

Environmental Ethics of Indian Religious Traditions

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Introduction

*O purifying Earth, you I invoke!
O patient earth, by sacred Word enhanced
Bearer of nourishment and strength, of food and ghee
O earth, we would approach you with due praise!*

(*Atharva Veda* XII.1.29)

Prologue

This accompanying essay forms the descriptive background to the fieldwork report on a living environmental project that I wish to present to you. It deals with the range of challenging and entangled questions and issues that are the common stock-in-trade of contemporary thinking in environmental philosophy. However, some of the major questions will be presupposed and in part help guide the present inquiry' although the aim here will by no means simply be to satisfy the modern mind in its quaint curiosity about traditional (Eastern) attitudes towards nature and the quest for alternative models of ecological discursive trends or pre-modern to the 'postmodern' predicament. (The specter of Orientalism has to be resisted here as well.) Moreover, it would be highly pretentious to say that the essay intends to offer solutions to the problem of the Environment. Rather, this is an exercise in what could be best termed philosophic historiography, i.e. an attempt at identifying certain patterns of ideas which may complement the history of environmental thinking. One

should not be led to expect that a coherent doctrine of the environment of 'ecosophy' will emerge from this brief survey. Until all relevant archeological, oral, textual, background cultural and socio-historical resources have been brought together all such accounts can be little more than a quilt-work of interesting and subjective sub-commentaries.

The Indian religious traditions are intertwined with equally disparate cultural, social, linguistic, philosophical and ethical systems that have developed over a vast history, compounded with movement of peoples, foreign interventions, and internal transformations in structures and identities experienced over time. How does one then begin to talk about environmental values and concerns in the Indian religious traditions? Well one can, albeit, randomly and selectively; and so this essay will be confined to tracing the contours of certain highlights and tensions in the traditional approaches to the question of the environment. Of special significance will be the Brahmanical-Hindu, Jaina, and Buddhist traditions, in their ancient to classical modalities, concluding with some contemporary responses to the supposed impact, or lack thereof, of traditional perspectives to ecological problems facing a rapidly modernizing South Asian nation-state, from Gandhi to Bhopal and after.

Even before the Brahmanical order took firm root in greater India, there are records from incomplete archaeological findings, that suggest a major civilization of the Indus Valley (in a sprawling region encompassed by the Punjab, Sind, and present-day Pakistan and Baluchistan), which peaked around 3000 BCE, where a close symbiosis between nature and the Dravidic people appears to have been prevalent. (Wheeler, 1979: 1,84) The major cities of the Indus civilization, namely, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, with their imposing civic edifices, mudbrick and timber dwellings complete with baths, extensive drainage and sewer systems, give the impression of being exceedingly carefully designed. The architecture as well as farming practices gave evidence to structural harmony with surrounding and climatic conditions that would optimally conserve natural resources, prevent deforestation, and also appease the gods who were little more than personified symbols of human dependence upon the energies of nature. Barely decipherable inscriptions and artifacts bear testimony to

the strong worship of a form of feminine earth divinity and of Siva, an ascetic yogic god.

Some elements of the religious and cultural practices from the Indus period and other indigenous (especially aboriginal) communities continued into the subsequent Vedism phase, which began with an influx of Aryans or 'Noble People', a tribe of pastoral nomads from somewhere in Central Asia who settled on the plains of the Ganges in the northern part of the subcontinent around second millennium BCE. Their agrarian culture, so much dependent on the forces of nature, is reflected in the repertory of hymns, the earliest of which are known as *Rgveda* (= *Rig Veda*). The oral tradition and the *Veda* would have to be among the earliest record of ruminations on nature in India. The *Vedas* (from Sanskrit *veda*, 'what is known') gradually grew into a huge canonical body of recited and memorized 'texts' that both eulogized and appeased the forces of nature and higher planes of beinghood depicted as gods. These were used in liturgical sacrifices and elaborate rituals supported by the chanting of sacred *mantras* or coded formulaic syllables, although their distinctive philosophical import remains largely hidden.

I. Early Indian ethics and outlook on nature

It is perhaps a remarkable feature of the Indian tradition that from its very early beginnings ethical ponderings were never too far off from the overwhelming awareness of nature, in as much as 'forms of life' were derivative of or entailed by a particular outlook on nature of which the human being, as other species or sectors of beinghood, was seen as a constitutive, at times lost, alienated or anomalous, perhaps even an outrageous or offending, part. In their moral judgements, the early Indian people placed on the side of the 'good', values such as happiness, survival, courage, health, joy, calmness, friendship, knowledge and truth; and on the side of 'bad' more or less their opposite or disvalues, notably, misery, suffering, sickness and injury, death, infertility, pain, anger, enmity, ignorance or error, untruth., (Bilimoria, 1991:44). These normative values were not restricted for human well-being alone, rather they were universalized for all sentient beings and inanimate sectors as well: spiritspheres, i.e. gods and the faithfully departed; the biosphere, i.e. animals and plants; and the broader biotic universe, i.e. inanimate realms comprising the elements,

stones, rocks, earth-soil, mountains, waters, sky, the sun, planets, stars, and galaxies to the edges of the universe (this and other possible ones).

The principle guiding this outlook was that the highest good is to be identified with the total harmony of the cosmic or natural order, characterized in the earliest religious texts as *Rta* (= *rita*), which we could render for now as the natural law: this is the creative purpose or *telos* that circumscribes all sentient behavior and every movement, from the stillness of the deep-sea water to the invisible vibration of the sub-atomic particle. The social and moral order is thus conceived as the correlate of the natural order. The vast universe was not strewn about in random chaos, but had an inner order, a unity with an inexorable law and purpose (*Rta*) that governs the working of both the macrocosm and microcosm (Dandekar, 1979: 15). This is the ordered course of things, the truth of being or reality (*sat*) and hence the 'Law'. *Rta* determines the place, entitlement, function and end of everything. But *Rta* is too subtle for the undiscerning eyes, and its originary promulgation occurs mythically with the dismemberment of the Cosmic Person (*Purusha*) performed by the gods.

