

8. Forest Conservation: Lessons from the Indian Tradition

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Abstract:

Rapid deforestation has taken a toll on the well-being of the environment and its components. Deforestation can cause climate change, desertification, soil erosion, fewer crops, flooding, increased greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and a host of problems for Indigenous people. Conservation, of forests, is the need of the hour for sustainability and benefit of future generations, regulation of hydrological cycle, planetary climate, purification of water, biodiversity conservation, reduction in pollution and natural calamities. There are enough references in every religion which point towards compassion for trees, animals and environment. Hinduism is one of the most ancient of all religions in the world. The principles of nature conservation are embedded in various rituals, mores and traditions of Hinduism. Its scriptures are full of stories and mantras evoking environmental consciousness and ethics. The present paper makes an insight into the Hindu texts to find out the principles of forest conservation enshrined in the religion.

Keywords:

Conservation, Environment, Ethics, Forest, Hinduism, Traditions.

8.1 Introduction:

The present-day forest cover in India rests at 24.62% of the total land area as against the targeted 33% forest coverage. However Indian forests are among the ones with highest biodiversity in the world. The forests have immense ecological importance, like protection of soil erosion, regulation of water cycle, as well as being a storehouse of biodiversity.

With increase in various developmental activities related to infrastructure, like mining, agriculture, transport and communication, the forests have come under a threat which is more than in any previous years. In view of the importance of forests in survival of the human race, it is imperative that all the nations of the world come out with novel ideas in conserving and protecting forests.

India, being a civilization of the ancient world, has an immense amount of knowledge regarding forest and environmental conservation. Since ancient times, walking in balance with nature has been the life philosophy in India. If we take a serious look in our ancient scriptures, we will find that India still has a lot to offer to the world.

The developed world, in its bid for rapid development, urbanization and industrialization, has caused immense harm to nature. While cutting trees and erecting concrete structures in the forest, they had no idea what serious consequences it would have in future. Environmental ethics was a term unknown to most of the Western world and nature was just another means of economic prosperity since they did not have any strong traditions to prevent damage to the nature. No culture of nature conservation is seen anywhere else in such magnanimity, except in the land of undivided India where there are codified *Mantras* (formulas) for nature conservation in religious traditions. In Hindu religion, nature worship can also be recognized as a form of nature conservation. In India, human relationships have been established with various forms of nature including trees, plants, rivers, mountains, planets, stars, fire and air. The tree has been compared to a child while the rivers and land have been considered as mothers. Planets, stars, mountains and air are all considered deities. Since ancient times, the scientists and sages of India had deep knowledge of nature conservation and human nature. They knew that humans can make serious mistakes on many occasions for their momentary gain which can cause huge damage to the environment. Therefore, they developed and codified traditions where nature was considered no less than the Gods so that humans can be prevented from causing serious damage to nature. This is the reason that since ancient times, there have been rituals in India related to worship of nature elements like Fire, Earth, Water, Trees, Animals, Birds etc. which taught, the ignorant population, the art of living in balance with nature.

It is estimated that before the British rule i.e. before 1880s, the forest cover in India was more than 108.6 million hectares which had declined to 98.9 million hectares by 1920s. The major factors responsible for this decline included building of Railways, Shipbuilding, Agricultural expansion, Commercial farming, Tea/Coffee plantations etc. Vast Forests of the Malabar, the Burma and the Himalayas were exploited for the rapid development of British Empire in India. This inculcated a culture of exploitation of nature in Indian elite, which continued even after independence. The result was a destruction of forests in the blind race for material development in independent India. But it is also true that if these traditions were not there, India's situation would have been like that of many western countries which are standing on the edge of deep crisis. Indian traditions which speak in form of its big family of religions be it Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism or Sikhism, preach the principles of compassion towards all living beings. Hinduism sets an extreme example in terms that it sees every living being as a part of that supreme power. The paper explores some of the Hindu texts for their ideas on Forest and nature conservation.

8.2 Hindu texts and the Concept of Forest Conservation:

Hinduism has an inherent idea of conservation of nature in its traditions. The deep relationship that Hindu religion has with nature can be understood from the fact that the first mantra of the world's oldest scripture Rigveda, is composed in praise of Agni.

अग्निमीळे पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य देवमृत्विजं । होतारं रत्नधातमं

(I praise Agni, the God of worship, high priest conducting the worship, benefactor from the ancient times (and) who recites the verses and presents the oblation (to the Gods). (He is also) the giver of great prosperity).

