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Review Article on Relation between Hinduism and Environment - A Vedic Approach

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The present paper gives an insight of the importance of the environment in the oldest religion of the world either, Hinduism and discovers the environmental ethics which were prevailing in the olden society and how far we human are still practicing those ethics of ancient time.

Human existence and environment have been co-existed since the evolution of human on earth. Environment had provided clean air, clean water and an environment free of toxins to the human kind. All the religion in the world had given due respect to the environment since time immemorial. Environment owes the important position in all the major religion of the world namely Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity. Hinduism can better be termed as a way of life. Hinduism is considered one of the oldest and the scientific religion of the world.

In Hinduism, environment and nature are considered as the gift of God. Hindu religion believed that survival of human kind is totally dependent on healthy environment. All the forces of nature either air, water, sun, earth and fire are termed as god, and hence they are eligible to be worshipped in Hinduism. The time when the conservation and protection of the environment was not even thought of, at that time the Vedas and Puranas which are the sacred books of Hindu religion, had directed human being to worship nature and its components.

Practices in Hinduism as confirmed by the study of Vedas were environmentally friendly and if those practices are followed today it can give answers to the various environmental problems.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is known to be the oldest religion in the world. The oldest book Rig Veda is proof of this religion being the oldest. All the Hindu religious scriptures Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagwat Gita crowns the glories of Ancient Indian Literature. All these scriptures rotate around the idea of well-being of Mother Earth (Mata Prithvi), nature and life present on it. Hindu literature owes the importance to environment which is called Paryavaran in Hindi and it has its origin from the Sanskrit word *Parvavarnam* which means avaran (covering). The origin of importance and respect to environment can be seen long back in the Vedic and ancient Sanskrit literature. The Hindu religion conceptualizes the relationship between human and nature. The ancient texts available in Hinduism provide knowledge about the basic elements of the environment [1]. They instruct in all the forms to have a worshiping attitude towards the entities of mother Earth and all the natural resources present on it. All the religious Hindu text preach human that it is the sanctified duty of human to protect Prithvi (Earth), Vayu (air), Aakash (sky), Jal (water) and animals [2]. Hinduism has always taught to practice respect for nature and to live in harmony within it. Many plants and animals were worshipped as deities. Conservation of plants and animals was considered as the top most duty of human who was also considered the creation of God [3]. *Ahimsa Parmo Dharama*, either non-violence is still considered the dharma of highest order. Saikia (2018) concluded that Vedas have answers to all the questions related to environment. Physical and spiritual knowledge both are covered in Vedas and they are full of idea of life and nature. [4]

Manusmriti, known as the written record on Hindu Law has stipulated various punishments for slashing down plants and trees. *Charaka Samhita* considers the most dangerous and threatening act for humanity is the destruction of forests. Charaka also mentioned specifically air pollution as a cause of many diseases. *Charaka Samhita* also refuses the use of unwholesome water [5]. Killing of animals was treated as a sinful act. Some animals not only had economic value but also, they had significant ritualistic value in the society [6]. Trees like peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), vata (*Ficus benghalensis*), banana (*Musa acuminata*) and animals like cow (lord

Krishna), bull (Lord Shiva), Lion (goddess Parvati), snakes also known as 'nag'(Lord Shiva) are still worshipped in many parts of India. Coward, 2003 explained the continuity and deep sighted relationship among all organisms on Earth, and they must be mistreated [7]. Tay, (2019) summarized in Hinduism it was believed that every individual will face its karmic consequences according to its behaviour towards the environment, which means that if good is done to the environment then that individual would accumulate the good karma [8]. Old traditions in Hinduism preach human to live in harmony and peace with nature. It believes that all the creatures are created by one creator, so nobody had the right to harm other living being maybe it a plant or an animal. But as the civilization progressed human gained an anthropocentric approach as started thinking itself to be the master of nature. Since the Vedic times, the social life in Hinduism believed in living harmonious with the nature. The study in the olden times was done while living in the forests with the help of Vedas, Purana and Smritis so that the student may develop benevolent attitude towards nature and respect it.

