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Environment in Hinduism

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Abstract

Living in harmony with Nature has been an integral part of Indian culture. This has been abundantly reflected in a variety of traditional practices, religious beliefs, rituals, and in the daily lives of the Indian people from time immemorial. Hinduism has always been an environmentally sensitive philosophy. The rishis of the past have always had a great respect for nature. As we are growing more materialistic, we are losing this connection. Hindu knowledge preaches Man to live in harmony with nature. Bhoomi Suktam or Hymn describes the beauty of Mother Earth and imparts lessons regarding the attitude a person must cultivate towards the environment. Hinduism teaches to preserve and protect the environment, not to pollute it. The Shantipath is also connected the Hindu with nature. This paper seek to analyse the Knowledge of Environment in Hinduism.

Keywords: Hinduism, environment, earth as a mother

Introduction

Hinduism (Sanatana Dharma) is rightly called a dharma rather than a set of fundamental doctrines, it has a strong tradition of toleration and it embraces diverse thoughts and practices. Sanatana means eternal which is not 'fixed' or 'stagnant' and 'conservative'. But today this dynamic nature of Hinduism has become a threat. Many dignified belief and practices of Hindu Dharma lost its way and in lieu of that many ignoble practices cemented its position in the Hindu way of life. The followers of the Hinduism have forgotten the emphasis that is laid on nature and the environment in Hindu Dharma and started following many rites and rituals on name of Dharma which causes much harm to our environment. In Sanskrit, the equivalent word for environment is 'Paryavarana'. Hinduism has always been an environmentally sensitive philosophy. No religion, perhaps, lays as much emphasis on environmental ethics as Hinduism. The Mahabharata, The Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas and Smriti contain the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance. Nature, or Earth, has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. In fact, man is forbidden from exploiting nature. He is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals.

Review of Literature

Swami Vivekananda rightly said "Religion is the idea which is raising the brute unto man and man unto God." Today when earth is suffering due to gross violation of nature by our greed, it is the exact threshold situation when "Hinduism" can provide reprieve. From the Vedic upto Classical, the intimate relationship between Nature and Man is being reflected and highlighted in the pages of Sanskrit literature. Throughout the long history of India, Hindus have shared a fascination with, and respect for, Nature and animals. As we are growing more materialistic, we are losing this connection. Our ancestors saw Nature as being a manifestation of God. The rishis of the past have always had a great respect for nature. The Vedic seers visualized the various aspects of nature, its glamour, regularity, helpfulness, loveliness, virile and unassailable power and sometimes fear caught up their imagination. India was a land of vast forests. Those forests not only administered to the daily needs of the people, giving them shelter from heat of the sun and ravages to storms. The people lived in one vast embrace of nature, as one family. There was an attitude of identification, not conflict, a search of the One, not of the many. It has a strong tradition of non-violence or ahimsa.

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The Isopanisada states in its 1st mantra that the God is present in each and every part of this creation- “isa vasyamidam sarvam yatkinca jagatyam jagat”. In the ancient spiritual traditions, man was looked upon as a part of nature. Hinduism teaches that the five great elements (space, air, fire, water, and earth) that constitute the environment are all derived from prakriti, the primal energy. In ‘Ten key Hindu Environmental teachings’ Dr. Pankaj Jain explains "Hinduism recognizes that the human body is composed of and related to these five elements, and connects each of the elements to one of the five senses. The human nose is related to earth, tongue to water, eyes to fire, skin to air, and ears to space. This bond between our senses and the elements is the foundation of our human relationship with the natural world. For Hinduism, nature and the environment are not outside us, not alien or hostile to us. They are an inseparable part of our existence, and they constitute our very bodies." Hindu knowledge preaches Man to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. Our cultural and religious texts like The Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Gita, Puranas and Smriti preaches for preservation of environment and ecological balance. “Hinduism does not authorize human beings to lord over the earth and exploit it in a whimsical, selfish and anthropocentric manner. It advises human to enjoy the world and their life, but within reasonable limits that do not disrespect the earth itself”. (Nadkarni, 2008, p.407-408). Dr. Karan Singh states: "In our arrogance and ignorance we have destroyed the environment of this planet. We have polluted the oceans, we have made the air unbreathable, we have desecrated nature and decimated wildlife. But the Vedantic seers knew that man was not something apart from nature, and, therefore, they constantly exhort us that, while we work for own salvation, we must also work for the welfare of all beings." (Essays in Hinduism - By Dr. Karan Singh p. 47).

Methods

The proposal which I selected is very important because the main aim of this study is the ecological awareness in ancient India. The mean of data collection is to study literature, analysis of data and interpretation of data. I have collected data from different sources. This paper explores the knowledge of environment in Hinduism.

