

Nature, Humanity and Religion: Exploring the Canons of Select Religious Texts

Kulwant Singh

Department of English and MEL, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, U.P., India.

Abstract

Ecological criticism is a relatively new but an important area in literary studies. Its traces go back to the assumption that literature can potentially have a significant impact on people's attitude towards environmental issues on global scale. Literature is important in impacting awareness of global issues. The focus, nowadays, has shifted more towards looking at nature because of the visible impact of ecological imbalances in day to day human life. Keeping this in mind, I wish to propose an analysis of the environmental issues in religious texts which came into existence ages back. What intrigues me into conducting this study is that at a time when the world is faced with serious ecological crisis which is the outcome of our tampering with nature in the name of development and economic progress, humans need to revisit their respective sacred texts which had long back apprised them of the importance of nature and had foretold the consequences that the world will have to face if they act against the laws of nature. The current global ecological scenario forces us to look creatively at the world's religious heritage and reinterpret the sacred texts and implement its teachings to the present problem.

KEYWORDS – Environment, Scriptures, Exploitation, Humanity

I. INTRODUCTION

Religion is seen as an important cultural influence that can promote or denounce ecologically responsible behaviour. It has an important influence on people's habits and behaviour regarding nature, social issues etc. It provides a certain world view and a system of ethics. It is on this very basis that the existing religious traditions may find a new role and relevance in our current environmental predicament. How different religions mention the artefacts of environment in their scriptures is what this work focuses upon.

All religions have deep concern for ecology. They teach us not to destroy nature. This work tends to explore the contemporary relevance of nature in the religious texts and the need to revisit them. In the name of development people are indulging in ecocide. It is a vicious trend, first man dehumanised man, now he dehumanises nature. Human being is the only being who is the destroyer of nature. This current dreadful crisis is in need of a spiritual response. One of the measures that could help a great deal to fulfil this demand is to regenerate and rejuvenate among the humans, basic values incorporated in the religious texts and propagate them.

Religion is a set of beliefs, feelings, dogmas and practices that define the relation between human being and divinity. A religion is defined by specific elements of a community of believers: sacred books, rites, worship, sacrament, moral prescription, etc. Religions teach us brotherhood, love for humanity and make our life beautiful in this world. They want to keep a keen correlation between flora and fauna and human life available on this planet.

The research work is based on the proposition that religions function for the welfare of humanity at large. They have set principles for a co-existence of human being and other aspects of nature, i.e. the peaceful co-existence of every being, living or non living. Since

nature is the cradle of human civilization, religions of the world have given adequate guidelines for the preservation of nature and ecology. This research aims at exploring the concern for ecology in the scriptures of Hinduism and Islam.

Every religion aims at the betterment of humanity. It had already foreseen today's situation long back and we do find a mention of the same and its repercussions in every religious text. In the context of environment, religion holds great importance but people today, being lured by materialistic things are drifting away from religion. They just treat it as a higher power. There are many things in our religious scriptures apart from just being a higher power. A common man has scant awareness on the welfare motif of religion, and its human face. We need to see nature in the context of religion and revisit our texts to understand the importance of nature and environment.

II. RELIGIOUS TEXTS

Literary texts should also be studied around preservation of nature. The scriptures should not be considered only as religious texts for worship but also be studied and analyzed in social, political, philosophical, cultural and environmental context. The above propositions can be substantiated with the facts that the religions taken into account show the trajectories of environmental concern. An analytical view of these religions and their respective scripture needs a mention here.

Starting with Hinduism, it is inherently an ecological religion. It lays great emphasis on environmental ethics. It is the world's largest nature-based religion that recognises and seeks the Divine in nature and acknowledges everything as sacred. The Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Gita, the Puranas and the Smritis contain the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance.

Hinduism is a remarkably diverse religious and cultural phenomenon, with many local and regional manifestations. It views the earth as its Mother, and therefore advocates that it should not be exploited. The diverse theologies of Hinduism suggest that the earth can be seen as a manifestation of the goddess, and must be treated with respect. A loss of this understanding or in fact a deliberate ignorance that earth is our mother has resulted in the abuse and exploitation of the earth and its resources. Ranchor Prime, in his work Hinduism and Ecology, asserts that Nature, or Earth, has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. In fact, man is forbidden from exploiting nature. He is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. (19)

According to one indigenous theory established in the Upanishads, the universe consists of five basic elements – earth, water, light, air, and ether. The nature has maintained a status of balance between these constituents or elements and living creatures. A disturbance in percentage of any constituent of the environment beyond certain limits disturbs the natural balance and any change in the natural balance causes lots of problems to the living creatures in the universe.

