustainable development refers to development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The questions for nations is not “whether” to embrace sustainable development but “how” to embrace it. The answer lies in an older school of thought. In ancient India, the inhabitants of the river Indus(Hindus)followed certain practices that were environment friendly with or without their knowledge. They embraced nature as an integral part of their life. Hindus have long had a palpable and organic connection with nature. In this paper, “Hinduism” is considered as “a way of life” that was practiced by our forefathers and not merely as a religion. Ancient Indian texts like Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads clearly describe the eco-friendly attitude of Hindus. Plants and trees are valued so highly in Hindu sacred texts that their destruction is connected with doomsday scenario. For the same reason, almost every temple in South India dedicated to Lord Shiva or Vishnu, or to a manifestation of the goddess, has a “sthalavriksha”, a special tree regarded as sacred to that area. The sthalavriksha symbolizes all trees and reminds pilgrims that all trees are worthy of respect. Similarly, in older days, people revered rivers, mountains, forests and animals. For example, many villages had a sacred lake, and around

it a grove of trees to catch rainfall and protect the banks from erosion. The lake and its grove would store rainfall to irrigate surrounding fields and also to provide drinking water to the local community. In recent times, the neglect of these simple techniques for gathering and protecting clean water has led to serious water shortage crisis. These are just few among many traditions followed by our forefathers. The objective of this paper is to study the traditional techniques of environmental protection that were followed in ancient India and to provide suggestions to government entities, NGO’s and International organizations for embracing those techniques for a sustainable future. It is high time to seek lessons from the spiritual heritage of our country as they offer a unique set of moral values and customs that serves as a guide in nurturing the relationship between man and nature, thereby, leading to a sustainable future.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of every nation is to achieve the twin goals of maximizing economic growth and minimizing poverty. In the process, countries have caused irreparable damage to the environment by over exploiting the existing resources without understanding the true cost of its depletion. Now, they are confronted by various issues such as pollution, water crisis, energy crisis and environmental degradation to name a few. A lot of expenditure has been incurred towards R&D by governments and international organizations in a bid to find solutions for a sustainable future. What countries have failed to realize is the abundance of knowledge contained in its own spiritual and cultural heritage. This is particularly true in the case of oriental countries. India has a great source of information pertaining to environmental protection in its sacred books like Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas. These traditional views hold good even in the 21st century. This paper attempts to study the role of Hinduism in protecting the environment for a sustainable future. Also, Hinduism is viewed purely as a way of life and not as a religion.

OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

The two main objectives of this paper are as follows:

- a) To study the traditional techniques of environmental protection that were followed in ancient India.
- b) To provide suggestions to government entities, NGO's and International organizations for embracing ancient techniques of environmental protection for a sustainable future.

ANCIENT METHODS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

India possesses a great-diversified ecosystem containing forests, wetlands, islands, estuaries, parks, landscapes, oceans and a rich blend of natural surroundings. Many customary or community practices were evolved by our ancestors to protect the environment. This is very evident from our Hindu culture. Hindu religion's reverence for the sea, soil, forests, rivers, mountains, plants, birds, and animals stems from its broader view of divinity. Hindus believe that all things and beings in the world are various manifestations of the Ultimate Reality (Brahman), and nothing exists apart from it. The whole emphasis of Hindu scriptures is that human beings cannot separate themselves from nature.

Several decades ago, Hindu sages realized that preservation of environment was necessary for survival of mankind. To create awareness among common people for preservation of the environment, the rishis taught that earth has the same relationship with man as a mother with her child. In the Vedic literature, the earth is addressed as Mother Earth and personified as the goddess "Bhumi", or "Prithvi". Five thousand years later, the world experts addressed earth as "Mother Earth" for the first time at the "Global Conference" in 1992 in "Rio de Janeiro".

There are numerous messages contained in Hindu scriptures for the protection of our environment and the maintenance of ecological balance. The following are a few examples of some of these timeless teachings to tackle the issues of deforestation, climate change, pollution and environmental degradation.

