

### **Hindu Environmental Ethics**

The numerous hymns, philosophical treatises and storybooks from the Hindu canon offer readers colorful and occasionally confounding descriptions and prescriptions about the natural world and man's place in it. This moral guidance is often buried within allegory or metaphor, yet occasionally it appears in plainspoken edicts. This paper examines eight Hindu texts — of different styles from different periods — in search of a sense of environmental ethics.

Readers must note that generalizing about the religion of almost a billion people is tricky business, especially given the multitude of interpretations of a voluminous canon. These texts must also be considered in their historical periods, as ideas shift concurrent with social and demographic changes. As the Aryan society spread across what is today India and Pakistan has changed, so has its epistemology, norms and values. Hindu environmental ethics evolve as well, becoming varied and conflicting. Reverence of nature — a basic tenet of conservation and stewardship — yields to anthropocentrism as philosophers focus on the human condition, sometimes to the exclusion of the natural world. In their most troubling iterations, these ethics turn against nature entirely, yet counter trends also appear to favor environmental protection.

Readers should be cautioned; in the interest of brevity, some relevant passages have been excluded. An exhaustive catalogue is not the goal of this paper. Rather, this analysis aims for an overview of important selections from the Vedic, classical, medieval and modern periods. It is through this survey that varying environmental ethics are indeed found.

#### *Elemental creation*

Early sacred texts from the Vedic period concentrate on tangible, natural elements and their origins. This period begins approximately at 1500 BCE, roughly the time of the demise of the

Indus Valley civilization, and lasts until 500 BCE. The earliest text under consideration, the 10-book *Rig Veda (RV)*,<sup>1</sup> dates roughly from 1200 to 900 BCE when the Indian subcontinent was sparsely populated. In this society, social order was most important function of religion. Hindu philosophers are more interested in explaining creation and the workings of the natural world. One famous story from the *RV* tells of the primeval man, a cosmic giant named Purusa. In a sacrifice, the gods divvy up Purusa to create this world, the worlds beyond, the celestial bodies, the seasons, all creatures and even the Hindu rituals themselves. Importantly, the four social classes, or *varnas*, are also carved out of this first man.<sup>2</sup> A different creation story is revealed in a hymn to Prajapati, the progenitor, who holds “in place the earth and this sky,” ruling over snowy mountains and the ocean. The supplicant declares to this god of creation, “No one but you embraces all creatures.”<sup>3</sup> In the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad (BU)*,<sup>4</sup> a philosophical treatise that arises between 600 and 500 BCE as Hindu society is transitioning from agrarian village life to increasing urban commercialization, Purusa reappears as an entity existent from the beginning of time and identified with the cosmic essence. Wanting companionship, Purusa splits himself to create a woman and copulates with her, making humans. She transforms herself into a cow, he becomes a bull and the two make cattle. This continues as each transforms into successive beings, until all creatures have been created “down to the very ants.” The cosmic Purusa goes on to create ritual sacrifices and even the gods themselves.<sup>5</sup>

These stories from the *RV* and the *BU*, texts authored by priests of the *brahmana* class yet considered of divine origin (*sruti*, revealed), emphasize a natural order where humans are one of

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Rig Veda*, trans. Wendy Doniger (London: Penguin Books, 1981), Kindle edition.

<sup>2</sup> *RV* 10.90.

<sup>3</sup> *RV* 10.121.

<sup>4</sup> “Brhadaranyaka Upanisad,” in *Upanisads*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> *BU* 1.4.3-6.

many divine creations. As the Vedic period progresses, gods are responsible for natural bounties and boons. This might simply reflect the concerns of a society dependent on natural resources. Such dependence could engender a reverence for natural elements and beings — be they cattle and ants or mountains and rivers. This pervasiveness of that which is divine foreshadows late-Vedic theology that preaches a fundamental equivalence between everything, obliterating the ideas of difference and distinction. All substances, beings and natural processes are part of the same cosmic essence.