From that cosmic sacrifice,
Drops of oil were collected,
Beasts of the wings were born,
And animals wild and tame.
From that horses were given birth,
And cattles with two rows of teeth,
Cows were born from that,
And from that were born goats and- sheep.
The moon was born from his mind;
His eyes gave birth to the sun;
Indra and Agni came from his mouth;
And Vayu (the wind) from his breath was born.
From the navel midair arose;
the sky arose from his head;
From feet, the earth; from ears, the directions.
Thus they formed the worl ds.

(*Rig Veda Purusa Sukta*' X.90. 8,10,13,14; de Nicolas, 1976: 225-226).

Although the hymn has as its central character the simulacrum of a personal being, its rhetorical intent is not entirely anthropocentric for it gives prominence to objects and forces of nature and outlines the basis of *Rta*, **which the Vedas seek to understand** and realize in human culture. Sometimes there is even uncertainty in the minds of the seers as to whether the 'One' alone or 'Himself' was responsible for the act of 'creation', or whether 'He' knows the Truth of how this manifest universe came about? The first and last two verses of the famous Hymn of Manifestation suggest this trope:

There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomless deep?

Who really knows? Who will proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe? Who then knows whence it has arisen?

Whence this creation has creation - perhaps it formed itself or perhaps it did not - the one who looks on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows - or perhaps he does not know.

(*Násadiya Sukta*, *Rig Veda X.129, 1, 6,7*; O'Flaherty, 1983: 25)

Above all, the quest, then, is for this *Law*, the Truth of things, the knowledge of its functioning; and the means of practical action consistent with what is ordained in or by the Law is at once spiritual and intellectual, the two orientations being hardly differentiated in the Vedas. The idea of *Rta* and its enigmas is expressed succinctly and, as so often mythically, in several of the moving verses of the *Vedas*. The verses speak of the mythological deeds of a galaxy of gods - Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Ádityas, and so on - who are responsible for holding together the universe by various devices, struggles against opposing dark forces, by churning the waters of the ocean for the stolen secrets, providing rain and grains for the nourishment to the deserving, and punishing with the same fetters the transgressors of the Law. Thus, for example, Varuna (from root *vr* 'to bind', 'envelope') could exercise his unstinted authority over the whole realm as its supreme ruler (*samrat*), an arbiter and exemplar of moral conduct or righteousness by virtue of being endowed with *asu*. As R N Dandekar (1979: 16, 158) points out:

The concept of *asu* is perhaps the most central in Vedic religious ideology. Indeed, it is seen to have vitally influenced the whole religio-philosophical thought of ancient India. It was believed that an all-pervading magical potency-substance penetrated through the universe and thereby invested it, so to say, with existence and life. This magical potency served as the essential basis of the various aspects of creation such as gods, men, animals, trees, etc. There was, accordingly, an essential qualitative unity throughout the universe... the larger the quantity of *asu* one possessed, the greater was the magical power he could wield. Varuna could effectively enforce the cosmic law *Rta* because he was believed to have possessed the greatest quantity of *asu* - because he was *asura*."

[Varuna]

He sits among his people,
consistent to Law.

Most wise, he presides and governs all things.

From there, surveying,

he beholds earth's marvels,

both that which has been and that which shall be

Supreme Lord,

ruling the spheres,

hear, O wise God,

as you pass on your way.

Free us from fetters of every sort. Loosen our bonds that we may live!

(*Rig Veda 1.25, 10,11,20, 21*; cf. *1.105.15*; Panikkar 1977: 149-150)

Following the differentiation of the cosmos, numerous god, often in a spirit of competition, would claim the title of the supreme enforcer of the Law. This indeed coincides with shifts in the substantial environmental conditions of the Aryans on their further migration towards the seven big rivers (*Saptasindhu*). Thus, Indra, a human hero who evolves to become the chief of gods, is extolled for his command over the arid forces of nature, especially the thunderstorm and thereby refreshing the earth with rain. The other gods who variously regulate different aspects of the biotic community are perceived as working in

unison with the mind of Indra. He claims to have released the Sun from its concealing darkness, and set the solar-disk on its proper course in the sky, making it shine bright so as to give energy to all gradations of sentience and nature - animals, trees, waters, rocks, moon, etc ; and in turn the Sun-god, Savitā, looks over to see that all other gods live according to *Rta*. - the harmonious inter-play of all the elements as forces of nature.

Let us worship Indra,
the True (*satya*) and not untrue or disorder (*anrta*)
(*Rig Veda* *VHI.62.12*).

Later on, in *Atharva Veda* (VII.24.1), Truth (*satya*) is identified with *Dharma*, as the Law that governs all beings. In the moral sense, Truth stands for integrity, living by truth and not falsehood. *Rta* as an aspect of natural law is here given a deeper ethical nuance. This requires active and positive abidingness with things as they are even as each thing strives towards the realization of its own intrinsic good in the larger scheme of things. For everything in the universe in a deep sense is thought to have its own worth and predation and is therefore morally significant. It is in accord with this moral understanding that each thing or, broadly species, consciously or unconsciously, individually or collectively, would strive to realize the deeper truth in their own uninimical way. Thus, when in accord with the Law the rains break, the 'fountains' that 'bubbling, stream forward' are said to be 'young virgins skilled in Law' (*Rig Veda* IV.19.7), and the microamoeba (primary cells) fight off opposing cells in order to bring forth life. Thus a distinction is assumed between good interests and untoward interests, and the moral standing of the respective species or 'island' is determined in accordance with what particular interest or set of interests the species best serves.