The messages of environmental conservation contained in the Vedic and Puranic literatures, in the Upanishads, the Arthashastra, the CharakSamhita, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are all based on Hindu religious philosophy. "Non-violence" that is, non-injury to both the living as well the non-living creations of nature such as plants, animals, air, water, land (earth), hill and forest is the core of Hindu religious philosophy. (Renugadevi 1)

The Vedas are ancient Indian compilations of the Aryan period ranging from 2500 to 1500 B.C. The Rig Veda especially mentions about environment on several occasions. The Rig Veda equates the sky with father, the earth with mother and the space as their son. The universe consisting of these three is like a family and any kind of damage caused to them creates imbalance in the universe. The Vedic scriptures reveal clearly about the earth's ecosystems and the requirement for maintaining their balance. The verses of the Veda convey the message to desist from causing any damage to the earth or else its ecological balance will be jeopardized. The Rig Veda has dwelt upon various components of the ecosystem and their importance.

The Atharva Veda also mentions about the importance of air, water and green plants essential for human existence. There was as such no concept of the word "Pollution" (in those days but it was referred in terms of "poisoning" of environment. The Atharva Veda in verse 18.17 mentions that three things cover the universe - air, water and plants and they are essential for all lives on earth to exist. It says that, "Plants and herbs destroy poisons (pollutants)." (8.7.10) and that, "Purity of atmosphere checks poisoning (pollution)." (8.2.25)

The Atharva Veda has also warned not to dirty and add toxic substances into water bodies as it may lead to spread of diseases. This is very relevant in the context of pollution of rivers and lakes and the resulting ecological diseases which the modern civilization is experiencing. (Renugadevi 2)

The Yajur Veda equally mentions about plants and animals, the ill effects of cutting of trees; and the poisoning of the atmosphere; but it also discusses about energy relations of the global ecosystem. A number of verses caution against causing harm to the environment, such as, "No persons should kill animals helpful to all." (13.37); "O King, you should never kill animals like bullocks useful in agriculture or like cows which gives us milk and all other helpful animals and must punish those who kill or do harm to such animals." (13.49); "Do not poison (pollute) water and do not harm or cut the trees."(YV 6.33); and "Do not disturb the sky and do not poison the atmosphere."(5.43)

The Hindu scriptures recognize the divine being present in the air, water, fire, earth and space and perceive divine existence in trees, herbs, rivers, lakes, mountains and other living or non-living beings. The Vedas contain a number of mantras on this subject. The almighty is the original substance which pervades the entire universe. Hinduism believes that the nature in its infinite forms and countless modes is nothing but a manifestation of God himself. He resides in all beings. This recognition of the presence of the divine in all the beings is the basic feature of Hinduism towards all the objects of the universe.(Narayan 33)

An integral part of Hindu ecology is the concept of 'Dharma' and 'Karma'. The welfare and caring of all would be realized through the golden thread of spiritual understanding and cooperation which is based on Dharma and Karma of individuals and institutions. Dharma is duty towards humanity and God's creation. It is one of the most intractable and unyielding terms in the Hindu philosophy. Ordinarily, the term Dharma is translated as a religious code - as righteousness, as a system of morality and as duty. While all other species conduct themselves as per the Dharma of their kind, only a human being because of the free will thinks that he is very powerful and therefore acts in an 'Adharmic' manner. For example, it is the true nature of a lion to hunt other animals when hungry, it is the Dharma of fire to burn; similarly, it is the true nature of a person to act in a 'Dharmic' way although he/she may be capable of both the good and evil tendencies.

The manifestation of Dharma necessitates the acceptance of the concept of Karma. The law related to Karma tells us that every action performed creates its own chain of creations and events some of which are immediately visible, while others take time to surface. Environmental pollution is but one example of the Karma of those people who thought that they could continue polluting the environment without realizing the consequences of their actions for future generations. Every action creates its own reaction. What is important to know is that a right action, that is, a Dharmic action generates beneficial results, while an Adharmic action results in harmful effects. (Dwivedi and Tiwari 17)

Such a suffering may continue to visit humanity unless we realize that the destruction we are inflicting in our natural surroundings will result in dire consequences for the present and succeeding generations. If we recognize and act on this philosophy of life, then only will people start paying due respect to nature as well as taking a stake in the care for the environment. All of our actions are interrelated with an interconnected to what eventually happens in this world. Although we may not face the consequences individually, nevertheless, someone else is going to be burdened with or benefit from our actions. It is in this context that the concept of Dharma and Karma becomes meaningful. (Dwivedi and Tiwari 19)

All this universe and every object in it has been created as an abode of the Supreme God; it is meant for the benefit of all; individual species must therefore learn to enjoy its benefits by forming a part of the system in close relationship with other species; and let not any one species encroach upon the right of others.