Since time immemorial, forests have been an integral part of the livelihood of mankind. The early inhabitants of India were well aware of the numerous benefits that forests could provide. As early as in the time of Rigveda, tree worship was quite popular and universal. The tree symbolized the various attributes of God to the Rigvedic seers. During the period of the

great epics and Puranas, the Hindu respect for flora expanded further. Trees were considered as being animate and it is still popularly believed that every tree has a Vriksha-devata, or 'tree deity', who is worshipped with prayers and offerings of water, flowers, sweets, and encircled by sacred threads. Also, for Hindus, the planting of a tree is still a religious duty. The Hindu worship of trees and plants has been based partly on utility, but mostly on religious duty and mythology. Hindu ancestors considered it their duty to save trees and in order to do that they attached to every tree a religious sanctity.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna compares the world to a single banyan tree with unlimited branches in which all the species of animals, humans and demigods wander. Indian consciousness is full of trees and forests. If you look, for example, in Greek literature, you will find only a few descriptions of trees and forests, whereas Indian literature such as Ramayana and Mahabharata is full of such descriptions, as if the people were always under a tree. The bond between Indian people and trees is very strong.

Hindu tradition describes three basic categories of forest. One is "Shrivan", the forest which provides prosperity. Then there is "Tapovan", where one can contemplate as the sages did and seek truth. The third is "Mahavana" the great natural forest where all species of life find shelter. Each of these categories must be preserved.

Forests and groves were considered sacred, and flowering trees received special reverence. Just as various animals were associated with gods and goddesses, different trees and plants were also associated in the Hindu pantheon. The Mahabharata says that 'even if there is only one tree full of flowers and fruits in the village, that place becomes worthy of worship and respect.'

Hindus see divinity in all living creatures. Animal deities therefore, occupy an important place in Hindu dharma. Animals, for example, are very common as a form of transportation for various Gods and Goddesses. Each divinity is associated with a particular animal or bird, and this lends a special dimension to the animal kingdom.

As the sheep is to Christianity, the cow is to Hinduism. Lord Krishna was a cowherd, and the bull is depicted as the vehicle of Lord Shiva. Today the cow has almost become a symbol of Hinduism. In India, the cow is believed to be a symbol of the earth because it gives so much yet asks nothing in return.

Lord Krishna Says in the Bhagvad Gita (9.26)
 Patrampushpampahalamtoyam
 Yomeybhaktyaprayachchatitadanambhaktyup
 ahrumtamasna
 (If I accept a flower, fruit or water or whatever
 is offered with devotion)

Apart from attaching religious significance to plants and trees, Hindus also revered them for their medicinal properties.

All plants and flowers have medicinal value in the Hindu system of medicine (ayurveda) brought by "Dhanvantari" - The father of Ancient Indian Medicine System during Samudramathana (churning of oceans).

For example, the Tulsi plant has great medical significance. It is used to prevent and cure many illnesses and ailments like cold, headaches, stomach disorders, inflammation, heart diseases and malaria.

The story of Lord Krishna has it that when Krishna was weighed in gold, not even all the ornaments of Satyabhama could outweigh him. But a single tulsi leaf placed by Rukmani on the pan tilted the scale. In the Hindu stories, tulsi is very dear to Lord Vishnu.

Hindus oppose killing for several reasons. Belief in karma and reincarnation are strong forces at work in the Hindu mind. What we have done to others will be done to us, if not in this life then in another. The Hindu is thoroughly convinced that violence which he commits will return to him by a cosmic process that is unerring. For the same reason, many Hindus adhere to a strict vegetarian diet also. They believe that any harm caused to any living being will backfire on them since they believe in the "Doctrine of karma". Two thousand years ago, South India's saint Tiruvalluvar said it so simply, "All suffering recoils on the wrongdoer himself. Therefore, those who desire not to suffer refrain from causing others pain."