The Sun, again, is auspiciously extolled in its own right as a majestic presence in the heavens, *Súrya*, or the Great Eye of Varuna, who along with the family of sky-gods (Dawn, Alvin, Visnu) brings light and joy to the earth and they cry out, "Here comes the Sun, magnificent!":

The cosmic eye, the auspicious *Súrya*,
Mounts upward for the good of all,
The God, the eye of Varuna and Mitra,
Has rolled up darkness like a hide.

(*Rig Veda* *VH.63.1*; de Nicolas, 1976: 213)

Related to the energy of the Sun, and much more present on earth, is Agni, the god of fire and heat. Indeed, Agni is the first god. bom of the waters, as the *Rig Veda* begins with a hyran. to Agni, the carrier of sacrifice as well as the first-bom offspring of Order and guardian of Truth (~?ta). In the **tenth mandala** of the *Rig Veda*, Agni is given high praise for his role in energizing subtle life forms by forming the necessary bridge between Father-sky (*dyauh pitú*) and mother-Earth (*prthvj mútd*):

The Holy Pair (Heaven and Earth) of great power, Moved by *Rta*,
have copulated, giving birth to a child. You (Agni) are the navel of all
that moves and stands still, Of your movement the sages have spun a
thread.

Rta's overflow and ritual foods
Nurse forever the healthy child
Wearing, him as mantle, Heaven and Earth
Grow strong- by pleasant food and drink.
When *Sat* (Being) and *Asat* (Non-Being) were in *Áditi's*
bosom,
In *Daksa's* origin, in the vault of heaven,
Agni was for us *Rta's* first-born,
A bull and a cow at the origin of life.

(*Rig Veda* *X.5, 3,4,7; XI, 37,47*; de Nicolas 1976: 222)

In ecological terms, the Vedic hymns interweave a number of insights, from a primitive conception of a unique all-being (or non-being) of which everything is a part, to the more complex idea of everything being a part of a unity which is also in everything or in every part that is constitutive of the unique whole. In other words, the Vedas speak of the uncanny unity of creation and, more significantly, the mysterious interconnectedness or co-dependence of everything to everything else. Each thing, element and each species or bio-organism - which we can be characterized as having the mark of *beinghood* -

has an interest and purpose to fulfil in the larger scheme of things. It is this that makes each thing 'sacred' and therefore worthy of moral consideration, by human beings and the gods alike.

Either way, the universe, whether as a whole or in each of its part, or both, accords respect, perhaps even some anxiety or *angst*, and deep regard for its beinghood, its mysterious origins, its inner workings, its regulative order, and its future state or *telos* with which indeed the existence, well-being and future of the human and other species alike are inexorably connected. The act of sacrifice is an act also of "sacred-making" and a reminder that the universe begins with and is sustained by this wondrous act, and by which also it comes to an end at the closure of the cycle of time

"Everything is sacred by virtue of its own nature because energy pervades everything, thus the lofty tree is worshipped as well as the humble grass on which we sit and the one that helps ignite the fire: all and each one play their role in the cosmic symphony". (Vannucci, 1993: 113).

The ancient people recognized that they could neither control the whole of nature nor interfere unduly in its order and processes to seize control of all its varied functions; that if anything, they needed the cooperation of the benign and harsh elements alike, be these the ravaging sails of the wind, the bursting of the waters, the quake of the earth, the fire of the forests, the wild beasts and pests on the fringes of dwellings, the darkness of the night, the stubborn seasons, and so on. Only after understanding the system and much sacrifice, i.e. appeasing of the forces of nature and the spirits in command beyond, could they hope to benefit from the bounty and goods provided by nature, or design wheels and other instruments for extracting natural products, dictated by needs rather than want and greed. Rituals helped prepare plants, herbs, and other healing products to restore health and rectify breakdown of the Law. Strict equilibrium had to be maintained in the internal environment as it was the Law in respect of the external environment too. The ecological framework in a broad stroke was formulated in terms of the proportionate combination of matter (substance, atomic entities) and energy (variously imaged as the spirit, breath, speech, vibration, *anima*, *pneuma*). Competition over the resources of nature can deplete the energy levels and create an

imbalance in the polar relations. The human being has no prelapsarian claim of dominionship over nature. A classical (Benthamite) model of utilitarianism which measures pleasure (or gain, benefit, the good) in terms human interests alone, could not have been thought of in this context even as a theoretical or formal possibility. The interest of the 'deep whole' or species in the broadest possible sense cannot be overlooked or unreasonably compromised.

However, some competition within nature represented in terms of struggle and tension between and among individuated forces signifying matter and energy is not ruled out; indeed, this could be a healthy crisis point and provide incentive for growth and flourishing of the natural world and towards overcoming malignant matter, 'evil' spirits or bad omens that hinder progression. But competition *with* nature can lead to disastrous consequences as well. The later Vedas, especially the Ayurveda section, demonstrate profound knowledge of biodiversity, the inter-relationship between living species and the environment, the need to maintain natural dynamism, the right ways of handling plants and trees, native flora and fauna, or the price one pays for transgressing the ecological principles. The attitude was invariably one of mutual respect, reciprocity and caring for other (non-human) subjects of the land. Appropriate belief-states along with commensurate rituals were developed that reinforced and continued this symbiotic relationship. The symbolic ritual act of appeasing the 'soul' of the tree before removing it to clear space or land for human habitat or use, is indicative of the respect afforded to the natural world. Recycling was a highly valued practice in traditional India, recognizing certain trees and plants do not even as much as tolerate wastage of their fallen branches, twigs, seeds, and flowers (they may regenerate into another plant or be self-composted). Again, as Vannucci forcefully points out in concluding her own passionate study of the ecological moorings in the Vedas:

"The ancient sris (seers) put to good use the knowledge of nature gained through empiricism and experimentation as well as that borrowed from other cultures. By and What god, shall we sacrifice?