### *Natural cosmology*

Early in the Vedic period, the natural world is a divine creation, born of cosmic energy.<sup>6</sup> A complex pantheon arises where gods are identified as elements or persons controlling aspects of the natural world. For example, Agni<sup>7</sup> is the god of fire; Soma<sup>8</sup> is the personified deity of the ritual plant used in sacrifices; gods of the sun, storms and other elements appear as well. Above these stands Indra, the boastful, powerful leader of the pantheon, sometimes identified as a creator or supporter of the natural world.<sup>9</sup> Numerous stories refer to his exploits, including one that seems to cement Indra's place as protector of water, a crucial natural element in an agrarian society. According to legend, Indra slew the mighty dragon Vrtra who had captured and held back "the waters," presumably rains absent during a drought. Fueled by that natural, divine intoxicant Soma, Indra crushes Vrtra who collapses, and "over him as he lay there like a broken

---

<sup>6</sup> *RV* 10.190.

<sup>7</sup> *RV* 2.35, 4.5, 10.51 among others.

<sup>8</sup> *RV* 9.74.1-6.

<sup>9</sup> *RV* 2.12.

reed, the swelling waters flowed for man.”<sup>10</sup> In the classical period, Indra also becomes associated with weapons and battle prowess, yet he and other gods retain their connections to natural elements. In the epic *Mahabharata (Mbh.)*, Ganga, the river goddess, gives birth to Bhishma, whose skill and power are enough to check the flow of the river herself; he later leads the Kurus in battle against the Pandavas.<sup>11</sup>

Though the *BU* focuses on ontological questions about reality and existence, natural elements still possess divine connections. Links exist among nature; *atman*, the essence of self; and *brahman*, the divine cosmic essence.<sup>12</sup> Renowned sage Yajnavalkya reveals a philosophical regress where the physical world is “woven back and forth” on water, which in turn is woven on air, which comes from the atmosphere (intermediate region). The regress continues through the worlds of the sun, the moon, the stars and the gods. Finally, the world of the creator Prajapati is “woven back and forth” on the worlds of brahman.<sup>13</sup> (Note: Continuing the regress, to ponder upon what brahman is woven, will cause your head to shatter apart.)

These connections between natural elements and divinity, as well as the gods’ control over natural bounty, lead logically to worshiping gods as creators, commanders and protectors of nature — or as nature themselves. This worship in the Vedic period takes the form of various sacrificial rituals, including the intricate, detailed and important sacrifice of the horse, a much-revered animal.<sup>14</sup> Yet this sacrifice goes beyond simply venerating the gods who are masters of nature and the elements; the worshiper prays for and expects very real boons to be granted from

---

<sup>10</sup> *RV* 1.32.

<sup>11</sup> *The Mahabharata: An English Version Based on Selected Verses*, rev. ed., trans. Chakravarti V. Narasimhan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 6-8.

<sup>12</sup> *BU* 1.5, 2.1, 2.5.

<sup>13</sup> *BU* 3.6.

<sup>14</sup> *RV* 10.56.

the practice: “Let this racehorse bring us good cattle and good horses, male children and all-nourishing wealth.”<sup>15</sup> Ritual sacrifice — not simply to worship a god but to obtain specific benefits — receives a grand articulation during the exploits of the Pandavas in the classical period. The fearsome Bhima engages in battle for 14 days to destroy the tyrant Jarasandha so that he can’t interfere with the *rajasuya* sacrifice, a powerful ritual that will cement Yudisthira’s emperorship.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, even the veneration of gods through sacrifice goes beyond mere nature worship; believers have real demands, some of which have little relation to environmental goods.

*A supernatural, natural cycle*

Even in ancient times, Hindus demonstrated an understanding of ecology — specifically the hydrologic rain cycle — which animated hymns and philosophies during the Vedic period. Doniger, in commentary on her translation of selected verses of the *RV*, explains: Hindus conceive of the rays of the sun as drinking the waters of earth (metaphorically from a cow’s feet) only to return them as drops of rain from above (metaphorically from a cow’s head).<sup>17</sup> This cyclical nature of rain and the larger role it plays in the growth of ecosystems appears in the theological cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). After cremation, the human essence rises to the moon only to return to earth in the form of rain. This is taken up by plants, which are then eaten by men, passing on this essence into semen that gives rise to a new birth.<sup>18</sup>

Yet this subsuming of part of a natural cycle into a supernatural one doesn’t necessarily engender a desire to protect the environment upon which it hinges. Rather, the system is seen as

---

<sup>15</sup> *RV* 1.162.22.

<sup>16</sup> *Mbh.* 44-46.