ILLUSTRATIONS OF ANCIENT TRADITIONS FOLLOWED IN INDIA

In India, there is a small community called "Bishnois" in Rajasthan. They practice a religion of environmental conservation. Their religion is an offshoot of Hinduism and was founded by "Guru MaharajJambaji" during the Marwar era. When he was young he witnessed how, during a severe drought, people cut down trees to feed animals but when the drought continued, nothing was left to feed the animals, so they died. Jambaji thought that if trees are protected, animal life could be sustained, and his community would survive. He gave 29 injunctions and principles, among them being a ban on the cutting of any green tree and killing of any animal or bird. About 300 years later, when the King of Jodhpur wanted to build a

new palace, he sent his soldiers to the Bishnois area where trees were in abundance. Villagers protested, and when soldiers did not pay attention to their protests, the Bishnois, led by a woman, hugged the trees to protect them with their bodies. As soldiers kept on killing villagers, more and more of the Bishnois came forward to honour the religious injunction of their Guru MaharajJambaji. This massacre continued until 363 persons were killed defending trees. When the king heard about this human sacrifice, he stopped the operation, and gave the Bishnois state protection for their belief. Today, the Bishnois community continues to protect trees and animals with the same fervour. Their community is the best example of a true Hindu-based ritual defense of the environment in India, and their sacrifices became the inspiration for the Chipko movement of 1973.

HINDUISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The abuse and exploitation of nature for immediate gain is unethical and unjust. No culture has remained immune from human irreverence towards nature. Hinduism in particular is against environmental degradation. They have laid emphasis on the importance of protecting the environment for future generations. For instance, the caste system which has been a subject of debate for decades was instituted for the sake of managing the resources efficiently. The society was divided into different classes and each class specialized on a particular profession. This is similar to the concept of division of labour and this ensured that the resources were put to proper use. There was no fear of encroachment from other classes when people were employed with a particular job profile. . When we look at it from a different perspective, it throws light on the concept of sustainable development where people judiciously used the resources by keeping aside enough for future generations. As Mahatma Gandhi cited, "nature had enough for everybody's need but not for everybody's greed." The budding issue in today's world is the poor belief system in our ancient customs and traditions. In a country like India, it is definitely easier for people to follow these practices provided they are incorporated as a part of their ritual. The Hindu religion teaches a renunciation of worldly goods, and preaches against materialism and consumerism. Such teachings could act as a great source of strength for Hindu societies in their struggle to achieve sustainable development.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EMBRACING TRADITIONAL METHODS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

As former President of India Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam said, "The future of India lies in the hands of the youth".

=> Governments should implement environmental courses for children that are culture and value based right at the school level. Lessons from Western countries should be kept at a minimum.

=> Students should be encouraged to plant saplings in the school and college premises as a part of their curriculum.

=> Good aspects from every religion regarding protection of environment should be taken as an input in framing environmental policies.

These are just few suggestions that are specifically targeted towards youngsters as they are capable of bringing a change in the society.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the need of the hour is a revival of respect for ancient cultural values. This revival need not turn into fundamentalism but could definitely be based on the relevant concepts enshrined in our ancient Indian texts. The message should be to adorn a traditionalist approach by incorporating spiritual guidance into the various socio-economic interactions without causing any harm to secularism. "Satyagraha for conservation" could very well be a rallying point for the awakened spirit of Hinduism. I believe that by incorporating traditional values in to rituals, we can evoke a kind of awareness in people that is different from scientific or technological reasoning. Hinduism helps make human beings aware that there are limits to their control over animate and inanimate world and that their arrogance and manipulative power over nature can backfire. Religion instills the recognition that human life cannot be measured by material possessions and that the ends of life go beyond conspicuous consumption. Secular institutions, national governments, and international organizations should acknowledge the role of cultural values in environmental education. There are definitely several disagreements among world religions but a mixture of key ideas from each of them pertaining to conservation could definitely lead to a new global environmental ethic.

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