(*Rig Veda X. 12 1*; de Nicolas, 226; cf. X 816)

Of this universe it is in truth the waters that were made first. Hence, when the waters flow, then everything here whatsoever exists is produced.

(Satapatha Bráhmaṇa VH.4.1.6)

Respect, then, was shown and praises set aside for the terrain of what we might call "raw" nature, such as the forest. Here is a hymn reflecting this sentiment directed to the forest, admittedly by a lone wanderer, fearful of the power of the rickety sylvan and palmy wood around:

Spirit of the forest, spirit of the forest, who seems to melt away, how is that you do not ask about a village. Doesn't a kind of fear grab you?

Whoever stays in the forest at evening imagines: Someone is calling his

cows; someone else is cutting wood; someone is crying out.

The spirit of the forest does not kill - not if no one else approaches.

She

eats sweet fruit and lies down wherever she pleases.

Mother of wild beast, untied by a plough, but full of

food, sweet-smelling of perfume and balm - to her, the spirit of the forest, I

offer my praise.

(Rig Veda X.146 1,4,5,6; O'Flaherty 1983: 242)

However, there are reservations about the traditional account. First a general point. It should be pointed out that despite the rhetorical strokes that sweep across the entire universe or cosmos, much of the ecological concerns and activities were confined to the more or less perceptible reaches of the surrounding or local ambience. At the farthest edges of the dwelling villages and agricultural terrains lay dense tracts of forest and jungles which were almost impenetrable (except by indigenous tribes, thugs or an attacking army), beyond which one had little recourse to be concerned about how the 'alien' groups organized their lives, tilled their land, or disposed of the departed, and so on. The chief imperative was to get one's own house, as it were, into some semblance of order and harmony; the universal appeal or applicability may follow later, gods willing.

Second, one too-often overlooks the negative effects of sacrifice, as this entails killing of animals, usually from the best of a breed, and sometimes this becomes a wide-spread practice as superstition sets into a culture. Third, it neglects the expropriations and amassing of power via Brahmanical or other upper caste privileges which in the past have led to the deprivation of the basic necessities of life and share in the goods of nature on the part of lesser groups, classes and sectors of the population, women included. Fourth, in the master-slave ideology that ensues, the exploitation of human labor extends to the exploitation of animal labor and competition for natural produce, which, as history has attested, results in wholesale colonization of vast tracts of natural landscapes. Fifth, in their eagerness to cultivate, to increase production and accumulate goods, rulers and landlords fall sort of careful planning and do not take adequate steps against despoilment and damages to natural surroundings; in other words, they have no environmental *program* as such. Sixth, the zeal for expansionism instigates rivalry and even warfare between neighboring kingdoms, provinces and states, causing much harm to the buffer forest zones and to each other's settlements.

The world as Eco-maya or pseudo-environmentalism

By about 500 BCE the Vedas gave way to the Upanishads or the philosophical treatises which elevated metaphysical knowledge over and above the sacrificial mentalite- and instrumental ritualism of the earlier Vedas. The Socratic dictum, 'knowledge is virtue' rang through here as well. However, the Upanishads also evolved a worldview in which a supreme principle, Brahman, characterized as the Self of all beings, is given the highest or transcendental prominence (*paramarthika*). In fact, Brahman as the indivisible, undifferentiated, ultimate reality of which no greater can be conceived or reached by 'word', becomes the presupposition or precondition for all other thinking, intellectual, moral and social. This metaphysical view came to be called Vedanta and its most extreme expression resulted in the denial of the reality of the manifest world, and all things and relations within them. This was especially marked in the monistic-monastic Advaita system of thought promulgated by the tenth century Hindu philosopher, Adi Sankara. But what does this mean in ecological terms? Eliot Deutsch advanced this intriguing answer: "Vedānta would maintain that this means the recognition that fundamentally all

life is one, that in essence everything is reality;... that *Brahman*, the oneness of reality, is the most fundamental ground of all existence." (Deutsch, 1970: 4). Being free, the self of the individual can behave as if unattached and without destructive intentions. So Deutsch concludes that "paradoxically, when nature is seen to be valueless in the most radical way, it can be made valuable *with* us in creative play." (Deutsch, 1989:264; Jacobsen, 1996: 225).

However, other writers derive different message from the doctrine of ontic illusionism, creative or otherwise. Lance Nelson wonders that if the world is considered not to be real than what is the motivation for maintaining or respecting it, and so he concludes: '[In Advaitic liberation experience, the world is not revered but **rather tolerated until** it passes completely away.' (Nelson, 1991: 285; Jacobsen, 1996: 222). **Moreover**, if Arthur Danto (1972: 99) is right in his observation that here all we have is an ethically bankrupt, quietistic and mystically-grounded morality, then even the high virtues of self-restraint, overcoming passions and emotions, self-sacrifice (for the sake of the Self), etc., provide very little inspiration for a sustained environmental thesis. Still, the basic Vedic insight of the organic unity of all things is emphasized in terms of the one-ness of Being. Is this not sufficient for a 'holistic' outlook? Here again it has been pointed out, by Baird Callicot, that there are different ways in which one can speak- of "oneness". (Callicot, 1989: 110). He thus contrasts the classical Indian view with, for instance, the late nineteenth-century German idealist tendencies and contemporary ecology. The basic characteristic of the Indian classical thinking of the unity of things is that it is substantive and essential and the experience of it is homogeneous and oceanic. While in the latter discourses, the oneness of nature is systemic and internally relational; that is, borrowing here a phrasing from Freya Mathews, 'all things are constituted by their relation with other things' (Mathews, 1988: 354). In other words, in this monistic account, the undifferentiated Being ultimately does not tolerate *difference* and therefore the multiplicity of living organisms, considered these to be ephemeral or ultimately identical with the one reality that stands out alone without qualia. The metaphysical doctrine of the complexity of internal relations and the relation of the self to nature without erring towards facile

reductionism in either direction is a *sine qua non* of much of contemporary ecology, and strongly so.