Discussion

Vedic culture is believed to be a culture of nature. The Rig Veda is a celebration of nature, its hero the God of Rain. Nature is beautifully described in this hymn of Rig Veda as:

“By the first touch of His hand rivers throb and ripple.
When He smiles the sun shines, the moon glimmers,
The stars twinkle, the - ower’s bloom.
By the first rays of the rising sun, the universe is stirred;
The shining gold is sprinkled on the smiling buds of rose;
The fragrant air is filled with sweet melodies of singing birds,
The dawn is the dream of God’s creative fancy.”
(Rig Veda 1.6.3)

In the Rigveda alone, we have several suktas where Rishi propitiates the natural elements as deities showing the significance of these objects in human life or in all living

beings. As for instance, in the Vayu-sukta of the Rigveda states that Vayu or the air is the essence of all living beings. (Rig., 10-186.2). In the Vedic period, the fur-fathered sages established this fact by their mantras where the Rishi shows his high gratitude towards vayu by designating it as his father, brother and friend etc. Likewise vayu the water is essence of life “jalat prasastamam lokopakarakam kimapi nasty” (Tai., Sikhsavalli, XII Anuvaka). The Aranayakand of Ramayana and AryanakaParva in Mahabharata contains much evidence of man and nature interaction. In the Ramayana, when Sita was abducted by Ravana, at this mournful situation, the flora and fauna had shown their sympathy towards Rama and paved his way in their own languages,-

“Evamukta narendrena te mrgah sahasotthitah |
Daksinabhimukhah sarve darsayanto nabhah
sthalam||
Maithili hliyamano sa disam yamabhyapadyat |
Tena margena gacchanto niriksante naradhipam ||
Darsayanti ksitim caiva daksinam ca disam mrgah |
Sadhu gcchavahe deva disametam ca nairrtim || (Ibid,
Aranyakanda, 17.19-22)

Thus, the intimate relationships between man and nature have been observed in the pages of ancient Indian scriptures. ShantiParva of Mahabharat says “It brings great sin if fire is not offered purifying material (havan); if trees are cut down on auspicious days, if human waste, spit and cough etc. are dropped in water.” (ShantiParva). In chapter eleven of Bhagwad Gita Lord Krishna is beseeched by Arjuna to reveal his universal form showing all of existence. Hinduism teaches to preserve and protect the environment, not to pollute it. The Matyapurana also suggests taking care and protection of trees which is highly beneficial for the existence of human beings and nature. i.e.

“Padapanam vidhi suta! yathavad vistarad vada |
Vidhina kena kartavyam padapodyapanam vudhaih
//” (MsP, 59.1)

The Padmapurana warns: "A person who is engaged in killing creatures, polluting wells, and ponds and tanks, and destroying gardens, certainly goes to hell." (Padmapurana, Bhoomikhanda 96.7-8). Rig Veda contains hymn which underlines the importance of trees in removing Pradushana or Pollution. “Do not cut trees because they remove pollution.” (Rig Veda 6:48:17). No one could have imagined at that time that there can be a problem like ozone depletion but Our Yajurveda highlighted the importance to save the atmosphere. “Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere.” (Yajur Veda 5:43). Mahabharata alerts the people regarding the need of taking care and protection of trees- “Puspam pusgam vicinvita mulacchedam na karayet” (Mbh, Uddyogaparva). In the Mundaka Upanishad the divine is described as follows:

“Fire is head, his eyes are the moon and the sun;
The regions of space are his ears, his voice the revealed Veda,
The wind is his breadth, his heart is the entire universe,
The earth is his footstool,
Truly he is the inner soul of all.”

God is in all thing and all things are in God (sarvam khalu idam brahmah). The whole emphasis of the ancient Hindu scriptures is that human beings cannot separate themselves from natural surroundings and Earth has the same relationship with man as the mother with her child.

BhoomiSuktam or Hymn to Mother Earth is one of the most beautiful hymns that describes the beauty of Mother Earth and imparts lessons regarding the attitude a person must cultivate towards the environment. The very first verse opens with a bold statement that defines the proper manner in which the Earth and the environment must be understood.

“Satyam Brhad-Rtam-Ugram Diikssaa Tapo Brahma
Yajnyah Prthiviim Dhaarayanti |
Saa No Bhuutasya Bhavayasya Patny[i]-Urum
Lokam Prthivii Nah Krnnotu ||” (12.1.1)