From the above, some light is thrown on the awareness of our ancient seers about the environment, and its constituents. It is thus understandable that the Vedic vision of living in harmony with nature was not just physical but rather wide and comprehensive. The Vedic message is clear that environment belongs to all living beings, so it needs protection by all, for the welfare of all. The Vedic literature containing so many examples and verses relating to the importance and protection of the elements of nature is in itself an indicator of how valuable nature is considered in Hinduism. The Vedic hymns dedicated to the protection of environment go to prove that the piety of environment is essential for healthy society, healthy people and healthy thinking. All the pleasures and wealth can be easily available by following the path of Dharma. This Dharma is easy to follow if we pledge to put into practice the environmental science contained in the Vedas.

Talking about Islam, this religion provides a comprehensive model of environmental ethics where at the same time man is a consumer and beneficiary as well as a guardian and trustee of the environment. It insists that nature is respected and invites humans to learn from it and join it in harmonious coexistence. The holy Quran guides as to how a man is to act to his environment and what the relationship is between man, God and nature.

The verses of the Quran mention that corruption in the land is forbidden. The main principles of faith (belief in God's Oneness and the Resurrection) are emphasized while humans are reminded of their function or duty: as God's vicegerent, they are to pray, establish justice, and avoid corruption of nature. Islam preserves an integral view of the universe and envisions the flow of Divine grace in the arteries of the cosmic and natural order. It refuses to consider humanity as distinct from nature.

For Muslims, the Quran is the ultimate green-guide. Believed to be a sublime revelation with remarkable ideas, this divine scripture is scrupulously read by Muslims for gaining spirituality. But it is not limited to only that. In the Islamic faith, environment is at par with

humanity, since Muslims believe he created all. The Quran glorifies nature and wildlife as an earthly heaven, a mirror to the lush forests of paradise above.

When Allah (God) created the earth for human beings to live on, he made it suitable and adequate for life. He created everything needed for their survival. In other words, he put nature at the service of human beings. (Jamil 13)

The Quran states that Allah created everything in the universe (the great environment) in due balance: a balance in movement, in temperature, in gravity and its forces, in magnetism and its impacts, in electrical fields, in the quantity of water found in the seas, in the earth as a whole...in the equilibrium between death and life, in the balance of the creatures on earth so that no species outnumber the others. The environment was created with utmost care and in a balanced manner. If this harmony is not maintained, the existence would lose its equilibrium. Everything is created to serve life and nothing is accidental nor is it created without a purpose.

The Quran deals in a comprehensive manner with all the components of the environment. If we consider the environment as the earth and whatever goes on it, we find that it has been mentioned in its verses in various Suras. The Quranic Verses and Prophetic Hadiths enjoin for environment conservation and urge for protecting nature from all factors of pollution and devastation.

No creature is capable of any feat or is able to possess anything whatsoever. It is Allah who possesses all the treasures. As mankind's knowledge grows, it gains more insight into the secrets of the world. The significance of the treasures of this world has become more apparent after man has discovered the nature of the elements of which the planet is composed and the nature of its structure and composition. Man realized that water is composed of atoms of oxygen and hydrogen and that one of the treasures contained in the green plant is the nitrogen found in the air. He also discovered many such things which demonstrate the treasures of Allah and of which man has come to know but a few.

From this perspective, Islam underlines the importance of preserving the elements of the ecosystem, and calls for using it wisely and rationally, without any change whatsoever, so that the system can keep on fulfilling its function of feeding life on a sustainable basis. Allah said in this regard, "But if any one, after God's favour has come to him, substitutes (something else) God is strict in punishment." (Baqara 211)

The Environment is harnessed to serve man, Allah's vicegerent on earth. Allah offered the environment for man's use. He said, "Do you not see that God has subjected to you (use) all things in the heavens and on the earth? And made His bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, (both) seen and unseen?" (Luqman 20). Allah made man His vicegerent on earth, "It is He who hath made you his agents, inheritors of the earth." (Anam 165)

Making man a vicegerent means that he is a steward over the environment (earth) but not an owner. He is simply borrowing these bounties and charged with dwelling on earth and settling in it on a temporary basis only. The holy Quran states that, "On earth will be your dwelling place and your means of livelihood for a time." (Baqara 36) This environment is a human heritage. Generations upon generations inherit the permanent riches of it. Humans are not the owners of the land, they simply borrow it from the preceding generations and it is their responsibility to preserve it for the next generations without polluting its resources and potentialities.