<sup>17</sup> *RV* 1.164.

<sup>18</sup> *BU* 6.2.16.

a prison from which to escape.<sup>19</sup> Liberation (*moksa*) becomes the preoccupation for late-Vedic thinkers who favor philosophical meditation and renunciation of the world. In this time, ritual sacrifice itself becomes a metaphor for meditation.

Socially, during this period, Hindu societies urbanize, develop commercial centers and become ever more interested in material welfare. Counter currents of asceticism embrace simple living in harmony with nature, but the Hindu brahmanas adopt a different focus: realization of ultimately knowledge to escape the cycle of rebirth all together. The *BU* emphasizes the “fundamental equivalence,” unknown to the masses, between the essence of the self (atman) and the cosmic essence (brahman). The *BU* suggests that everything society holds dear — wives, priests, royalty and even “the worlds” — should be held dear based solely on understanding of their equivalence with the self.<sup>20</sup> Understanding that brahman, atman and everything else are of the same essence is the Vedic student’s “highest attainment! This is highest world! This is his highest bliss!”<sup>21</sup> One who realizes this truth escapes the cycle of rebirth. Those who understand this, “these people live in those worlds of brahman for the longest time. They do not return.”<sup>22</sup>

This hardly seems like an environmental ethic. This is not recanting a life of materialistic pleasure; the emphasis here is on transcending the physical reality entirely. With this as the ultimate good, late Vedic literature leaves little room for conservation or even veneration of nature. Preservation of the physical, natural reality is simply at odds with this Vedic goal of transcendence and peeling back that reality to reveal the “real behind the real.”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> “Introduction,” in *Upanisads*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xlviii.

<sup>20</sup> *BU* 2.4.5.

<sup>21</sup> *BU* 4.3.32.

<sup>22</sup> *BU* 6.2.16.

<sup>23</sup> *BU* 2.1.20.

*Shifting conceptions of nature*

If many early Hindu thinkers are preoccupied with escaping the material world, the classical thinkers appear focused on ordering it. Political fractionalization, competition between kingdoms and urban concentration mark the classical period roughly from 500 BCE to 500 CE. As kingdoms grow, consolidate and fall in the upheaval, early Vedic interests in natural elements and gods diminishes. Social structuring, performance of duty and human welfare become core concepts for human-authored (*smṛti*, remembered) texts including the dense codebook *Laws of Manu*, or *Manavadharmasastra (Manu)*<sup>24</sup> and the allegorical *Mbh.* In the process, conceptions of nature evolve; though the gods still play roles in the affairs of men in the *Mbh.*, they help more in earning wealth or succeeding in battle or dice, instead of granting boons of rains and food.

Conceptions of natural spaces shift. Forests, in particular, take on a sinister aspect, as places of wilderness and wild beasts, to be feared more than respected. Though trees in Hindu society have been objects of reverence, the end of the Vedic period and the classical period witness the forest re-conceptualized as an outland, where one travels at one's own peril or suffers a life of privation. This may be the result of economic and social changes in Hindu society. As population and commerce concentrates in growing cities, elites — such as those authoring religious texts — would logically become disconnected from and less directly dependent on forests and natural resources. Though some xenophobia may be at play, a hint of the reinvented notion of the forest appears even in the *BU*. Remote wilderness is a fearsome place and the reader is advised to never “travel to frontier regions lest one run into evil” because that is where the deity Dur had driven

---

<sup>24</sup> *The Laws of Manu*, trans. Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith, (London: Penguin Books, 1991), Kindle edition.

“the evil that is death.”<sup>25</sup> This theme reappears multiple times in the *Mbh.* as the forest becomes the home of demons (raksasas)<sup>26</sup> and the scene of an ambush by demi-gods, the Gandharvas.<sup>27</sup>

Another demonstrative case of the evolving fearsome connotation of the forest is found when the Pandavas lose their kingdom in a game of dice in the *Mbh.* The forest is their place of banishment. The heroes ultimately need the divine aid of Surya, the sun god, to provide for themselves during their twelve years of exile in the forest.<sup>28</sup> This may reflect a social disconnect between nature and the warrior kings who are accustomed to jeweled halls and cushions.