2. PERSPECTIVE OF ENVIRONMENT IN VEDAS

The concept conservation and protection of environment is not new to India. The early steps of conservation and protection of environment is traceable in the Vedic period where worship of nature is thought to be originated. [9] Several prayers and hymns mentioned in Vedas gives an idea of respecting the nature in all aspects which also have similarity with the principle of modern times which relate to conservation of natural resources. For example the twenty-fifth Rio principle talks about the interdependent and indivisible nature of peace, development and environmental protection [10].

Rigveda says "environment provides blessing to people for living their life perfectly. River bless us with the sacred water and medicines provides us health, sun bliss us with peaceful life. Our cows provide us sweet milk" [11]

In *Atharvaveda*, there is a verse related to pollution

*"Sarvo Vai Tatra Jivate
Gour-Asvah Purusah Pasuh
Yatredam Brahma Kriyate
Paridhir Jivantaya kam"*

Above verse explains the importance of clean, unpolluted environment for the human being as well as animals. Sanctity of the atmosphere should be maintained in order to live and solve the purpose of life. Man on this earth can live up to hundred years also if the atmosphere is unpolluted, peaceful and clean. Rigveda defines Sun as the vital source of all what so ever is moving and also of which is not static. Sun is the ultimate propagator of darkness because the rising sunrays mitigate all adverse effects of pollution. This can be found in a shloka mentioned in Atharva Veda [12].

“Adityah Parvatebhyo,
Visvadrasto Adrstaha”

The importance of forest conservation and preservation was given due importance in Atharvaveda. Although India was blessed with many rivers and heavy rainfall, then also wise use of water was well advocated by the scholars of ancient India. [13] Veda directs every individual present, to pay due regard to the environment by worshipping trees. [14] The word ‘Panchvati’ seems to be very common in the ancient text, where ‘panch’ means five and ‘vati’ means grove. Simple meaning is a grove consisting of five trees. Mainly these five types of trees were Banyan, Peepal, Ashoka, Bael and Harad which were considered sacred due to their medicinal properties. Even today Hindus do worship these trees. Kale and Shkadwippee (2018) had explained through the verse in *Bhumisukta* about the treasure which mother earth had bestowed on human being in the form of gold, silver and other minerals. But human being should not unnecessarily dig the mother earth. The idea of sustainable development can be found in the religious text of Hinduism which was written centuries ago. [15]

“Sita Bhumir Asima Pamsuh,

Sa Bhumih Samdhrta Dhrta”

Religion plays an important role in molding the sight of human being towards environment. All the religion in this world have their own ethics and morals in regard to the entities of environment. The biggest challenge in today’s world is to deal with the ongoing crises of the environment. The sacred books of Hinduism are filled with the idea of protection and conservation of environment. Today’s big need is to go back to the religious literature available and take up the idea of preserving the environment [16].

3. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMAN AND NATURE IN HINDU RELIGION

In Hinduism, even human being is considered to be made up of five natural essential elements these are Prithvi (mother earth), Varuna Devata (lord of water), Vayu Devata (lord of winds) Agni Devata (lord of fire) and Aakash (sky). Therefore, cutting of trees, polluting air, water, land was regarded as sin as these elements of nature were to be respected as gods and Goddess. Protection and conservation of these five elements was the duty of everyone. The Rigveda devoted an entire hymn to praise the healing properties of trees. Some of the trees associated with Gods and Goddesses are given below-

One important vedic prayer in Sanskrit is “*Mata Bhumih putruahan prithivya*” where Earth has been depicted as a mother and all the individuals present on the earth are depicted as its sons. All the natural resources which are present on earth like water, air, land, soil, mountains, flora, fauna and whatever present on the earth naturally are to be taken care of in the same way as a son takes care of his mother. There are several verses in Vedas which are dedicated to environment protection and conservation [17].