However, it should be apparent that the Advaita Vedānta metaphysics of indivisibility of being is not exactly representative of the Vedic worldview (its polyentheism and interdependence of entitive parts and plurality of life forms would rule that out); nor is it necessarily a logical entailment of the more panentheistic Upanisadic outlook. The academic popularization of Advaita Vedānta, despite its glaring blindness to the subject-position of the "other" (Bilimoria, 1996), has hindered more than it has helped arrive at a fair appraisal of classical Indian environmental concerns. We shall therefore briefly comment on the classical *Dharma* traditions, before turning to the related Buddhist and Jaina responses.

II. Broadly classical

Following the pattern of pre-classical religiosity, Hinduism developed a strong moral ethos (*dharmasamsantah*) which to a large extent superseded the earlier (Vedic) view from the heavens (or of the gods) by a view as if, "from nowhere", that is, from no one particular subjective position (whether divine or human). Here the moral concept of *dharma* emerges as a much more abstract, authoritative and autonomous notion, but with the same normative strength that the ontological and cosmological conceptions had earlier served. The universe is seen as a most meaningful and principled moral order: human beings have a responsibility, indeed a duty, to help sustain this world thus rendered morally significant or 'deep' (the Sanskrit root '*dhr*' means to sustain, uphold, support.) The difference with similar sentiments built around the idea of *Rta* as an 'eternal order' or alternatively as fixed principles is that here the *moral* content is deepened, in that it is much more concrete and better defined, it is the normative, at times legalistic or systematic, issuing in elaborate proscriptions, precepts and rules, ordinances and statutes, which are written down in the great many texts, including personal ethical or moral manuals as well as social and political treatises, such as *The Dharmasastras*, *Arthasastras* and the *Mahabharata*. *Dharma* comes to designate a variety of moral terms -, norm, virtue, righteous, duty, responsibility, entitlement, justice, truth (in conduct), - and there

continues to be much debate and hermetic anguish over its exact nuance and application. But its universal appeal is perhaps in its calling to preserve the organic unity of beinghood, to render justice where justice is due, and to minimize the burden of *karma*, which reflects a universalization of the basic tenet, ‘as one sows so one reaps’. (Bilimoria, 1995). The rule of *karma* does not discriminate between humans and non-human life-forms (amoebic, individual or whole ecosystems) for everything has value and is an end in itself. In ethical terms it demands a deontological disposition in one’s conduct, but its own internal calculative system heeds to consequences, good and bad, and to any excesses of utilitarian or even prudential exploitation committed on the part of one species over another or the others (cf. Midgley, 1995: 97). And duty, it follows, is here cast neither within the theoretical frame of contractual obligation nor as a necessary response to corresponding rights; duty is performed, as it were, for *dharma*’s sake: the sense of responsibility is *sui generis* a (moral) relative absolute. Linking ethics to the parameters of certain religious cosmologies would entail that there are some duties which are mandatory.

One of the cardinal duties and therefore values to be developed in the dharma tradition (in the shadow of the proto-yogic descendants, and Jainism and Buddhism) was that of general non-injury. The most refined expression of this value is represented in the great epic of the *Mahābhārata* (circa 100 BCE to 200CE). Much moral development proceeds through organizing and placing constraints on the otherwise pre-supposed liberties of human life. Of chief concern is the impact that one’s action, pursuits and conduct might have on the other. In this regard, non-injury or non-violence is prescribed unequivocally.

The *Bhagavadgītā* which is a book within the great epic, provides a quasi-philosophical grounding for the values extolled in the *Mahabharata* and is more decisive in its ethical pronouncements. It is for this reason that the *Gītā* (for short) has had a profound impact on modern Hindu-Indian thought and is drawn upon obliquely in Western ethical and ecological deliberations as well. (Gandhi, 1962; Naess, 1989: 194; Jacobsen, 1996: 231-233). Two most commented upon verses in this context are the following:

The one whose self is disciplined by yoga.
See the self abiding in every being
And sees every being in the self;
He sees the same in all beings.
When one sees pleasures and pain of others
To be equal to one’s own, O Arjuna,
He is considered the highest yogin.

(*The Bhagavadgītā* 6.29, 32; de Nicolas, 1976a: 110)

Several commentators, including Sankara, have observed that the feeling of pain is universalized so as to derive a principle of empathy and non-injury. Sankara characteristically commented that one who sees that what is painful and pleasant to himself is painful and pleasant to all creatures will cause no living beings pain, and that he who is non-injurious is the foremost of yogins. (Sankara, 1976: 198-9; Bilimoria & Hutchings, 1988: 366). Self-realization in the *Gita* takes due cognizance of the moral principle of *lokasamgraha*, the well-being of all peoples. The world of living things is brought together in a process governed by moral cause-effect relationships and it makes it imperative for each being within it to respect the autonomy, the interests and destiny of the other, and ultimately to find a way out of the cyclic implications of this process.

III. Sramana traditions

This broad moral characterization is true not only of Hinduism, but the parallel - or by some accounts alternate - traditions of Jainism and Buddhism that also developed extensive moral theories and cultures, which we shall now explore for their ecological ramifications.