Though dominant, this dangerous quality of the forest is not universal. The forest is also the destination for ascetics or those in the twilight of life, according to the *asramas*, or life stages, articulated by *Manu*. The third and penultimate stage is that of the forest-dweller,<sup>29</sup> when Hindus adopt a life of austerity in preparation for renunciation and meditation. This forest-dweller stage arises in the *Mbh.* when the Kuru king Dhrtarastra, his wife Gandhari and the Pandavas mother Kunti retire to the forest clothed in rags and bark.<sup>30</sup> This retreat to the forest means a life of deprivation, a notion that is only reinforced in the medieval period from 500 CE until 1500 CE. During this time, regional kingdoms stabilize, build wealth through commerce, support temples and develop culture. Cities stand opposed to the mountains and forests that are the redoubts of sages and worshippers living in austerity and personal discomfort, practicing *tapas* in meditation. Frequently, wild spaces are even the abode of the supreme ascetic god Shiva himself.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> *BU* 1.3.9-10

<sup>26</sup> *Mbh.* 31-33

<sup>27</sup> *Mbh.* 67-69

<sup>28</sup> *Mbh.* 58

<sup>29</sup> *Manu* 6.1-97

<sup>30</sup> *Mbh.* 198-202

<sup>31</sup> *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas*, ed., trans. Cornelia Dimmit and J.A.B. van Buitenen, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 198, 203, 209-210.



This notion — that culture and society flow from cities — continues into the modern period, beginning roughly in 1500 CE. This time is characterized by increasingly sophisticated, economically oriented kingdoms, first in the Mughals and finally in the British Raj. Stories from Bengal demonstrate the rise of merchant class,<sup>32</sup> wealth accumulation via trade cements the city as the center of human activity. Wild spaces remain places where travelers risk being accosted by brigands and thieves in the “foreign *jungly* wasteland”<sup>33</sup> or where a disconsolate yogi can capture and keep a beautiful woman, turning all who would seek to rescue her into palm fans.<sup>34</sup> From the forest, wild creatures also descend to cause havoc, as in the case of a rhinoceros that nearly destroys a city.<sup>35</sup> Even in tales where the nature’s beauty is rekindled, the forest remains a place of forbidden love<sup>36</sup> or magical creatures that feel emotions but stand apart from humans. These stories send a powerful, if subtle, message contrary to environmental ethics: Mankind’s place is in settled lands. The natural forest is for most people a place of hardship best avoided.

### *Social order and consumption*

In the face of population growth and urban concentration that begins in the classical period, *dharma*, or duty, becomes the focus of *Manu*, the famed law book. The text does articulate some environmental ethics, providing a rationale for vegetarianism, though it does so on the grounds of purity<sup>37</sup> rather than stewardship. While *Manu*’s prescriptions for the brahmana — properly

---

<sup>32</sup> *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs: Tales of Mad Adventure in Old Bengal*, trans. Tony K. Stewart, (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2004), Kindle edition.

<sup>33</sup> “The Wazir’s Daughter Who Married a Sacrificial Goat,” in *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> “The Disconsolate Yogi Who Turned the Merchant’s Wife into a Dog,” in *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs*, 99-104.

<sup>35</sup> “The Wazir’s Daughter Who Married a Sacrificial Goat,” in *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs*, 44.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 38-40.

<sup>37</sup> *Manu* xxxiii.

limited desire,<sup>38</sup> restrained sensory powers,<sup>39</sup> scholarship before other pursuits<sup>40</sup> — do not preach overconsumption, the duties assigned to the ruling *ksatriya* kings and lords, are starkly different. For rulers, conquering and wealth accumulation are the orders of the day, creating an ethic that is at best ambivalent, if not outright in opposition, to environmental ethics.

*Manu* gives instructions for the king in a time of fractured politics; a discourse on the proper maintenance of a kingdom seems logical. The chief duties of a king are “ordinary matters of peace and war, the condition (of the kingdom), its wealth and protection and the consolidation of gains.”<sup>41</sup> A king’s appointments are intended to manage resources, including his manufactures and mining. A king should settle in an open country with grain where the neighbors have been subjugated. “(The king) should try hard to get what he has not got and to guard what he has got; he should make what he guards grow.”<sup>42</sup> A kingdom’s prosperity reflects on its ruler. According to *Manu*, the people depend on a king’s might and skill, rather than elemental gods for boons.