Table 1. Plants associated with gods and goddesses

Name of the trees	Associated god and goddesses
Ashoka (<i>Saraca asoca</i>)	Buddha, Indra
Fig (<i>Ficus carica</i>)	Vishnu, Rudra
Kadamb (<i>Neolamarckia cadamba</i>)	Krishna
Lotus (<i>Nelumbo nucifera</i>)	Laxmi (Goddess of wealth)
Mango (<i>Magnifera indica</i>)	Laxmi, Govardhan
Neem (<i>Melia azarachta</i>)	Sitala, Manasa
Palasa(<i>Butea monosperma</i>)	Brahma, Gandharva
Peepal (<i>Ficus religiosa</i>)	Vishnu, Krishna
Vata (Banyan) (<i>Ficus benghalensis</i>)	Brahma (creator of universe)

Source: *Environmental Law by S.C. Shastri*

"Do not cut trees, because they remove pollution." -Rigveda [18]

"Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere." – Yajurveda [19]

Flora occupies the important place among the peoples. The vedic people use to harness the wealth of nature very judiciously. They compared the trees like Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), Vatvriksh (*Ficus benghalensis*), and Banana (*Musa acuminata*) with God. There is a verse in *Vriksayurveda* which denotes that benefit which we get by planting a tree is equal to the benefits which we get from having ten sons.

"Dasakupa sama vapi dasa vapi sama hradah
Dasahradah samah putro dasaputra sama drumah"

It was prohibited to cut Vatavriksha(*Ficus benghalensis*) because it was believed that god resides in this tree and no disease can attack the place where Vatavriksha (*Ficus benghalensis*) is present [20]. This has been backed by Shri Krishna in the Shrimad Bhagwadgita—

"asswathu sarvavrikhanam".

According to the scientists of recent times, the peepal tree and Vatavriksha tree assimilate carbon dioxide from the air and release oxygen and thereby balancing the concentration of carbon dioxide and oxygen in air.

Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) is still considered as sacred in Hinduism. In vedic times, it was compulsory to plant a Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) plant by every hindu family. Every family use to have a Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) plant at their verandah. Worship of Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) plant was considered as sacred. Watering tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) plant was believed to give a long and healthy life. Family was believed to be prosperous if Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) plant was worshipped and taken care of. There is another verse in *Vriksayurveda* which praises the tulsi plant. [20]

"Jabadinani tulashi rupitapi jad grihe grihe
Tabadvarsha sahasrani vaikunthe sa mahiyate"

This Sanskrit Veda verse means that the number of years the tulsi plant is at any individual home, the same number of days he will reside in heaven. In ancient vedic period, Yajnas were performed by the saints and chief ingredients of

Yajna were ghee (clarified butter) and various dried herbs. It is well known that after the Yajna, the air becomes pollution free. The bacteria harming the environment come to an end. [21]

4. IMPORTANCE OF NATURE IN HINDUISM

One of the Hinduism beliefs is that it's the duty of a person to save its Dharma; meaning of Dharma is duty. In other words it has been directed in Hinduism to save the environment because it has been incorporated in their Dharma. [22] Hindu worship and accept the presence of god in nature and its elements either biotic or abiotic. Hinduism had connected all the living and non-living components to god and goddess. Hindus were considered as *Dharmabhiru* which means a person who was scared of not performing his dharma properly. They do believe that it was their core duty to protect mother earth and its components. If they fail to do so they will be punished by god after their death and will not attain *Moksha*.

Still several Hindu communities like *Bishnois*, *Swadhaya* and *Bhils* are known for protecting their dharma in the form of their conservation-oriented practices. Bishnois are still known to save their trees and animals from any type of anthropogenic disturbances. *Swadhayayis* are known to build their tree temple which are called as *Vrikshamandiras* and *nirmal nir* which are known to be water harvesting sites. *Bhil* community still performs their sacred rituals in a groove of forest and pays their homage to god for the wonderful creation of nature. In brief it can be said that whatever these communities are doing it is not mere to protect the environment but they consider it as their dharma to honour the god's gift which is in the form of nature [23].

