

Divinizing Nature for Sustainable Global Growth: The Indian Perspective

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Abstract

The recent catastrophic climate conditions and the spate of wildfires, floods, cyclones, etc. on an unparalleled scale sweeping most parts of the globe has sent mankind in a tizzy. Despite numerous summits and conferences of world leaders and the action plans continue to make headlines even though the real effect on the ground seems suspect. Faultlines flagged include the seemingly unsustainable global market economy, high-level consumerism, widespread deforestation, emissions from ever-burgeoning number of automobiles and fossil-fuel fed industries, use of chemicals, building of big dams, etc. While all this is true, the real change has to come about in human attitude to nature. From the urge to exploit nature, it has to be of an interdependence based on respect for the natural elements and creatures because these maintain balance and provide congenial environment for life. My paper analyses the situation and concludes that for this to happen, we need to involve heart and soul as much as the mind. Our native cultures existing since ages and finding expression in ancient as also contemporary literatures provide an answer to tackle the fearsome scenario facing us, and this is to treat nature not just as a living being, but rather a divine being.

Keywords: Ecology, Religion, Globalization, Culture, Spirituality, Ancient Indian Texts.

INTRODUCTION

That the climate change has come to threaten human survival is now crystal clear. On one hand is the increasing evidence of fires, floods, tsunamis, typhoons and earthquakes; on the other, we find famines, volcanic eruptions, global warming, loss of biodiversity, species extinction. These are no mere writing on the wall, rather these are endemic and here to stay. For far too long, we have behaved ostrich-like, refusing to see the inevitable, and now suddenly, we find the time has run out. It is feared that there will be 2.7% rise in earth's temperature by the end of current century despite commitments made by various governments at COP25 and subsequent editions of this conference. According to scientists, rise in temperature beyond 1.5% is catastrophic for human life. If the present trend continues, then by 2050, most of the earth will become a vast tropical desert that is inhospitable for human survival. The Pulitzer awardee Elizabeth Kolbert rightly avers that "We're wrecking our life support system – that's the big story!" (Kolbert).

The Coronavirus that shook the world not long ago is now taken to be the harbinger of several such diseases spreading frequently and there are clear indications – you get to read too often now of a new variant coming up. Rise in temperature by 2 degree Celsius by 2070 will mean more and more animal species being forced to settle in new areas closer to human settlements and that means "by 2070, 10000 to 15000 new germs (bacteria and viruses) which were previously confined to animals and forests would come into contact with humans," claims a watchdog (Roberts). The World Health Organization long back launched the One Health Initiative that treats the health of humans, animals and environment as interconnected. ("One Health")

Reasons for the continuing rise in temperature vary from congestion in cities to and pollution caused by automobiles and factories, or desert sand and forest fires. Fossil fuel emissions have been rising steeply since 1950. In fact, with the rise of industrialization, the phenomenon of urbanization (2% land mass occupied by 56% urbanites in the world) and later globalization with its focus on mass consumption and international travel have added to the malaise. The world "in the 20th century used 10 times as much energy as in the thousand years before 1900." (McNeill)

According to studies, human impact increased on environment since the 1960s with the construction of big dams, ample use of riverine water and fertilizers in fields. The geologists are mulling over naming the start of Anthropocene age (name given to our times when human impact is maximum on environment) from this time

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period or from the time when America detonated nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. The moot question is how we accept nature: as environment and resource only, or something more with its intrinsic life and worth? Our anthropocentric approach in believing that humans are the only important beings in this universe, is responsible for environmental disasters. We should not forget that the health of humans, animals and vegetation are intertwined,” says Chandrakant Lahariya, Director of Foundation for People-centric Health Systems. Unless we change our callous and lop-sided outlook and involve all stakeholders, the catastrophe facing mankind will not vanish.