This quasi-obligation to procure and consume wealth drives the Pandavas and Kurus in the *Mbh*. Neither side can give up the pursuit of their property and power. Gandhari, the wife of the blind king, castigates her own son as avaricious and wicked for refusing to peacefully share the kingdom. At the same time, Yudisthira debates the merits of a war that will surely kill many: “Wealth is said to be the best virtue. Everything is established on wealth; and rich men live in this world while poor men are practically dead.”<sup>43</sup> He recognizes the evils of war but refuses to back down from the pursuit of his lost kingdom. In doing so, he demonstrates an ethic of

---

<sup>38</sup> *Manu* 2.3-5.

<sup>39</sup> *Manu* 2.93.

<sup>40</sup> *Manu* 2.136.

<sup>41</sup> *Manu* 7.56-69.

<sup>42</sup> *Manu* 7.99.

<sup>43</sup> *Mbh*. 101

consumption at all costs, of increasing wealth, of pursuing *artha*, or worldly advantage. This stands in stark opposition to an environmental ethic of preservation and stewardship.

Yudisthira's dialogue here articulates what is called the "law of the fishes," an inevitable eat-or-be-eaten dogma. "A ksatriya kills another ksatriya; a fish lives on another fish; a dog kills another dog," he says. "See how each follows his rule of life." This combines the absolute duty of *Manu* with a binary social order from the Vedic period that separated life into food and eaters of food in a metaphor for consumption. Humans conquered food and won wealth by becoming eaters of food. In the *BU*, recognition of a deep understanding makes one "the eater of this whole world, and the whole world here becomes his food."<sup>44</sup> Such an ethic may stem from pre-classical writings where "consumption was, in sum, the ultimate victory of the consumer over the consumed, of the victor over the vanquished, and of the self over the rival."<sup>45</sup> This anti-environmental ethic continues into the modern period when mercantilism and trade reinforce the notion that wealth is a social good.

### *The age we live in*

The political stability that sets in during the medieval period bolsters urban culture. Large-scale temple constructions foster a sort of religious maturation, and Hindu authors begin to define their traditions, filling in the backstory of deities and expanding upon philosophical notions. This project occupies the writers of the *Puranas*, a series of books on a variety of topics composed over a 1,200-year span starting as early as 300 CE. Many pages are filled with both mundane and fantastic descriptions of the gods, which provides less insight into environmental ethics of the

---

<sup>44</sup> *BU* 2.2.4

<sup>45</sup> *Manu* xxvi

day. However, descriptions of the Hindu divine ages, or *yugas*, are illuminating. The *yugas* are the four epochs of the cosmic time cycle defined by progressively worsening conditions. They can be thought of as a process of moral and material entropy that ends in the destruction of the world, followed by recreation and the restart of the cycle. The *Puranas* provide a description of natural abundance succumbing to mankind's consumption as the cycle progresses.<sup>46</sup> In the Treta Yuga, the second of the divine ages, "wishing-trees" provide homes, clothing, ornaments, food and effortless honey. An ethical lesson emerges when the trees, overwhelmed by human greed and avarice, ultimately disappear. Even then, civilization benefits from another natural bounty — rain that brings new trees, fruits and herbs from the soil. However, "greed and passion arose again, inevitably," and scarcity leads to moral disorder and the need for the class system to constrain social conduct. As time progresses to the final age, the Kali Yuga, oppressive, greedy rulers force people into hiding, "suffering from cold, wind, heat and rain;" money becomes the only good and virtue has departed, eventually bringing about the destruction of the world.<sup>47</sup> This final age is presumed to be the age of both the authors of the *Puranas* and the present day.

Here, consumption and greed — the socially enshrined values of the classical period — cause the descent of mankind into ruin. On the one hand, this provides a powerful caution against avarice and would seem support a strong environmental ethic of conservation and stewardship of natural bounty. Yet this collapse is also inevitable as the Hindu time cycle progresses. This fatalism can easily create an anti-environmental ethic. Stewardship and conservation imply that the future is open; saving for the next generation is then worthwhile. But if destruction is preordained, a person living near this end of days has little incentive to stop consuming. The

---

<sup>46</sup> *Classical Hindu Mythology*, 38-40.