Preserving the elements of the ecosystems is an individual as well as a collective duty. For all the preceding reasons, the protection of the environment, the preservation of its resources, and refraining from wasting or over-exploiting them become individual as well as collective duties. The Quran states that Allah threatened to punish, in this world or in the hereafter or in both, those who change his blessings. It is indisputable that the destruction of the elements of the environment, which engenders ecological problems from which our modern world is suffering, is a sort of punishment for those who alter the bounties of God. The scripture mentions that "Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of (the meed) that the hands of men have earned, that (God) may give them a taste of some of their Deeds: in order that they may turn back (from evil)." (Rum 41)

Preserving the environment is thus, a form of worship. Worship in its overall meaning is not restricted to performing religious rituals such as prayer, fasting and pilgrimage etc. but comprises also the faithful abidance by the precepts and injunctions of Islam in all walks of life. Therefore, the good use of the environment, the protection and the preservation of its riches for the sake of mankind at large, the non-pollution of water, its preservation, the non-pollution of the air and the soil, the good use of public facilities and public property, and abstaining from indiscriminate hunting and grazing, all of these are forms of worship. From this perspective, any concept that defines the way one should deal with the natural and civilization components of the environment, through a constructive Islamic conduct, is an order from Allah that should be met with obedience and subordination, out of gratitude for his many blessings. The Quran guides in this respect, saying that "But do thou good as God has been good to thee, and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land." (Qasas 77)

God ordered human beings not to do mischief on earth. He said in his Holy Book, "Do no mischief on earth, after it hath been set in order." (A'rāf 56) "Then is it to be expected of you, if you reject Islam, that ye will do mischief in the Land." (Muhammad 22) "But they ever strive to do mischief on earth. And God loveth not those who do mischief." (Ma'ida 64) But unfortunately, it has been observed that skills and competence have grown among human beings more quickly than wisdom and rationality and this has led them astray, far away from the religious precepts of environment.

God has been good to us by creating for us an environment having all the components of life. We must, therefore, be thankful to him and abide by his instructions. The exploitation of environmental resources turns us away from truly serving him. These wrong behaviours inflict damages on mankind at large. Islam prohibits humans from doing this. The bad, unwise and irrational exploitation of the environment, its destruction, pollution and depletion are tantamount to showing ungratefulness for Allah's favours and ingratitude and the denial of God's favours and bounties lead to many scourges and catastrophes.

Water is a source of life on earth. Allah gives a stern advice to mankind to value and preserve this prestigious component of nature. In the Quran it has been said that, "See ye the water which ye drink? Do ye bring it down (in rain) from the cloud or do we? Were it our will, we could make it salt (and unpalatable): Then why do ye not give thanks?" (Waqi'a 68-70) It is stated in the holy Quran, "Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breasts" (Hajj 46).

The ozone gas in the stratosphere is very important for life. It shields the earth from the ultra-violet rays sent by the sun. Should these rays reach the earth they would kill all organisms and creatures. The ozone gas absorbs these rays and prevents them from flowing to the earth

surface. Pollution inflicts a huge damage on the ozone and consequently on life in all its aspects. Scientists hold that the effects from the ozone hole would be hazardous and harmful.

Thus, from an Islamic point of view, over-exploitation is a proof of irresponsibility. The Quran envisages the principle of natural reserves with specified borders and limits. When we do not restore these things to harmony we only end up polluting our own little bubble of survival. That is why God says that our catastrophes are self-inflicted, “corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by what the hands of people have earned.” As if to give a wake-up call, people are told these catastrophic processes can heal and eliminate social and natural disorders, but through belief in God and respect for nature. The holy Quran warns human kind of the consequences stating that, “Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of [the deed] that the hands of men have earned, that [Allah] may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from Evil).(30:41)

From the preaching of the Holy Quran, we can draw a conclusion that the Islamic approach, in dealing with environmental issues, is based on promoting the image of a man as one who believes that he is part of the ecosystem and not one who behaves as the absolute lord of this system, one who conserves environment and its resources rather than wasting them. Humans need to understand the message envisaged in this holy book and implement it in their lives if the ongoing global ecological crisis is to be resolved.

III. ANALYSIS

Human beings are the most intelligent beings on earth so it makes sense that they have the responsibility to care for the planet, to give it a hug and a health check now and again. It is the need of the hour to change human behaviour, for it is human being who is responsible for and entrusted with the task of preserving nature. An ‘environmental consciousness’ aiming to promote a sound behaviour towards the environment needs to be developed.