Buddhist and Jaina religious philosophies (along with yoga-ascetism from the time of the Indus civilization) are said to belong to the *sramanic* lineage or the proto-yoga renouncer tradition. The *sramanic*, very generally, had its origins in lonesome ascetic pursuits by socially-withdrawing (or ‘drop-out’) yogis, that is, adepts of certain esoteric practices who became disenchanted with the prevailing ritualistic or materialist human environment, giving way gradually to a monastic and more formally speculative system of ordering life. The systems evolving out of this traditional lineage were looked upon as

being somewhat eccentric, non-mainstream and heterodox by the powerful Hindu-Brahmanical orthodoxy. Nevertheless, Jainism and Buddhism both grew to gain considerable strength and following within India; and while the popularity of Buddhism shifted further North to Tibet and eastward to Southeast Asia and the Far East (China, Japan, Korea), its influence on Hinduism was quite extensive. (Indeed, in large measure the challenge of Buddhism was responsible for the gradual erosion of the Brahmanical orthodox stronghold giving way to a more broad-based, though still caste-ordered, popular Hinduism in the post-classical phase.)

Jainism owes its name to the term *jina*, meaning one who conquers attachment and overcomes pain. The prominent Jina who helped give a more formal shape to the order and systemized the teachings of an older group of Jinas was Mahāvira (circa 500 BCE), possibly a contemporary of the Buddha. The basic philosophic belief of the Jainas is that every entity in the world possesses *jiva* or a sentient principle, and there is a countless number of *jivas*, whose distinguishing feature is consciousness along with vital energy and a pleasurable disposition. The suggestion is that consciousness is continuous and nothing in the universe is without some degree of sentience at varying levels of conscious and apparently unconscious existence, from its more developed form in adult human beings to invisible embryonic modes at 'lower' animal and plant levels. (Here sentience is not determined merely by pain-pleasure responses, as some psychical activity may continue to occur etherically or subconsciously or at unconscious levels as also under naturally-disposed comatose and anaesthetized conditions.) The sentient principle *jiva* subsists in a contingent relation to the quantity of *karma* it has accumulated through its activity, volitional and non-volitional. If *karma* can be prevented and exhausted the bondage of cyclic process of existence can be arrested, and the sentient being would achieve full self-realization. Since this requires much discipline (of self-control and renunciation) and the process is long and arduous (extending over several embodiments and re-deaths), each sentient being has to act in accordance within its relative level of bondage and limited freedom. The Jinas remain the sagely exemplars, while 'lesser' sentient beings, at least in terms of practical ethics, are considered immune from moral frailty, though they are not devoid of moral value

in their own right by this theory. The cardinal disciplinary codes highlighted in Jaina practical ethics are: *ahimsā* or non-injury, *satya* or truthfulness, *asteya* or not stealing, *brahmāchārya* or sexual restraint, *apigraha* or nonpossession.

Recent scholars have gallantly extolled the virtues of non-injury or nonviolence, *ahimsa*, in part because the Jaina ethic of noninjury is as much part of a regime of internal discipline as it is of external conduct or behavior towards others. They also tend to endorse the operative cosmology of the Jainas as "perhaps [being] the most sympathetic to an ecological worldview" even while recognizing that the basic teleology of the *Sramanic* traditions is aimed towards transcendence of the self from the constricting human conditions of desire and attachment. (Chapple, 1993: 9-18). The second point to note is that Jaina ethic of non-injury and a compassionate regard for others (insects, microamoebic entities, animals, human beings, gods, and spirits) finds its support on prudential grounds, for doing harm to other beings will result in more negative *karma* for one self! Thus the ultimate justification for all ethical practices is that they should raise the moral stature of the practitioner; if derivatively, perhaps unavoidably given the interconnectedness of all *jivas*, it raises the moral profile of the community (in the broadest biotic sense), then this is all the more reason for persisting with it. Some writers, however, would argue that such virtues as *ahimsa* have intrinsic value and that their justification lies in their being derived, not from objective facts (such as 'all life has sanctity'), but from some experience which is self-evident. What is 'right' is in harmony with this experience. *Ahimsa*, in their view, is an experience related to the occurrence of pain and suffering among living beings and is universalized for others from one's own experience of pain. *Ahimsa* stands as the 'good' to which other values tend. (Songani, 1984: 243; Bilimoria, 1991:53). Hence it follows that if there is to be a clearer articulation of Jaina environmental ethics it too would strive to be autonomous and normative, admitting the possibility of objective value, of which *ahimsa* would seem to be the most significant and distinctive feature.

The picture is more or less consistent in the case of Buddhism as well, although Buddhist ethics proceeds on a broad-based naturalistic stance, as Buddhists would concur that *certain types of facts* are relevant as support for moral considerations (de Silva, 1991: 63; 1990:

18). One such general fact with which the Buddha began his teachings is that there is suffering, for such is the human condition and the surrounding state of affairs confirms this truth, not least the contingency of existence (birth and death) and the impermanence of all things, good and bad, big and small, here as elsewhere. The appropriate moral response is to minimize suffering and pain as best as one can and to overcome suffering or unsatisfactoriness, both by understanding the causes of such existential and other ailments, and by alleviating the suffering of all forms of life. Its ethic covers human behaviour in relation to all living beings and it underpins certain basic virtues, particularly of the benevolent kinds, more specifically, compassion, love, kindness, sympathy, empathy, equanimity and joy in the other's happiness. It is said that human beings are capable of infinite amount of compassion, generosity and gratitude, and that all creatures, great and small, should be the subject of our moral sensibility (Dalai Lama, 1996). The Buddhist codes of ethics is similar to the Jaina ethics, with much emphasis placed on self-control, abstinence, patience, contentment, purity, truthfulness and right attitudes. The treatment of animals and plants in accordance with these principles finds ample references in Buddhist texts, from the earliest monastic codes to the development of Ch'an or Zen Buddhism in China, Korea and Japan. Nature as a whole is not looked upon as antithetical to human needs; rather, everything in nature is capable of making a contribution towards overcoming suffering and the final spiritual end which human beings strive toward. The Buddha's teachings include tales of acts of generosity on the part of animals towards human beings, and the reciprocal compassion which humans are advised to direct towards other life forms. Buddhist societies evolved with this moral self-consciousness, and the great emperor Asoka, after his conversion to Buddhism, institutionalized care and welfare towards animals, as the following edict tells us:

Here no animal is to be killed for sacrifice...
Formerly in the Beloved of the God's kitchen several hundred thousand animals were killed daily for food; but now at the time of writing only three are killed - two peacocks and a deer, though the deer not regularly. Even these three animals will not be killed in future.
... the Beloved of the Gods has provided medicines for man and

beast...
medicinal plants.... [R]oots and fruits have also been sent where they did not grow and have been planted along the roads for use of man and beast.