This observation at once pits the human interest against the interest of the non-human world, for what we see is the depletion of non-human population and a rise in the human population. This human/non-human hierarchy in inter-species rationality is linked to other such binaries like civilization/savagery or culture/nature and seems intractable. The leaders of the world have to understand that modernization has meant industrialization and that has been responsible for urbanization distorting the village culture that has sustained world for millennia. Nowhere do we find the thinking about going back to learn from native cultures which are far better attuned to nature than the so-called modern civilization riveted only to science and technology.

Science and Religion

Science grew in the western world which was also the seat of Christianity. Despite initial opposition to science, church finally yielded and approved even the colonization. Talking of the most dominant civilization, i.e., Christian, Lynn Townsend White, American historian and environment activist, in his paper “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis”: “We shall continue to have worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.” (White)

It was the anthropocentric culture that determined their worldview and knowledge systems when some philosophers tried to define the universe in terms of a machine. Francis Bacon famously pronounced that the universe is a dead machine and only humans have any value, and so they must control the universe. Born out of human arrogance, this view was responsible for aspirations of the European colonizers to rule over the world. They set out on sail to conduct trade which proved to be a step towards slave trade and colonization. The victims were non-Christians and therefore Much of Europe rose at the expense of rest of the world and their native cultures.

The colonizing process was accompanied by cancellation of eco-friendly native cultures not merely in India, but even in Europe, the native Celtic, Slavic and Germanic cultures became the victim of violent Christian conquest. The church was supported by kings to claim divine approval of their rule. “The victory of Christianity was the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture,” says Lynn White. Science played the role of a handmaiden to this ambition, what with its focus on exploitation of nature for mass production in factories, genetic engineering of plants, carbon-emitting vehicles and machines, etc. Genetic engineering threatens mankind with unforeseen consequences through techniques like gene modifications for sex selection, race or colour preferences, etc. Even though some of such techniques have been used for increasing farm yields etc., yet knowing full well about the ways in which science has been used, one can be sure that these will be aimed at reaping material benefits and, what is more worrisome, imposing technologies that are essentially destructive of native knowledge systems.

Globalization

The colonizing instinct is not passe but is visible in the garb of globalization today. With its nucleus of economics, it has become economic colonization that is doing the action replay with regard to native cultures. Contemporary MNCs driven by greed manifest the most nefarious human instinct to conquer nature even as it is known that widespread denudation of forests, building of large dams, digging of miles-deep mines to extract minerals and oils upset the fragile eco-system.

Amitav Ghosh, an erudite scholar and novelist, gives us an insight into the working of the MNCs in *The Hungry Tide*. As a piece of eco-fiction, not only does it highlight the ecology of a unique natural region, the lifestyle of the people and animals, etc., but also deals with important questions that have a bearing on ecology and the human population that is umbilically attached to it. How, in search of subsistence, the dispossessed tend earth

to bear fruit for them but how their rights are negated by the politics of multinationals that results in a horrible episode in which thousands of people are killed.

The central issue in Ghosh's novel is the infamous 1979 Morichjhapi massacre of Hindu migrants from the then East Pakistan. Around 30000 migrants had settled in the Sundarbans despite its inhospitable terrain with a large number of small islands which routinely get submerged with frequent waves rushing in from the sea. These islands have mangrove forests and dangerous creatures like tigers, crocodiles, etc. (Sarkar). The West Bengal government, in collusion with the business house known as Sahara Pariwar, is on record as having evicted around 10000 people from Jambudwip Island in 2002 because the corporate wanted to set up a tourist resort. On the face of it, the idea of a beautifully maintained natural habitat to be sold to the tourists seems to favour ecological maintenance, but the reality is different.

Looking into the life of the refugees, we notice that they were able to live in a symbiotic relationship with nature – deriving their sustenance while at the same time minding the conservation part. They had the dream of resettling in the Sundarbans which they considered as part of their motherland. (165). They rapidly established Marichjhapi as one of the best developed islands of the Sundarbans. Within a few months. A thriving localized economy without any government support was built in the region. However, the negative fallout was that the left front government of West Bengal felt slighted at the successful resettlement of refugees in Marichjhapi and accused them of having violated the forest acts and causing serious ecological imbalance. (Mohanty 176). Over ages, the people in that region have been living a sustainable life, as for example, not fishing when it is the breeding season for the fish, and so on.