<sup>47</sup> *Classical Hindu Mythology*, 38-40.

authors may have simply been describing the consumption and commercialism of their time to explain hardship and suffering, but that interpretation may only support Yudisthira's ethical law of the fishes where consumption, rather than stewardship, is the natural order.

*From action to love*

The transition into the medieval period also brings to the forefront new religious practices that have implications for environmental ethics. These receive their best articulation in the *Bhagavad Gita*, (*BG*)<sup>48</sup> which expands upon a dialogue from the *Mbh.* between the heroic warrior Arjuna and the divine Krsna. As Arjuna stands ready to slay thousands in war, he is overcome with doubt for “out of greed for the happiness of royalty, we are prepared to slay our own people.”<sup>49</sup> Krsna's first response to chide Arjuna: Both he and his opponents should remember their duty in battle; death is an illusion as the soul will carry on and to die in performance of duty for warriors is righteous.<sup>50</sup> To live virtuously, Arjuna must perform his duty and kill his opponents without concern for the consequences. Such indifferent performance of duty regardless of “the fruits of action” is the discipline of *karmayoga*, another path to liberation.<sup>51</sup> If that duty involves laying waste to kith and kin, field and forest, so be it. This moral guidance provides absolution from — and indeed councils disregard of — the effects. As such, it stands opposed to an environmental ethic that asks humans to consider their relation to and impacts on the natural world.

Beyond *karmayoga*, Krsna lays out a second discipline, one he considers an easier, better path to liberation: *bhaktiyoga*. In general, *bhaktiyoga* calls for concentration on and love of a god

---

<sup>48</sup> *Bhagavad Gita: The Beloved Lord's Secret Love Song*, ed., trans., Graham M. Schweig. New York: HarperCollins, 2010. Kindle edition.

<sup>49</sup> *BG* 1.45.

<sup>50</sup> *BG* 2.30-32.

<sup>51</sup> *BG* 2.37-48.

that goes beyond simple ritual. “Be mindful of me, with love offered to me; sacrificing for me, act out of reverence for me. Surely you shall come to me, thus having absorbed yourself in yoga with me as the supreme goal.”<sup>52</sup> Love means absorbing oneself in the god, in much the same way that earlier sages absorbed themselves in renunciation. Actions are to be performed with love for the god; in this sense, Arjuna’s inevitable defeat of the Kurus is done out of love for Krsna, who is the embodiment of all the best elements, creatures and qualities in all the worlds.<sup>53</sup> In that sense, bhaktiyoga emphasizes love of everything — nature included — for everything is divine. Performance of bhakti, too, leads to liberation.

The evolution of this doctrine from the *BG*, authored between 100 and 300 CE, espouses values that become adopted fully in the medieval and modern periods. Yet this discipline of love is ambiguous in regard to environmental ethics. If nature itself is divine — as in the case of many rivers in India — then loving the god may engender concern for the natural health of the waterway. In this way, an environmental ethic is born. Devotees, out of love, may also seek to mimic a god’s embodied qualities (*saguna*). This, too, can give rise to an environmental ethic in so far as gods are protectors of the environment. Krsna, in particular, assumes that role in a tale from the *Puranas*, when as a child he defeats the evil snake Kaliya who has poisoned the Yamuna River at Vrndavana.<sup>54</sup> If loving Krsna means to follow in his footsteps, a devotee might have concern for the health of waters in India that are desperately polluted today.

However, there is little motivation to alleviate human causes of an environmental problem if a god will always alleviate suffering if devotees only show enough love. In that sense, the benefits of loving a god become a moral hazard, shielding humans too much from their own acts.

---

<sup>52</sup> *BG* 9.34.

<sup>53</sup> *BG* 10.19-42.

<sup>54</sup> *Classical Hindu Mythology*, 114-116.

Krsna protects his followers from torrential rains. He is also the god who will relieve the earth of suffering.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps Krsna will protect humans from their own pollution, be it land degradation from agriculture or a changing climate fueled by greenhouse gases.

