Cultural Embedding of Environmental Consciousness and Conservation

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Abstract

The practices of a community express its worldview, values, belief systems and attitudes. This paper explains the central concept in Hinduism pertaining to the relationship between the creator, humans and nature. It examines how these Hindu beliefs have been translated into everyday rituals and practices that express the relationship of interdependence between humans and their natural environment. These rituals, beliefs and practices instill Hindu values pertaining to the earth, natural phenomena and human beings. Thus they encourage environmental sensitivity and promote conservation.

Keywords: Hindu beliefs, practices, environmental concern.
Without the forest, the tiger cannot survive. Without the tiger in the forest, the forest will get destroyed by people. Hence the tiger must protect the forest and forest must protect the tiger (and other animals) (Sanskrit Proverb, 2015)

Hindu concepts of nature

Environmental concern and protection are embedded in the Hindu tradition because of the concept of the fundamental unity and interdependence of all creation including humans, flora and fauna. These religious concepts are translated into daily rituals and practices. This paper examines a number of such beliefs that are manifested in simple daily practices that inculcate respect for the earth, water and living organisms. These practices derive from three basic beliefs of Hinduism.

The first belief is the Hindu concept of the nature of matter. Although it is generally mistaken for animism, the Hindu belief system draws from the unique concept of Parabrahman. Parambrahman is the Origin of all matter and of the life force. Parabrahman is thus the SOURCE of the infinite universe which It (Parabrahman is beyond gender) brings forth, sustains and then withdraws into Itself. This cycle is repeated infinitely. Parabrahman is the substratum of all things: everything in the universe is made of Parabrahman just as all the golden ornaments in the world are made of gold. Parabrahman manifests this entire universe out of Itself and there is nothing in the universe except Parabrahman. This is the fundamental unity between the Source, humans and nature. Because of this concept of origin, all things are worthy of being cherished and worshipped.

This sophisticated philosophical concept, translated into religious tenets and daily observances, forms the essence of Hindu attitudes to the environment.

The second Hindu belief that creates environmental consciousness is the concept of dharma. Everything in the universe has a dharma, a sacred duty. This dharma is to perform its function faithfully for the benefit of all. For example, the sun has a dharma – it must rise and set routinely, hold the planets in orbit, give warmth and light, and enable photosynthesis and evaporation. This is its dharma; it must play this role for which it was created. Similarly, each thing, from the smallest to the biggest, from the inert to the animate, follows a universal divine order, which is its dharma. By following its dharma, each thing upholds the universe and keeps it functioning.

In the very distant past, our Rishis deduced that every atom of the universe works in harmony, consequently there was universal order and thus human life was sustained. So they concluded that humans must act in such ways as to contribute to the universal divine order, rita,
the basis of dharma. Humans alone have free will therefore they need to learn their dharma. All right action is dharma, which protects us when we protect it, dharmo rakshati rakshitah. The truth of this axiom is evident from the way the earth is punishing humans for the environmental degradation we have caused.

The third concept is that of samsara, the cycle of rebirth which states that we take millions of births in many forms – as insects, animals, plants. This belief creates a bond between humans and other living organisms and finds expression in the bhuta yagya of Manu’s five mahayagyas.

These three fundamental beliefs have given rise to the concept of vasudhaiva kutumbhakam which means the entire earth is one family. Therefore plants, animals, humans and non-living things are all related because they come from the same source, Parabrahman. Secondly, they are interdependent and interrelated; therefore, all things must be respected and not exploited.

Due to these beliefs, Hinduism has developed many practices and rituals that express environmental consciousness and respect.

Worship of the earth and the sun

The earth is revered and worshipped as a deity dharti maataa, Mother Earth. Human survival is made possible by the gifts of the earth in the form of air, water, food, clothing, shelter and medicine. Therefore, humans owe a great debt of gratitude to her.

This gratitude is expressed in many ways: for example, upon stepping out of bed, traditional Hindus show their respect to the Earth by doing naman – bowing reverentially, touching their hands to the earth, and bringing them up to their foreheads in a gesture of veneration. Every ritual prayer ceremony, called pooja, also begins with a prayer of gratitude and offering of flowers. Before any construction is undertaken on a piece of land, Hindus must perform dharti pooja, worship of the earth, to respectfully seek permission to commence work, to thank her for all her kind gifts and to apologise for the injuries that will be inflicted upon her during the works. In the conclusion of all poojas, a prayer of forgiveness is recited to seek forgiveness for killing insects and microscopic organisms during the preparations for the ritual. This concept of gratitude to the earth is pervasive among all Hindus.