According to Ghosh, nature is all that “included everything not formed by human intention.” (142) and it is self-sustaining, as for example, the fish “scrape off the diatoms and other edible matter attached to each grain of sand” (142). The writer also examines various myths, legends, anecdotes and beliefs that circulate in the layman's domain. There is a temple here, as elsewhere in the region, of *Bon Bibi* or the goddess of the jungle who is worshipped by all regularly, particularly when they go out to work or undertake a longish journey, which goes to show how they treat the forest as the abode of the deity and lead life respecting the rights of the non-humans considering them as co-creatures. Thus, it is not just dry reason that should govern mankind when it comes to dealing with the issue of environmental crisis, because reason has restrained political leadership across the world from coming together to fight the menace, as we have seen in case of the COPs. It is the involvement of heart that will make the real change. We saw this during the Covid times when each nation was only raising its barriers. How some governments refused to share the formulae for the newly discovered vaccines with other countries was a stark reminder of the cloistered and cocooned mindset of people sitting in seats of power there.

Tribal Communities

In the ancient societies which have retained the native cultures, we find that theirs was the lifestyle that sustained nature. Their oral literature venerates and communicates with nature. Regrettably, the impact of Christian missionaries and past colonization continues till this day to wean vulnerable communities away from their eco-cultural practices like worship of vegetation or mountains, dubbing it as superstition. Ordinary people are guided by culture but are alive to the needs of time and space. The Chipko movement in the hill state of Uttarakhand in India was based upon the notion that trees are our friends and ought to be saved from the capitalists who want to clear the forest to set up tourist resorts. It took so long for their efforts to bear fruit under the stewardship of a committed environmentalist Mr. Sundar Lal Bahuguna.

As already pointed out, among literary luminaries, Amitav Ghosh has been championing the environmental cause through his writings since long. Apart from several novels, his non-fiction *The Great Derangement* (2016) too touches upon this subject in his characteristic scholarly manner. *The Living Mountain* (2022) is a fable published recently by him, in which he relates the story of the so-called modernity that is undermining the traditional wisdom and endangering environment, symbolized by the 'Mahaparbat' in the book. The location is the idyllic landscape of a valley at the foot of a mountain. Despite the ongoing clashes between groups living in the valley, they are united in not letting outsiders enter their habitat and step on the mountain which they consider as a living mountain. They are blessed with a magic tree, the wonderful nuts of which attract people

of another race called the Anthropoi, who wish to enter but are refused. So, they note down the details of the riches of the place and return with armed soldiers. The inhabitants' averment -- "since we were not making use of the mountain's riches, they were fully justified in seizing them and taking whatever they wished" (14) -- shows their mental subjugation. Now, the mountain is ravaged, the natives enslaved physically and culturally, and forced to assault on the mountain. While climbing it, the natives too turn against each other even as their avaricious exploitation of the mountain results in avalanches and landslides. It is a metaphorical take on the colonizers who foisted a unitary, utilitarian and rational outlook on the unsuspecting natives accustomed to a simple, contented life in their habitat that they considered divine. The divinizing or deifying land is not something new for the western civilization either if we consider the concept of 'gaia' or the earth goddess of Greek mythology. This too supports the ecological view of earth as a self-supporting organism. Environmentalist Derek is right in concluding that "The concept of an Earth goddess is nearly universal and certainly ancient. Egyptian, Greek, Indian and Jewish traditions, to name but a few, provide us with female Earth deities" (74). But the evolution of western culture and civilization forsook its non-Christian past.

