

CHAPTER 4

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN INDIA

4.1 INTRODUCTION

All religions and cultures have something to offer to conservation and environmental protection. From each religion several injunctions or exhortations can be brought forth to form a code for environmentally sustainable development. This is amply and extensively demonstrated in the codes of the various religions.¹

4.2 ENVIRONMENT AND HINDUISM

The sanctity of all life on this planet and elsewhere is clearly ingrained in the Hinduism. The Supreme God has absolute sovereignty over all creatures including humans. According to Hindu scriptures all lives have the same right to existence. Human beings have no dominion over other creatures. They are forbidden to exploit nature; instead they are advised to seek peace and live in harmony with nature. The Hindu religion demands veneration, respect and obedience to maintain and protect the harmonious unity of God and nature. This is demonstrated by a series of divine incarnations, as enunciated by Dr. Karan Singh in the Assisi Declaration:

The evolution of life on this planet is symbolized by a series of divine incarnations beginning with fish, moving through amphibious forms and mammals, and then on into human incarnations.

This view clearly holds that man did not spring fully formed to dominate the lesser life forms, but rather evolved out of these forms itself, and is therefore integrally linked to the whole of creation.²

Hindu philosophy provides a solid foundation for the **doctrine of Ahimsa** (non-violence) and this presupposes the **doctrines of karma and rebirth**. The Hindu belief in the cycle of birth and rebirth, wherein a person may come back as an animal or a bird, means that the Hindus give other species not only respect, but also reverence. This provides a solid foundation for the doctrine of *ahimsa* - non-violence (or non-injury) against animals and human beings alike, and Hindus have a deep faith in this doctrine.

The soul may return in different life forms and with this belief there is a profound opposition to the institutionalized killing of animals, birds and fishes for human consumption. Hinduism considers the Nature as **'the body of God'**. Different birds and animals are associated with different Gods and Goddesses and worshipped or the emphasis is on their protection and preservation. Finally Hindu religion provides a moral guideline for environmental preservation and conservation. Abuse and exploitation of nature is considered as unjust and sacrilegious.

4.2.1 Environmental Protection in Vedas

Vedic literature (about 1500 BC) clearly speaks that there is an integral balance in Man, Nature and The God. Natural forces were considered to be expressions of the Lord Himself and are venerable entities. Vedas envisage a beautiful natural environment on earth and command the man not to pollute.

In **Rig Veda** it is mentioned that universe consists of five basic elements namely Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Space (Ether). These five elements provide basis for life in everything and man is ordained to conserve them.

Yajur Veda talks about propitiation and peace of all components of earth.

Atharvana Veda considers earth to be the Mother and the creations are her offsprings. There is a command not to degrade the resources of Mother Earth. Water is considered to be the milk of the Mother Earth which fosters the growth of all its offsprings and makes them pure in 100 ways. Rivers are the source of power for life and water is the symbol of dignity.

Veda commands the knowledgeable to keep the environment free from all impurities and that can be done by way of Yagnas or sacrificial fire. Yagnas have said to be the medium of relation between human and the Devatas. These Devatas are the natural forces who have to be kept propitiated. The Yagnas are done to worship the deity and to purify the air and keep the environment healthy. The 'vid' has been commanded to devote his life for the purpose of yagnas and thus balancing the interests of man and nature.

4.2.2 Environmental Protection in Puranas

During the puranic period (320 BC on ward) a popular belief emerged that each tree had its own deity. People offered water and circled trees with sacred threads in order to protect them.

Narsingh purana personifies trees as God himself.

Varaha purana advocates regular plantation as a means of achieving heaven.

Matsya purana regards planting of single tree is equivalent to leaving a progeny of ten sons.

Vishnu purana says that God is pleased with a person who does not harm or destroy other non-speaking creatures or animals.

In Padma purana and Karna purana it is mentioned that the trees like peepal, bel, ber, neem etc. are the abode of God and they are not to be cut.

Durga saptasati says that so long the earth has mountains, forests, trees plants etc. human race will continue to survive.

Charak samhita considers destruction of vegetation as the cause for drought.

The Padma purana mentions that those who sacrifice cattle are doomed to perdition.

In Manusmirthi the cruelty towards animal is totally condemned. It also mentions optimum use of the natural resources to maintain the balance in the eco system.

4.2.3 Environmental Protection in Bhagavat Gita

Bhagavat Gita considers Nature as one entity with two components **PARA** and **APARA**. Para is the consciousness part of the system and Apara

the physical part of it. The entire universe of which the Earth forming a small of it is created with the union of two elements. The physical part of it is animated by the consciousness part and as such everything visible is considered to be manifestation of one Supreme whole. Gita considers the Nature as the essence of human culture and the man devoid of Nature is considered, an entity without soul.