There also remains a question of the ultimate goal being sought. Characters in modern tales of Satya Pir, a holy figure and divine avatar that blends Hindu and Muslim traditions, often invoke the sage in moments of desire, whether to resurrect the dead<sup>56</sup> or to return safely to a wife.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, Stewart suggests that in stories from Bengal, “One worships Satya Pir to get rich, to live well.” These aren’t necessarily natural boons and indeed could be detrimental to the environment. The form of worship may be different, but the goals may be reminiscent of those of the Vedic sacrificers. Whether appeals to a beloved god for assistance are create a positive environmental ethic, it seems, depends entirely on one’s ambitions.

### *Early counter trends*

Though environmental ethics evolve — or perhaps dissolve — from what appears to be an early Vedic reverence of nature into patterns either of renunciation or consumption, a counter ethic also emerges in fits and starts. Glimpses appear even in the Vedic and classical periods as authors copy the social backlash against growing materialism. In a particular lesson from the *BU*, Prajapati, the creator, dispenses wisdom to his student-children: gods, humans and demons. Prajapati teaches each the monosyllabic mantra of “da” and each interprets a different meaning. The gods understand this syllable to refer to *damyata*, or restraint. Humans perceive *datta*, or bounty (possibly better understood as generosity). Demons interpret *dayadhvan*, or compassion.

---

<sup>55</sup> *Classical Hindu Mythology*, 107.

<sup>56</sup> “The Wazir’s Daughter Who Married a Sacrificial Goat,” in *Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs*, 41.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

The author then instructs, “One should observe the same triad — restraint, bounty and compassion.”<sup>58</sup> *Manu*, despite numerous instructions on aggrandizement, also advises kings to “make an effort to conquer greed”<sup>59</sup> as the root of vice. The *Mbh.*, a morality play where Krsna ultimately spurs war and slaughter to free the world of the excesses of men who possess demonic souls, the food vs. eater of food metaphor is resurrected. The heroic Bhima is stricken before he can transcend to the realm of the gods. Dying, he questions Yudisthira as to why he has fallen, and the king responds, “You were a gluttonous eater, and you ate without regard to the wants of others.”<sup>60</sup> In these examples, a new environmental ethic eschews the excessive consumption that marks much of Hindu society and indeed much of the world. This ethic then receives its fullest treatment in the modern period as India undergoes yet another round of political upheaval.

### *Gandhian backlash*

Known today more as a political thinker, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s philosophy remains rooted in Hinduism and indeed has much to say about the spiritual and ethical state of India. Written in 1909 to an audience of educated, expatriate Indians clamoring for their nation, *Hind Swaraj (HS)*<sup>61</sup> is Gandhi’s early treatise that builds upon traditional Hindu thinking while critiquing the modern civilization of his day. In doing so, Gandhi develops a powerful set of environmental ethics rooted in Hindu traditions.

---

<sup>58</sup> *BU* 5.2

<sup>59</sup> *Manu* 7.49

<sup>60</sup> *Mbh.* 208

<sup>61</sup> *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, centenary ed., ed. Anthony J. Parel, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.)



Central to Gandhi's thinking is the notion of the four aims of life, or the *purusarthas*: *kama* (pleasure), *artha* (power and wealth), *dharma* (duty) and *moksa* (liberation).<sup>62</sup> Gandhi is essentially disgusted that India has fawned over modern Western civilization, with all its accoutrements, because such civilization is unbalanced in pursuing chiefly *artha* through economics and material comforts. Gandhi sees Indians adopting the contrivances and habits of the British — from Western doctoring and lawyering to machinery, railroads, styles of dress and education. Yet he considers these to constitute a kind of anti-civilization that has won converts by sleight of hand.<sup>63</sup> Doctors treat symptoms, not causes. Lawyers start quarrels, abuse the law and absolve men of understanding right from wrong. Machinery and railroads make people busier, too ambitious and too dependent on convenience. British clothing creates false stature and encourages consumption and arrogance. The education system reinforces this by encouraging pursuit of power and commerce. All of this amounts to “irreligion,”<sup>64</sup> distracting from the important goal of *dharma*, which Gandhi uses more broadly to mean ethical living, as well as *moksa*. True civilization — as opposed to that which the British have sold India — “is that mode of conduct which points out to the man the path of duty.”<sup>65</sup>

In *HS*, Gandhi isn't explicit in his environmental ethics, yet they are easy to spot. Gandhi would have Indians practice self-restraint, balance the goals of life and accept that material wealth and comfort are not satisfactory aims by themselves.