Indian Culture

Various civilizations in the world have sprung from humble roots. In their long journey to becoming what we consider "civilized" societies, they underwent myriad experiences and evolved different knowledge systems. While some have strayed far off in the quest for material advancement, in India, ecological concerns have always been important as the old and the new co-exist in a unique way here. The ancient texts may have been dubbed by some western Orientalists as expressions of laymen of a bygone era, but therein lie the truths that can help us save humanity today.

Cultural Texts: Take, for example, the Vedas which are acknowledged as the oldest texts available to mankind. These are replete with references to the life and activities of ancient times which gives the impression how the people living at that time revered nature. We find detail of vegetation, animals, birds, etc. The Rig Veda venerates deities like Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Marut, Surya, Agni et al, that control various elements/functions in nature. The seers of the Vedas wish for proper balance among these elements in the interest of human welfare and prosperity. In Prithvi Sukta (Section), Shloka 12, the Vedic seer states: "*Mata Bhumiḥ Putroham Prithivyah*" (Earth is my mother and I am her son.). Elsewhere in the same section: 'Whatever I dig from thee, O Earth, may that have quick recovery again. O purifier, may we not injure thy vitals or thy heart', (Shloka 34), we find this potent plea for sustainability in nature. Rigveda prohibits the destruction of forests (Rigveda, 8.1.13). The Vedas are full of verses wherein the qualities and uses of myriad plants and trees are given and there are hundreds of verses which enjoin upon humans to protect the birds and animals while recounting their usefulness.

The Upanishads which are devoted to debates about ethics and spirituality, were written in ancient ashrams or hermitages which served as schools also. These were located close to nature, even in forests or in the hills as these facilitated uninterrupted meditation and learning. As a specimen of its ecological slant, one can quote from *Chhandogya* Upanishad, the famous maxim *Sarva Khalvidam Brahma* or the entire universe including living and non-living matter is the manifestation of God only. (3.14.1). This is also the central message of the Vedanta philosophy which has the greatest following in India. It debunks the distinction between the animate and the inanimate world, for it believes all creation to be imbued with a cosmic consciousness.

The Bhagavad-Gita, which is an extension of this philosophy, provides the divine base of prakriti (roughly nature). "Īśvara, as an omniscient God, is the source of the universe through his two prakritis—sentient and insentient. This classification is purely based on the degree of manifestation of the Consciousness in those entities. There are no ontological differences at all in these sentient and insentient entities, as all of them are but expressions of the same divine power of God" (Vireshananda 6).

Ordinary Indians believe in the concept of 64 lakh yonis or life forms in which humans can be re-born, so one cannot look down upon any life form. Indian culture, therefore, emphasizes respectful attitude to nature. From seeking God's blessings on all natural elements in the Vedic *Shantipath*¹ prayer mantra to the epic story of Lord Hanuman's supplication to the Sanjeevani herb to donate its leaves for Laxman's life, instances supporting respect for vegetation are there in plenty.

Sustainable Practices: Sustainability needs to guide our daily life which is led according to the culture of a place. Religion has a lot of say in cultural matters. The concept of dharma which is considered most significant element in human life by Indians is generally taken to be synonymous with religion but it is not exactly the same. Without going deep into its meaning, let us understand it as the central theme of the revered epic Mahabharata, in which Lord Krishna enlightens Arjuna about the nature of dharma: *ya syaat dharna samyuktah sa dharna iti nishchayah* (only that which promotes sustenance is dharma). There is lengthy discussion at several places in the epic about the sustainability fostered by dharma. It is said that dharma is context-sensitive, so that “If in specific situations, or over time, the norms start hindering the sustenance of the stakeholders, they too need to change and evolve. This is the inherent flexibility of dharma. The end goal – that “of sustenance and growth – is what matters” (Ganatra 5). Besides, it also says that *dharna ev bato hanti dharmo raksbati raksbitah* (Dharma destroys those who destroy it and protects those who protect it). (Ganatra 6). Since dharma controls the universe as *rita*, we can supplant the term ‘dharma’ here with nature which would then underline the lesson that mankind is being urged to learn in our times.