4.3 ENVIRONMENT AND BUDDHISM

Buddhism is the religion full of love, understanding and compassion committed to the ideals of non violence. The basic tenets of Buddhism are simplicity and ahimsa. The principle of simplicity based on sustainability teaches that man should not over exploit the natural resources. The principle of ahimsa or non violence of not killing the animals shows the love for fauna. The teachings of Buddhism have concentrated on the theory of Karma and the theory of cause and effect. They demonstrate that unmindful neglect of these principles of right living may lead to chaos and thus to environmental crisis. In Buddhism the rivers, forests, mountains are highly respected and regarded as bliss bestowers and buddhists had great respect for the Sun, Moon and other planets. Buddha also set down rules forbidding the pollution of rivers, ponds and wells in **Sutta-Nipata**. Know ye the grasses and the trees ... Then know ye the worms, and the different sorts of ants ... Know ye also the four-footed animals small and great ... the serpents ... the fish which range in the water ... The birds that are borne along on wings and move through the air.³

The Dalai Lama expressed this clearly in the following way "As a Buddhist I believe in the interdependence of all things, the interrelationships among the whole spectrum of plant and animal life including elements of nature which express themselves as mountains, valleys, rivers, sky and sunshine".⁴

4.4 ENVIRONMENT AND JAINISM

Jainism places great emphasis on the principle that one should refrain from avoidable acts that are harmful to oneself or others.⁵ Ahimsa (non-violence) is the fundamental tenet of Jain way of life, a term that is clearly allied with realism, common sense, personal worth and responsibility. For the Jains environmental harmony through spirituality should be pursued by all. This can be done by adhering to three precepts: **the right belief, the right knowledge and the right conduct**. Everyone should be benevolent towards all living organisms, compassionate for the weak, tolerant of the insolent and joyful at the virtuous. This is the Jain way of bringing environmental harmony.

4.5 ENVIRONMENT AND SIKHISM

Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion assigned divine attributes to nature. According to Sikhism people should respect God's creations and know the eternal truth regarding their place in the universe.⁶ Human race is the integral part of the nature and linked to the rest of creation by indissoluble bonds. The Guru Granth Sahib proclaims the glory of God in nature and the environment. Sikhs believe that the universe was created by the Almighty God. A balance between all the elements of nature is necessary for the continuation of the universe. Any disruption in balance brings distress and disaster. The history of the gurus contain many stories of their love and special relationship with the natural environment with animals, birds, vegetation, earth, rivers, mountains and the sky. Thus Sikhism teaches, that the natural environment and the survival of all life forms are closely linked in the rhythm of nature. The history of the gurus contains many stories of their love and special relationship with the natural environment-with animals, birds, vegetation, earth, rivers, mountains and the sky.

4.6 ENVIRONMENT AND ISLAM

In Islam the Holy Qur'an and the divinely inspired words of Prophet Mohammed form the foundation of and rules for the conservation of nature.⁷ The Qur'anic message is one of unity, harmony, balance and order. It stresses that nature's laws must be observed and that defined limits should not be exceeded. Man was created so that he could become a manifestation of divine attributes and serve as a mirror to reflect the image of God. The Holy Qur'an declares that everything is created from water. Allah is considered to be the owner of land and mankind is the trustee or guardian whereas other living creatures are considered to be the beneficiaries.⁸

Allah is unity and His unity is reflected in the unity of mankind and nature. His trustees have been made responsible for maintaining the unity of His creations, the integrity of the earth, including its flora, fauna, wild life and the natural environment. Thus the environment is not in the service of the present generation alone. Rather it is the gift of God to all ages-past, present and future. This message is found in Surah 2:29. Anything that causes pollution or deterioration of the environment is considered as 'Fasad' in Islam.

The punishment for disrupting the delicate balance of nature is laid down in the *Qur'an* and in the sayings of the Prophet. The basic essence of this punishment is accountability before God after death. Iqtidar Zaidi quotes from the Holy *Qur'an* to substantiate this point concerning man's interaction with the environment:

Unto Allah (belong) whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth, and whether ye make known what is in your minds or hide it, Allah will bring you to account for it. He will forgive whom He will and He will punish whom He will. Allah is able to do all things.⁹

Thus in Islam also the necessity of maintaining the harmony between man and nature is very much stressed.

4.7 ENVIRONMENT AND CHRISTIANITY

The Christianity also says that harmonic triadic relationship exists between the divine and humanity, among human beings and nature and failure to maintain the harmony may alienate humanity from its creator and also from Nature. As the Lord said "I am the Alpha and the Omega the first and the last the beginning and the end"¹⁰ Consequently every part of creation has His divine hand in it: no human being has absolute right to destroy it. It is from this perspective that Rev. Father Lanfranco Serrihi (Minister General, Order Friars Minor Conventual, Rome) said "All human effort in the world must therefore lead to mutual enrichment of man and creatures".¹¹ Pope John Paul VI in his message to United Nations Conference on Human Environment held at Stockholm (1972) stated that the environment and resources are for every one: they are inalienable property of everyone and there does not exist over this universal prosperity discretionary sovereignty exempting from responsibility towards humanity of today and tomorrow.¹² This message of Pope John Paul VI makes it amply clear that there is a close link between Christianity and Environment and the thrust is for Sustainable Development. Thus the true spirit of christianity to keep the environment in a perfect condition is very much stressed.

4.8 ENVIRONMENT AND INDIAN CULTURE

The cultural heritage of India show a deep concern for the protection and preservation of the environment. Indian tradition considered the earth as 'Mother'. Rivers are described Lokamata. India is a land of rites and rituals. Indians have articulated the need to sustain and promote the ecological balances of nature through sacred incarnations and systematized

rituals for the sustenance of life on the earth. Since all most all the major world religions are represented in the Indian soil and their religions in turn realized the proximity of mankind and nature, they regulated conduct of mankind in such a way conducive to nature. Indian culture shows an ecological evolution to peace. Peace to all elements of nature and mankind and harmony between them.¹³ Indians applied the culture lessons at two levels. First at the level of relationship between society and nature and second between people within the society. The Indian society was ecoculturally socialized. Renewability and sustainability were the second lesson. It is based on the recognition that sustenance comes from the forest not from the man made cities: from the fields, not from factories. Thus 'environmentalism' is a part and parcel of the Indian culture.