(Sources of Indian Tradition, 1988: 144-5)

The verses demonstrate that rights and protection of certain liberties of animals have been recognized in Buddhism. Many Buddhist monasteries across East Asia as well banned the cooking of animal flesh as this involves the killing of animals, with or without direct intentionality of consumption. Buddhists environmentalists are active in modern-day Sri Lanka in their efforts to preserve the lush beauty of the island state from despoilment through extensive technological development and the ravages of an ethnic war that has escalated there in recent decades. They too can be said to be continuing a practical environmental ethic fostered centuries ago after Buddhism was brought to Sri Lanka.

Likewise, the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet in the seventh century engendered a nation-wide program for the preservation of the heavenly-natural oasis that remained a mysterious land for much of the outside world. The ruling Lamas proscribed injuring and killing of animals, big and small. The moral practice of showing respect for all nature became a way of life for the Tibetans. Even though Tibetan Buddhist metaphysics continued the influential Indian Buddhist doctrine of the absence of self-nature or intrinsic existence of properties and substances alike, proclaiming thus the 'emptiness' of all things, its moral framework paradoxically gained strength from this stand-point, on three counts, as follows.

i) Moral properties such as those of the good, compassion, and loving kindness or respect, by no means absolute, have solid presence (contingently supervenient on 'emptiness', of course), in as much as human interaction and communication or ethical life generally presuppose these properties.

ii) A pluralistic ontology that has fair regard for members within it without privileging any particular species easily gets translated into a non-anthropocentric respect for biodiversity.

iii) The religious-soteriological 'end' requires certain self-motivated ethical practices and norms, including restraint on desires, meditation on the limits of the ego-self, altruism based on the moral properties of reverence and deep (but not condescending) compassion for all living and non-sentient beings. In other words, the normative constructs for monks, nuns, lay people, farmers and nomads too, underscored concern for the environment.

The Buddhist ethic of living in harmony with the earth accordingly pervaded all aspects of the Tibetan culture. Perched on the 'roof-top' of the world or on an altitude shared with the Himalayas, Tibet's environment was recognized as being crucial to the stability of ecological environs and crop cycles in much of neighboring Asia. For instance, the ten or so major rivers that wind through Asia feed off the river valleys and smooth glacial ice-scapes of Tibet; the monsoons sweeping through South and Southeast Asia rely on Tibet's abundant natural vegetation and dense forests. It's wildlife and natural animal sanctuaries maintained a natural equilibrium and contributed in different ways to the enrichment of the environment, providing manure for controlled husbandry and organic re-vegetation, as well as fuel (from yak dung), and so on. (Oxley 1996: 1,2)

However, after the Chinese occupation of Tibet around 1950, the situation has dramatically altered: massive deforestation, land erosion, pollution of rivers, depletion of resources, excessive killing of animals, and general degradation of the environment appear to have become the norm. The information is sketchy, video-recordings or testimonies smuggled out of Tibet are not always reliable. But official Chinese obfuscation adds to the suspicion. Observers lament that the sanguine spirit of Buddhism is being crushed in Tibet and claim that the environmental damages will continue until as such time as the patrons of Buddhism, namely Tibetans with their refugee spiritual-temporal head, the Dalai Lama, are returned full cultural control and self-determination of the country. This shows the faith that some people have in at least one field of traditional wisdom, in regard to the environment.

IV. Concluding remarks

Traditional Hindu, Jaina and Buddhist environmental values and concerns have continued to influence the discourse and aligned

practices of environmentalism in much of South Asia. One of the most successful and well-noted applications of the Indian ethic of non-injury emerged with the nonviolent struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi in the first half of this century. Gandhi was adamant about the need for such an ethic in our treatment of animals as in our behavior towards each other and towards other human beings. (Gandhi, 1959: 34-35). He followed a strict regime of vegetarianism (bordering on vegan practice, except that he accepted goats milk). Unlike Jainas however whose practice of *ahimsā* could be best described as a form of passive self-restraint, Gandhi turned *ahimsā* into a dynamic force, informed by truth (*satya*), that proactively engages in the promotion of nonviolence and achieves its various social-political goals through activities grounded in nonviolence, which becomes the outward symbol of the inner truthforce (*satyāgraha*). A spectacular environmental movement, called the Chipko (from an Indian vernacular term meaning 'cling on to', which describes an unrelenting embracing of the trees to prevent environmental destruction through human intervention) was directly influenced by Gandhian environmental awareness programs and led by Gandhian *sarvodaya* (welfare-for-all) workers on the principle of nonviolent resistance. (Weber, 1988: 24). Nevertheless, Gandhians by no means believed in complete biospheric egalitarianism and permitted small-scale or modest introduction of 'soft' technology supplemented heavily with hand-crafting and cottage industries localized to village economy.