In the context of environment, religion holds great importance but people today, being lured by materialistic things are drifting away from religion. They just treat it as a higher power. There are many things in our religious scriptures apart from just being a higher power. A common man has scant awareness on the welfare motif of religion, and its human face.

All scriptures have their broad base on established relations with human and nature. In some cases, nature is worshipped while in the others it is not but no negativity towards nature is observed. Every scripture holds the same view on the preservation of environment though in different languages and following different methods of preaching but they all deliver the same message for human beings. We therefore, need to revisit our texts to understand the importance of nature and environment. Religion and nature are interrelated. Religion talks of the Omnipresence of God and it includes nature also. If we claim to be religious, we need to equally respect nature. But ironically, human beings mould religion and nature according to their convenience. They interpret the religious texts in a way that suits their needs and in the same way they use or rather abuse nature in the style that suits them best.

IV. CONCLUSION

Environmental problems have become a reality endangering human life both in the present and in the future. The situation will become worse unless human beings change their behaviour to the better. If human beings abide by their faith and its regulations, they can spare themselves of all these environmental problems. If we claim to be religious we need to equally respect nature and see nature in context of religion. The current deplorable environmental crisis demands a spiritual response. One of the measures that could help a

great deal to fulfil this need is to regenerate and rejuvenate the basic values of the religious cultures and propagate them.

REFERENCES

- (1) Banwari. *Hinduism and Ecology*, Shri Vinayaka Publications, Delhi, 1992.
- (2) Dwivedi, Kapil Deva. "Ecological Thoughts in the Vedas." *Ecological Concepts in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity and Sikhism*, edited by Rajdeva Narayan and Janardan Kumar, Deep and Deep Publication, New Delhi, 2003.
- (3) Dwivedi, O.P., "Dharmic Ecology." *Worldviews, Religion and the Environment: A Global Anthology*, edited by Richard C. Foltz, Thomson Wadsworth, Melbourne, 2002.
- (4) Dwivedi, O.P. and B.N. Tiwari. "Dharmic Ecology: A Foundation For The Environmental Sustainability." *Religion and Environment*, edited by Kishna Ram Bishnoi and Narsi Ram Bishnoi, Guru Jambheshwar University Publication, Hisar, 2002, pp. 1-22.
- (5) *Islamic Terms Dictionary*. www.alim.org Web..
- (6) Haneef, Sayed Sikandar Shah. "Principles of Environmental Law in Islam." *Arab Law Quarterly*, vol. 17, no.3, (2002), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3382024>
- (7) Jamil, Mohammad Assayed. *A Study on Environmental Issues With Reference to the Quran and the Sunna*, translated by Dr. Lahcen Haddad. Cairo: ISESCO, 1999, pp.13-15
- (8) Kansal, Mukesh. *Vedic Mythology*, Maxford Books, New Delhi, 2008, pp.1-28.
- (9) Khalid, Fazlun M. *Islam and Ecology*, edited by Joanne o Brien, Cassell Publishers Limited, London, 1992.
- (10) Klostermaier, Klaus. "Ecology and Religion: Christian and Hindu Paradigms." *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, vol. 6, no.6, 1993, pp.7-11.
- (11) Kumar, Janardan. "Islam And Ecology." *Ecological Concepts in Hinduism , Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity and Sikhism*, edited by Rajdeva Narayan and Janardan Kumar, Deep and Deep Publication, New Delhi, 2003.
- (12) Narayan, Rajdeva. "Ecological Crisis And Hindu Religious Thought." *Ecological Concepts in Hinduism , Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity and Sikhism*, edited by Rajdeva Narayan and Janardan Kumar, Deep and Deep Publication, New Delhi, 2003, pp.33-37.
- (13) Rahman, Fazlur. "Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'an." *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol.2, 1983, pp.183.
- (14) Renugadevi, R., "Environmental Ethics in The Hindu Vedas And Puranas In India." *African Journal of History and Culture*, vol. 41, no.1, 2012, pp. 1-3.
- (14) Prime, Ranchore. *Hinduism and Ecology*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, pp.19-20.

- (15) Sharma, P.D. Ecology and Environment, Rastogi Publications, Delhi, 2011.
- (16) Soukari Ali, Ali. Environment from an Islamic Standpoint, Maarif, Alexandria, 1995.
- (17) The Holy Quran, translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, King Fahad Holy Quran Press, 1987.
- (18) Vannucci, M. Ecological Readings in the Vedas, D.K. Printworld, New Delhi.