Animals were given due importance in the Vedic period. Cow was considered sacred animals not only during the Vedic period but also in today's modern era. It is in common termed as *Gau Mata* which refers cow as mother. Even the urine and excreta of cow are considered sacred and are still used in religious ceremonies in Hinduism for purifying an individual. Lord Vishnu is said to take the avatar (form) of half human and half fish in his *Matasya* avatar (quoted in *Matasya Puran*) and cleaned up the polluted sea and rivers. [24] Lord Vishnu is also believed to take the avatar (form) of swine (quoted in *Varah Purana*) and cleaned the land by eating up all the filth present on the land. These avatar (form) of Lord Vishnu

are still worshipped [25]. Even Monkeys are treated as incarnation of Lord Hanuman.

Somvanshi (2015) summarize the saying of Swami Hasdevacharya, who is head of Swami Jagannath Math of Haridwar that the only religion based on respect of nature and environment is Hinduism. The biotic components of environment like the trees, animals and birds and abiotic components like the geographic entities are given the status of gods and goddess and are hence conserved and worshipped. [26] It is well known fact that Peepal tree release more oxygen than other tree species, thus in Hinduism peepal tree is worshipped and cutting of peepal tree is a sin. There are many examples in the sacred books of Hinduism which highlights that Hinduism aims at conserving the environment. [27] All the religious scriptures inform human being about the importance of earth's ecosystem and necessity of protecting them. A verse explanation of Rig Veda clearly states that "thousand and hundreds of years if you want to enjoy the fruits and happiness of life then take up the systematic planting of trees."

Framarin (2012) concluded that literature on Hinduism gives the moral understanding of behaviour of human towards plants and animals. [28] One of the popular religious text of Hinduism *Ramayana*. It signifies the importance of monkeys and their king Lord Hanuman as they were considered an important ally of Lord Rama. Today also we have many temples dedicated to Lord Hanuman. Lord Krishna is another deity who is known for his love towards cows. Lord Vishnu is known to his love for Lotus plant and in *Vishnupuran* it is mentioned that lord Vishnu resides on Lotus flower. All the ancient scriptures of Hinduism had directed human being to be the care taker of mother Earth and its elements. Environmental ethics had always been the indispensable part of Hinduism [29].

Vedic sages and even holy prayers today also in any of the religious reverence chant the shloka which pray for peace at all levels in the Shanti Mantra – "Let there be peace in the space, peace in the sky, peace on the earth, calmness in waters, peace of trees, peace of plants, grace in all gods, blessings in the Brahman, peace in everything, peace and peace, peace be with every one of us." [30] Madhavi and Done (2018) highlighted in their study that if we go back into the ancient religious literature (Vedas) available to tackle the environmental problems especially

pollution, then maybe we will able to solve problem of pollution to some extent [31].

5. CONCLUSION

Hinduism believes that all the living and non-living beings are sacred. Hindu religious texts are filled with idea of environment protection and conservation. Many of the environmental issues which persist today can be solved by going through the path which ancient scriptures had suggested centuries ago. The belief that all the living beings are part of god, even land, mountains, rivers are believed to have souls in them and hence, they are eligible for worship. Today we human being had forgotten these teachings. In Bharat, still people practice the teachings of their sacred text. Their festivals are based on environment friendly rituals. Still River Ganges is treated as sacred and is called Maa Ganga. Mount Kailash is treated as adobe of Lord Shiva. Lake Mansarovar is worshipped even today. Glacier like Gangotri is thought to be home of Goddess Parvati.

Thus, the answer to environmental problems lies in environment itself. Practicing the sayings of ancient literature will definitely provide remedial measures to stop environmental degradation. The practices mentioned in Hinduism are still effective, only the need is to bring them back to daily practices which human being is forgetting in his fast and environmentally degrading life.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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