In order to achieve sustainability in human-nature relationship, we need to modify our lifestyle. Now, there are several daily practices in the life of ordinary Indians which din into his mind the reverential status of natural elements, thereby motivating us to conserve and sustain them. The first morning Puranic mantra to be chanted after rising from bed refers to the earth goddess: *Samudra vasne devi, parvat stan mandle; Vishnu patni, namastubhyam, paadsparsb kshamamyaham* (O, goddess earth, spouse of Lord Vishnu! The oceans are thy garments and the mountains thy bosom. Pardon me, I am touching you with my feet). The respect for vegetation is inbuilt. There are days when womenfolk would worship different trees like Peepal, Bunyan, Amla, etc. Worship of animals like cow and snake is a common practice. Same is the case for rivers like Sindhu, Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, etc.

Sustainability is an integral part of the rituals. For example, Yajna or the sacrificial fire is performed daily by many to purify environment. The concern for sustainability also leads to adaptability of alternative practices in, for example, immersion of Ganesh idol at the time of Ganesh Chaturthi festival into a pond customized for the occasion rather than immersing in sea or rivers as had been the practice. Also there are what are called ‘emergency provisions’, for in times of war, natural calamity, the proper material may not be available and so alternative one can be used. All these practices are sustainable, like in yajna, if a particular type of wood is not available, then some other can be used; and if that other type is not available, still another type can be used. In Brahadaranyak Upnishad, there is an interesting conversation between king Janak and Rishi Yagyavalkya:

King: What is the oblation for *agnibotra* (ritual fire)?

Rishi: Milk is the best type of oblation.

King: If milk is the best and it is not available, what should be done?

Rishi: Use rice and barley.

King: If rice and barley are not available?

Rishi: Take some other medicinal herb.

King: If that herb is not available, then what to do?

Rishi: Use some wild herb.

King: If wild herb is not available, then?

Rishi: We’ll use vegetation.

King: If vegetation is not available, then?

Rishi: Use water.

King: If water is not available, then?

Rishi: When nothing was available, then also agnihotra was performed – by putting truth as oblation into the fire of devotion. (Ashrit 56-57)

CONCLUSION

There have been several attempts by international bodies like UNESCO through its Earth Charter 2019 to strengthen “community of life”, and environmentalists like Vandana Shiva talk about “earth democracy” and “ecological civilizations”, but unless heart gets attached to the cause of saving environment for its own sake, and our lifestyle including our deeply entrenched but outdated religious practices change out of compassion for the environment, our planet cannot really be called safe. Sentiments and emotions that appeal to heart are not valued in this technological age, but these are not entirely out. It will be a doom’s day for earthlings if we enter the Brave New World of Aldous Huxley, with mechanical production of human beings! Rousseau’s “Back to Nature” call needs to be repeated now, loud and clear.

Divinizing nature is a spiritual rather than a religious act. For a non-believer, arousing emotions that take one to the next level of deification rather than reification, literature and its visual counterparts can help. Thinkers belonging to different cultures have looked upon literature as substitutes for religion. Literature of a sublime kind has the potential to sway the heart in the right direction, and even take it to a spiritual state.

Notes

¹ *Om Dyau Shanti, Antariksha Gwam Shanti, Prithvi Shanti, Rapah Shanti, Oshadhayah Shanti, Vanas Patayah Shanti, Vishwed Devah Shanti, Brahma Sarvagwam Shanti, Shanti Reva Shanti, Sa Ma Shanti Redhi. Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om!* This ‘Shantipath’ recited at the end of all types of formal prayers invokes peace on all natural elements and spheres, viz., space, sky, earth, water, herbs, vegetation, all gods looking after various functions of nature, the creator lord Bramha, and every celestial being and worldly object, so as to lead to the realization of peace by us, human beings. What is to be marked here is that the term ‘peace’ denotes perfect balance and harmony. If the sky, land and water are in natural harmony, then the human beings too would enjoy peace. Thus, it underlines the link between natural elements and human beings.

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