It says that the Earth is upheld, is sustained by Truth (Satya), Eternal law or Order or Righteousness (Ritam), Consecration or Initiation (Deeksha), Devotion (Brahma) and Sacrifice (Yajna). Earth is not a “jada” or non-living entity. She is a living mother, a force that is sustained by Truth, Order, Austerity, Devotion and Sacrifice. Hence, it is these attitudes that a human is expected to implement in his life. The Suktam (in verse 12.1.12) calls “Maataa Bhuumih Putro Aham Prthivyaah” or “Earth as the mother and humans as her sons”. Hence it becomes a duty of humans to not only help the mother Earth sustain herself, but also to protect and enrich her. They should develop the attitude of devotion and sacrifice regarding every object, every entity present in the surrounding environment. Such a person will never commit those actions that can harm other entities that are present in the environment because he realizes that Himsa or injury is adharma or against the cosmic law. If, every person cultivates these attitudes towards the surroundings, it would automatically result in the protection, preservation and enrichment of environment. The Suktam (Verse 12.1.4-6) further describes Mother Earth as the “Mistress of four quarters in whom food and cornfields have come to be, who bears in many forms the breathing and moving life; in which men of old have performed many tasks, where the gods have defeated demons, which is the home of cattle, horses and birds; which is all sustaining, treasure bearing, firm staying place, gold breasted home of all creatures, who supports the Universal Fire Vaishvanara” (Vaishvaanaram Bibhratii Bhuumir-Agnim-Indra-Rssabhaa Dravinne No Dadhaatu). These verses further bring out the understanding of Earth as a nourishing, all sustaining Mother. The nourishing aspect of the Earth is further highlighted in verses (12.1.29-30), wherein the Earth is referred to as “Purifier” using whose pure water a person purifies himself. Mother Earth is further described as a place where all human actions are carried out. She is the basis, the foundation that holds together all actions. But, the Bhumi Suktam is concerned about those human actions that may turn to be harmful to nature. Verse 12.1.35 says, “What, O earth, I dig out of thee, quickly shall that grow again: may I not, O pure one, injure thy vitals or thy heart”. The verse is clearly speaking about the misuse of natural resources and its harmful effect on the environment. Towards the end, in Verse 12.1.48, Mother Earth is described as supporting both the fools and the wise, the good and the bad. She supports everyone, including those who harm her and the environment in a dangerous way. Such, is the compassion and love of Mother Earth for her children. Hence, people should realize her supreme love and sacrifice, and begin to live their

lives in such a way that the environment is not harmed in any manner. The BhumiSuktam (Verse 12.1.63) ends with a prayer asking the Mother Earth to stabilize life and fill it with grace and splendor. Similarly, the Visnupurana also praises the earth as our mother as she nurse and nourish all existing things- “saisa dhatri vidhatri ca dharini prasani tatha” (VP, 1.32.92).

The highest ethical standard that Hindus ought to apply comes from the concept of SarvaBhutaHita, which means the welfare of all living beings. In Hinduism the common good takes precedence over private advantage.

According to Indian seers, environment is consisting with pancamahabhutas -the earth-water-fire-sky and wind. So, these five visible gross elements have a great significance for an environment, without which the survival of mankind is quite impossible. Several Indian philosophers are also in favor of these facts that, God is present in each and every element of this universe. So these are not so ordinary elements which have been deified in Sanskrit literature. The significance of deification of these elements is that, the human beings will be psychologically and spontaneously eager to develop a sense of respect towards these elements. In this way, the ancient Indian seers observed nature from different angles viz. as creator or a creation. The entire world is interconnected with both animate and inanimate objects. There is a deep relationship among plants, animals and human beings. Therefore, as being the superior to all of these, it is the duty of every man of this earth to maintain the beauty of nature and not to disturb its equilibrium. The Vedic ancestors devoted their life for welfare of the whole universe. They performed some religious activities (like *yajnas*) through which they had been teaching human beings to respect natural objects, peace, purity, sanity and serenity forever. They prayed:

“Om Dyau Shanti RantarikshaGwam
ShantiPrithvi Shanti Rarah
Shanti Roshadhayah Shanti VanasPatayah
Shanti Vishwed Devah Shanti Brahma
SarvagWam
Shanti Shanti Reva Shanti Sa Ma Shanti Redhi
Om Shanti ShantiShanti Om” (AV., 19.8.14)

Conclusion

Hinduism can never teach its follower to violate and harm the nature for short sighted selfish gains. All Hindu religious and cultural texts teach us to revere the Earth for its endowments. In Bhagavad Gita Krishna explained the ecological cycle to Arjuna in verse 3.14-16 “All living bodies subsist on food Grains, which are produced from rains. Rains are produced from performance of yajna (sacrifice), and yajna is born of prescribe duties ... One who does Not follow in human life the cycle of Sacrifice thus established by the Vedas certainly lives a life full of sin. Living only for the satisfaction of the senses, such a person lives in vain”. Hinduism does not authorize its followers to lord over earth. It teaches to respect the earth as our mother. At the end of my paper I also pray the mantra called Shantipath for the peace of all of us.

“Madu vata rtayate madhu ksaranti sindhavah |
Madhvirnah santvosadhiih ||
Madhu naktamutosaso madhumat parthivam rajah |
Madhu dyaurastu nah pita ||
Madhuman no vanaspatirmadhuman astu suryah |
Madhvirgavo bhavantu nah ||” (Rig., 1.90.6-8)

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