Hindutva is a scientific way of life. There is some scientific mystery hidden behind every Hindu tradition. One thing the world believes about Hindu religion is that Hindu philosophy is based on the principle of 'live and let live'. This specialty is not present in any other religion. The principle of coexistence of Hindu religion makes Hindus more sensitive towards nature. In the Vedic literature, there are instructions for the conservation and promotion of every element of nature. Our sages knew that the basis of life on the earth is air, water and forests. Therefore, considering air, trees and water as important for the protection of the earth, in the Rigveda, the God has said –

वृक्षाद् वर्षति पर्जन्यः पर्जन्यादन्न संभवः'

(Tree is water, water is food, food is life).

In Mahabharat Krishna says

पुष्पिताः फलवन्तश्च तर्पयन्तीह मानवान् । वृक्षदं पुत्रवत् वृक्षास्तारयन्ति परत्र च

(Meaning that Flowering and fruiting trees bring satisfaction for man and therefore anyone who plants and conserves trees will be revered even in the heaven).

Similarly, Rig Veda 1/90/6 says

मधु वाता ऋतायते मधु क्षरन्ति सिन्धवः।माध्वीर्नः सन्त्वोषधीः

(Environment provides bliss to people leading their life perfectly. Rivers make us happy with sacred water and provide us health, night, morning, vegetation. The trees bliss us with tranquility and a peaceful life. Our cattle provide us food in form of milk). The Bhagvad Gita has numerous references for Forest Conservation. A verse from chapter 3 of the Gita has explained the cycle of cloud, rain, food and human behavior towards sustainability and cycling of resources.

अन्नाद्भवन्ति भूतानि पर्जन्यादन्नसंभवः । यज्ञाद्भवति पर्जन्यो यज्ञः कर्मसमुद्भवः

(Life depends on food which grows by means of clouds and rain. Clouds are formed by the Yajna which is the offering of the earth to the Gods. The accumulated fruits of the Yajna will form the basis of all new life or the future.).

Another similar verse states

प्रकृतेः क्रियमाणानि गुणैः कर्माणि सर्वशः । अहंकारविमूढात्मा कर्ताहमिति मन्यते

(Nature controls all action, but the ignorant deny its authority).

Chapter 7 of the Gita contains some beautiful verses in relation to living and non-living elements the nature.

भूमिरापो ऽनलो वायुः खं मनो बुद्धिरेव च । अहंकार इतीयं मे भिन्ना प्रकृतिरष्टधा
अपरेयमितस्वन्यां प्रकृतिं विद्धि मे पराम् । जीवभूतां महाबाहो ययेदं धार्यते जगत्
एतद्योनीनि भूतानि सर्वाणीत्युपधारय । अहं कृत्स्नस्य जगतः प्रभवः प्रलयस्तथा

(Abiotic components of environment include 8 major ones like the land, water, fire, space, mind, intelligence and arrogance which have been called as *Apara*. The control of these lies in the ninth element i.e. Consciousness also known as the *Para*. These elements hold the whole world together while I create and reinforce the life).

In chapter 14 the following verses clearly signify that the nature is the mother of all the livings.

मम योनिर्महद्ब्रह्म तस्मिन्गर्भं दधाम्यहम् ।

संभवः सर्वभूतानां ततो भवति भारत ॥

सर्वयोनिषु कौन्तेय मूर्तयः संभवन्ति याः ।

तासां ब्रह्म महद्योनिरहं बीजप्रदः पिता ॥

(Brahma is the beginning of material world also known as the *Prakriti*. It gives rise all forms of life giving each of them distinct souls and ability to be born. *Prakriti* is thus like a mother of all living beings in which life is sown like a seed by the Brahma).

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. Atharva Veda considers the earth to be the mother and the creations as 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 hundreds of ways. Rivers are the source of power for life and water is the symbol of dignity. Vedas commands the knowledgeable to keep the environment free from all impurities and that can be done by way of Yajnas or sacrificial fire. Yajnas 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 Yajnas 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 yajnas and thus balancing the interests of man and nature. During the Puranic period (320 BC onward) 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 Kama Purana, it is mentioned that the trees like peepal, bel, harr, neem etc. are the abode of God and they are not to be cut.