Another case which drew worldwide attention where similar nonviolent resistance tactics have been used to raise awareness of environmental concerns is the Narmadā Dam project in south Gujarat. Environmentalists have constantly argued that damming the river would cause immense damage to surrounding landscape which would also lead to the dislocation of masses of tribal people who have lived in the vicinity with good regard for their environment for countless many generations. The intensive protests provoked the World Bank to withdraw temporarily its share of promised funding. In the 1950s and 1960s when India undertook massive damning projects in collaboration with Russian and Western industrial conglomerates, modelled on TVA, it is claimed that on a conservative count these caused dislocations of thousands of people from their long-standing habitat. Over the fifty years since such projects began some 50 million

people have been affected, resulting in both eventual dispersal and disappearance of distinctive tribal groups as well as the local knowledge (public scholarship of sorts) about ways to preserve the environment and retain the wild-life, aquatic culture and green belts around the riverbeds and vicinity. The grass-roots movements were not as successful as they might be today, since modernity's persuasive grip on the public was much stronger than it is today. Ironically, even the elite (in locations as far away as Columbia, New York) tend to heed to Gandhi's very prophet mutterings on the ravages of technology on the environment. And this message and mission is carried on most unassumingly without any textual flourish by Sunderlal Bahuguna, the founder and key figure of the Chipko movement; more riskily by Medha Patker; and more textually by Vandana Shiva and Ramchandra Guha.

There are numerous other grass roots groups and movements that invoke traditional wisdom and practical ethics in their expression of resistance to and concerns for radical transformations of the local environment. There is great apprehension that these interventions serve the technocratic interests of upper classes, the middle-managerial classes or the national, or as it is increasingly the case, multinational corporates and mega-media tycoons who have no understanding of or sympathies for local conditions, customs, habits, attitudes and the underpinning cosmologies or philosophies. Rural development and alternative technology programs have been helping villagers and farmers to construct, for instance, free-standing smokeless ovens, mudbrick dwellings, and to utilize non-toxic organic fertilizers in well-irrigated farmlets for their produce. Schools and colleges are established with the help of non-government groups (NGOs) to explore and promote safe ecological practices. Tribal groups have been encouraged to preserve the wild bushland, to curtail excessive use of wood for fire-cooking, and to develop new kinds of technology for dealing with local conditions while resisting the technologies and wares brought in by eager profit-driven urban and corporate enterprises.

However, despite the great wealth of wisdom and inspiration afforded by traditional teachings and cosmological blueprint that underscores strong ecological values, a number of writers and critics on India have mild to strong reservations about the relevance of such

traditional approaches. This cleavage surfaced in the aftermath of the Bhopal incident in 1984. The Union Carbide chemical plant which had been ill-maintained for some years, unleashed thousands of tons of poisonous fumes and chemicals in the atmosphere which killed and irreversibly handicapped many thousands of people. As with Chernobyl, the enormity of the Bhopal catastrophe could not have been imagined by traditional wisemen, and so one questions whether tradition, including perhaps Gandhian minimalist industrial program, could have ever alerted and therefore prepared society for such an environmental holocaust. The naturalistic fallacy notwithstanding, if the facts were not there facing them in their eyes, what motivations or triggers would the ancients have had for pondering on correlate values that would be necessary to contain or deal with the facts? The world has changed and the challenges of industrialization, modernity, globalization and a rapidly expanding liberal economy, present us with very different set of circumstances and contexts that require quite different sorts of responses on the environmental front. Are there any resources left within the traditional framework to combat the modern consumer model which has all but disrupted the traditional agricultural practices and all kinds of unities? asks one of the best-known Indian women activists and environmentalists. (Shiva, 1998) But Shiva for one does not underestimate the contribution traditional or pre-modern sensibilities can make towards fostering a 'post-modern' response in the terms of an integrated, holistic view of both humans and their environment. (Shiva, 1988) Shiva more recently supported a nation-wide campaign against 'plant variety' rights claimed by Western multinationals under intellectual property and international patenting accords, to which countries like Indian, several South American states and Australia, have been persuaded to become signatories. This latter move is seen by environmentalists as acting against biodiversity and the right of each people to control and maintain their local ecosystems within the means and wisdom afforded by traditional or customary practices and modern-day urban pressures.

Still, there are critics, such as Ram Chandra Guha and Chapple, who suggest that a too-one-sided focus on traditional patterns of ecological thinking and attitude detracts from the need of the hour, which is an active and practical initiative for addressing local and

specific or particular instances of environmental abuse, of degradation, and violation of agreed-upon international memoranda for the protection of living and non-living species. Thus, Chapple has argued that although "the integrated reality of village economy, as espoused in the case of the Brahmanical traditions, certainly sustained agrarian India for millennia, and although tribal peoples today continue to eke out a sustenance existence, neither model bears direct relevance for the burgeoning urban life that hundreds of millions of people in India have embraced in the past few decades." (Chapple 1996) He concludes on a sad note: "Unfortunately, both models suffer a platitudinous hollowness and, I am afraid, will fail to capture the imagination of precisely the sorts of people who stand to commit the greatest infractions against the ecological order, the people throughout South Asia who feverishly are buying cars, building condominiums, and filling their flats with prepared foods and plastics." Perhaps Chapple is echoing the oft-made charge that environmental ethics lacks a sustained political ideology and program (Sylvan and Bennett, 1994). But his own alternative to the 'shallow' ecology from the hoary past verges on re-kindling Gandhian suspicions of the virtues of technological-consumerist largesse and deepening the Jaina ethic of nonviolence to 'animals, earth and self' in a reinterpreted practical ecological ethics so as to accommodate current (and future) environmental concerns.

The suggestion is that there are indeed resources within the traditional systems - Yoga, Jaina, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Islamic, Christian, Gandhian, all of which have helped give shape to a modern, secular India - to increase awareness of environmental concerns and to instigate the extension of ecological values and modal practices to the plethora of environmental problems facing Indians, as they do most human beings in other parts of the world. This is a laudable suggestion and one with which a number of environmental thinkers are likely to agree, or, if they disagree engage in discussion with.

See also the author's following related writings and references in this area: 'Enfranchisement of Nature', major chapter in P. Bilimoria and J McCulloch, *Environmental Ethics*. Victoria: Deakin University. 1992.

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