We notice that mind is a restless bird; the more it gets, the more it wants, and still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passions, the more unbridled they become. Our ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgences. They saw that happiness was largely a mental condition. A man is not necessarily happy because he is rich, or unhappy because

---

<sup>62</sup> *HS* xxi-ii.

<sup>63</sup> *HS* 33-64.

<sup>64</sup> *HS*, 36.

<sup>65</sup> *HS* 65.

he is poor .... Observing all this, our ancestors dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures. We have managed with the same kind of plough as it existed thousands of years ago. We have retained the same kind of cottages that we had in former times, and our indigenous education remains the same as before. We have had no system of life-corroding competition.<sup>66</sup>

Gandhi's anti consumption prescription, along with making decisions according to moral principles beyond wealth and bodily welfare, lies at the core of an environmental ethic that recognizes human impacts on the natural world.<sup>67</sup> Gandhi wants to return to village life and self-reliance on mind, body and soul.<sup>68</sup> Though Gandhi arguably romanticizes the Indian village of old, he is implicitly arguing for a principle of environmental subsidiarity, where decisions are made locally, resources are used locally, impacts are felt and ameliorated locally and responsibility is accepted locally, all without fancy law, medicine, education and commerce.

Gandhi also stands in tacitly against the imbalances of previous periods. If the modern period (and the medieval period) is obsessed with artha, the classical period is inordinately focused on dharma's social duty. Similarly, the Vedic period was preoccupied with moksa. This paper has shown that these imbalances are often responsible, often, for anti-environmental ethics; Gandhian ideals, then, may provide a better set of morals for conservation and stewardship.

### *Conclusion*

This paper examines eight Hindu texts and tracks the evolution of environmental ethics and conceptions of nature over time from the Vedic period through the classical and medieval

---

<sup>66</sup> *HS* 66.

<sup>67</sup> Gandhi also debates the nature of nonviolence and generally sides with protection of life, though he acknowledges that involuntary taking of life occurs. This is consistent with some less strict forms of vegetarianism, but that ethic wasn't at the core of his writings in *HS*.

<sup>68</sup> *HS* 21, footnote 26.

periods to the modern. In early Hindu philosophy, nature was associated with the divine both through creation myths and a cosmology that considered deities as protectors of the natural world. A complex philosophy emerges in the later Vedic period that emphasizes renunciation of the physical, natural world, to the detriment of environmental conservation and stewardship. As Hindu society grows and urbanizes, starting in the classical period, conceptions of nature shift; forests and wild spaces become outlands on the periphery of human society. Social order and material wealth become overarching concerns for elites, leading to an anti-environmental ethic of consumption. As authors flesh out Hindu tradition in the medieval period, their day — and indeed the present — is conceptualized as a time of moral decay; the natural bounty of previous ages has been obliterated by greed. Yet this is inevitable in fatalist Hindu theology and not a motivator of environmental preservation. Methods of worship also change in medieval times, with an emphasis on devotion and love of the gods, which has conflicting implications for the environment and stewardship even in the modern era. Throughout these periods, however, authors do offer critiques, and burgeoning counter trends suggest material welfare and resource consumption are not absolute goods. This backlash culminates in the modern period with a critique by India's great political philosopher Gandhi; He calls for a balance of ethics that includes, at its core, eschewing consumption; this constitutes the core of a potential environmental ethic as India marches toward independence.

### **Bibliography**

*Bhagavad Gita: The Beloved Lord's Secret Love Song*. Edited and translated by Graham M. Schweig. New York: HarperCollins, 2010. Kindle edition.

*Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas*. Edited and Translated by Cornelia Dimmit and J.A.B. van Buitenen. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978.

*Fabulous Females and Peerless Pirs: Tales of Mad Adventure in Old Bengal*. Translated by Tony K. Stewart. New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2004. Kindle edition.

*Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*. Centenary ed. Edited by Anthony J. Parel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

*The Laws of Manu*. Translated by Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith. London: Penguin Books, 1991. Kindle edition.

*The Mahabharata: An English Version Based on Selected Verses*. Rev. ed. Translated by Chakravarthi V. Narasimhan. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

*The Rig Veda: An Anthology*. Translated by Wendy Doniger. London: Penguin Books, 1981. Kindle edition.

*Upanisads*. Translated by Patrick Olivelle. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.