Other sacred texts like the Durga saptshati 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. In Manu Smirti the cruelty towards animal and plants is totally condemned. It also mentions optimum use of the natural resources to maintain the balance in the eco system. Our sages call 'forests as the bliss of earth' – 'अरण्यं ते पृथ्वी स्योनमस्तु', this is the reason why all the four important Ashrams of Hindu life, Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha and Sanyasa are indirectly related to forests. In Hindu philosophy (Vrksayurvedah-5), a tree has been compared to ten sons of man –

दशकूप समावापीः दशवापी समोहृदः। दशहृद समः पुत्रो दशपत्र समोद्रुमः

(This means that ten well are equal to a bawadi (large step well), 10 bawadis are equal to a pond, 10 ponds are equal to a son and 10 sons are equal to a tree).

Even daily cultural rituals and mores clearly show the importance of plants in daily life. Tulsi plant (Sacred basil) provides the most vital oxygen to humans. Many medicinal properties are also present in the Tulsi plant. Tulsi Strotam 8 says

तुलस्याः पल्लवं विष्णोः शिरस्यारोपितं कलौ । आरोपयति सर्वाणि श्रेयांसि वरमस्तके

(Tulsi leaves are blessed as they adorn the head of Shri Vishnu, it is the Gods' boon in form of plant, to a devotee.).

Similarly, Peepal tree (Ficus tree) is considered a deity in Hinduism. It is worshiped regularly because it also provides oxygen in large quantities.

मूलतो ब्रह्मरूपाय मध्यतो विष्णुरूपिणे। अग्रतः शिवरूपाय वृक्षराजाय ते नमः।।

आयुः प्रजां धनं धान्यं सौभाग्यं सर्वसम्पदम्। देहि देव महावृक्ष त्वामहं शरणं गतः।।

(To the form of Brahma at the root and the form of Vishnu in the middle and Shiva on the top, O king of trees, I offer my obeisance to you in front of you. Give me longevity, progeny, wealth, grain, fortune and all wealth. O lord give me this great tree I take refuge in you)

It can be clearly observed that the Hindu traditions have an innate relationship with the Forests. Therefore, each tree has the position equivalent to a deity. Since there is a tradition of worship of trees, a practicing Hindu becomes a protector of trees. Hindu Emperors like Asoka and Vikramaditya had many conservation strategies in place during their reign. Chankya's *Arthshartra* gives references of appointment of Forest guards to protect the trees.

In Chhandogya Upanishad, the Sage Uddalak, while describing the soul to his son Shwetketu, says that like humans, the trees also have souls. They experience happiness and sorrow like humans. It is common to see that an ordinary Hindu housewife explaining to her innocent child that trees and plants should not be touched at night, as they go to sleep and it is not right to disturb them.

She might not know the scientific reason behind this but she carries on the traditions of her family. Science tells us that trees release more carbon dioxide at night, hence children, youth and elderly people who spend the whole day under the shade of trees in villages do not sleep under trees at night. Little traditions and festivals like *Janmashtami* and *Shivratri* are also marked with involvement of plants. It is said that Mahadev, the God of Gods, is pleased only with Bel leaves (Wood Apple leaves) and Dhatura (Jimson weed). If someone is a devotee of Shiva then he will have to protect the Belpatra and Dhatura trees and plants. If we want to celebrate the festival of Vat Purnima and Amla Gyaras, then banyan trees and Amla (Gooseberry) trees will have to be saved on earth. The Vat Savitri Vrat (Fast) is also marked with the worship of Banyan tree. It is well known that these trees have immense value in Ecosystem. It was therefore enshrined in our religion to worship them so that damage to them was considered a sin. These traditions have helped save a number of trees from felling. Similarly, there are prescriptions of use of plant products like Coconut, Betelnut, Rice, barley, saffron, Sandalwood etc. alongwith flowers like marigold, lotus, rose, Jasmine etc. thereby helping in protection of various species of plants and other forms of life, depending on them.

8.3 Conclusion:

Hinduism encompasses a rich tradition emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings and the environment. Rooted in principles like "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" (the world is one family), followers are encouraged to treat nature with reverence. Sacred groves and trees are acknowledged, and the concept of Ahimsa (non-violence) extends to promoting sustainable practices. Dharma, the righteous duty, underscores the moral obligation to protect and preserve the environment. Rituals like Yajna involve offerings to gods from the natural world, reinforcing a symbiotic relationship. The personification of Earth as Bhumi Devi (the goddess of land), the mother goddess, fosters a sense of responsibility for the planet. Beliefs in karma and reincarnation suggest consequences for environmental actions, promoting responsible stewardship. Some Hindu festivals, while rooted in nature, are evolving toward eco-friendly celebrations. Despite variations in interpretations, many Hindus actively engage in environmental conservation, aligning their practices with the ethos of harmony with the natural world.

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