The sun is worshipped daily by offering water and reciting mantras that recognize our dependence on the sun as the source of all life. The sun god, Surya, is invoked and thanked in every pooja and there is also an annual festival, Chhat, in adoration of the one who sustains all life on earth. This, clearly, is a recognition and appreciation of the interrelatedness and interdependence of all creation which contribute to the survival of human beings.
The worship of waters, flora and fauna

Waters, many plants and animals are also worshipped by Hindus. An ancient mantra explains that the earth is a mother and rivers are her life giving milk. The analogy is self-explanatory: would life be possible without rivers? So Hindus not only have ritual poojas to honour rivers for their precious gifts, but all rivers are sacred to them. One well known example is the Ganges. The goddess Ganga came down to the earth as a blessing for humans as a result of severe austerities undertaken by a particular royal family. Similarly, wells and ponds are worship worthy because water is essential for life. Thus, numerous traditional practices sought to instill environmental consciousness into the socio-cultural psyche through such practices, although, at present, water bodies are in a deplorable state due to the pollutants and the pressure placed on them by a huge population.

Numerous trees and plants are holy to all Hindus because of numerous religious associations. Tulsi, mango, peepul, bael, neem, kush and durva grass, paan leaves, marigold, lotus and many other flowers are sacred flora. The tulsi plant, is worshipped daily in every household. The kind of respect Hindu have for plants is shown by a common practice that even the most illiterate observe: if we need fruit or leaves from a plant after dusk, when the plant is ‘sleeping’, we join our hands together in namaskaar and humbly apologize for disturbing the plant. After this, we request permission to take what we need and help ourselves to the leaves or fruit. Another very touching practice is that we do not kick at plants, nor do we cross over them – they are living beings and our benefactors, and therefore entitled to respectful treatment.

All the gods have their favorite flowers, plants, grasses, leaves, fruit and animals. During worship, the requisite, fruit, seeds, grains, leaves etc., must be offered to the deity or deities. This practice imparts in the worshipper, who is an ordinary human being, a vital and deep respect for plants and trees that yield these leaves, seeds, and grains. Shiva must be offered Bael leaves, dhatura flowers and other white flowers. The Goddess Lakshmi, is offered lotuses. The peepul is so sacred that it cannot be cut down no matter where it grows.

Animals are also associated with the gods. Vishnu rides an eagle, while Brahma and Saraswati are seated on white swans. Shiva wears snakes as ornaments, and rides an old bull. His consort, Shakti, rides a tiger or a lion – for whom the bull is natural prey. Their son, Kartikeya’s, vehicle is a peacock who is the enemy of snakes. And the other son, Ganesha, rides a helpless little mouse – who is also the prey of the snake. All these animals are sacred due to their association with gods, while simultaneously expressing the contradictions underlying co-existence in nature.

The four mahayagnas

The great lawgiver Manu has laid down five sacred duties ‘nitya dharman’, which must be performed daily in all circumstances. These are called the five mahayagyas, the great sacrificial performances [Primer of Hinduism, 1929]. Hindus believe that all humans have innumerable
debts to society and nature. We have to repay these by performing the five mandatory sacred duties, one of which is *bhuta yagya*, which is performed by offering food to animals and water to the tulsi plant.

Watering the tulsi plant is symbolic of concern for all plants which is tantamount to environmental conservation. Ritualy, concern for animals is shown by offering food to insects, birds and animals. It is a common practice in India to place leftover rice and roti (unleavened Indian bread) on a bird table as birdfood. Leftover food is not ‘chucked’, but fed to fellow creatures. Many people ritually break bits of roti and feed it to birds each day as a sacrifice, a good deed to cancel out bad karma. In South India, every morning a geometric design, called *kolam*, is drawn on the floor at the front door. This is a beautiful custom to feed the ants - rice powder is used to draw the design.

**Prayers**

Hindu prayers also evidence a pro-environmental consciousness. The *Shanti path*, prayer for peace, which is repeated at the conclusion of every prayer ceremonies. And nowadays also at the beginning of meetings and other gatherings, reads:

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Om
dyauh shaantih Antariksham shaantih
Prithivee shaantih Aapah shaantih
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Oshadhayah shaantih Vanaspatayah shaantih
Vishvedevaah shaantih Brahma shaantih
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Sarvam shaantih Shaantireva shaantih
Saamaa shaantiredhii Om shaantih, shaantih, shaantih! (Shanti Mantras, 2015)
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This verse in Sanskrit translates as: May peace radiate in the whole sky as well as in the vast ethereal space everywhere. May peace reign all over this earth, in water and in all herbs, trees and creepers. May peace flow over the whole universe. May peace be in the Supreme Being Brahman. And May there always exist in all peace and peace alone. Om peace, peace and peace to us and all beings! [http://www.hinduism.co.za/shanti.htm].

**Conclusion**

Everything is sacred to Hindus not only because they have come from the Maker, but because Hindu thought discerns and appreciates the interdependence of all creation. Due to the beliefs of the religion, Hindus are made conscious the interdependence of all life and matter. These beliefs are translated into practices, customs and rituals which become a daily reminder that all humans are beholden to nature. Such customs inculcate a sense of oneness between humans and other living creatures and instill a sense of concern for their well-being. Thus they encourage protection of plants, kindness to animals, and gratitude to the earth and rivers.
References

