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Talking about Hinduism 'Till the Sacred Cows Come Home': a response to 'Hinduism and ecology' by Catherine Robinson & Denise Cush

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Catherine Robinson and Denise Cush have produced an interesting piece of work. The first part of the paper looks at the idealised portrayal of Hinduism as an ecologically sound tradition, and includes some positive examples of environmental action undertaken by Hindus. The second part of the paper examines the ecological credentials claimed by Hindus and others for the tradition. Most of my response concerns this half of the paper. While the authors' hermeneutical skills are commendable, they are not entirely free from a subjective/anachronistic reading.

While it is important to take a critical view of the idealised presentation of Hinduism as eco-friendly, it is equally important to realize that a gap between the ideal and contemporary practice is bound to prevail, something which is not exclusive to Hinduism. In the process of addressing ecological concerns, there is a tendency to construct a visionary picture with little reference to the present. While one cannot go back to an idyllic existence, one can draw upon textual/mythological/philosophical resources within the tradition (both ancient and contemporary) to evolve an appropriate ecological approach which can be applied to our present context. I agree with the authors that a simplistic reading of an 'ecological agenda into ancient texts and traditions' is not helpful; but I would say that what is required is a rethinking and reformulation of traditional concepts and wisdom in constructive ways.

Defining the 'Other' in Binary Categories

The paper tends to look at the sacred and secular in binary categories. Seen from this perspective, it would seem that any religious act of Hindus cannot possibly have an ecological goal. Since religion is very much part of the Hindu way of life, an act that one performs has a religious basis or motivation, and to see it, as these authors have tended to do, as being separate from other areas of life is to divorce religion from everyday life. In the authors' view, references to plants, animals and natural phenomena do 'not necessarily translate into environmental action'. It could be

argued that such resources can be used in constructive ways. The fact that the river Ganges is considered sacred does not mean that it can have no positive ecological implications. Hindus need to be made aware of their own scriptures relating to matters such as land, air and water pollution (*Caraka, Vimanastanam*, III 6:1 & 6:2), and of injunctions which clearly prohibit disposal of waste into the river:

One should not perform these 14 acts near the holy waters of the river Ganga: i.e., remove excrement, brushing and gargling, removing cerumen from body, throwing hairs, dry garlands,...washing clothes, throwing dirty clothes, thumping water and swimming. (*Pravascitta Tatva* 1.535, cited in Dwivedi, 1990: 207)

All activities are to be regulated by codes of conduct (*dharma*), and departure from it affects the relationship between us and Nature. One cannot draw neat distinctions between religious and ecological dimensions, because they are interrelated. For example, a Hindu in rural India worshipping a tree may not be reflecting ecologically. The tree is sacred and therefore deserves care and respect. As Dwivedi points out, 'The Hindu worship of trees and plants has been based partly on utility, but mostly on religious duty and mythology. Hindu ancestors considered it their duty to save trees; and in order to do that they attached to every tree a religious sanctity' (1990: 206). Here the religious act does not endanger ecological sensitivity. On the contrary, it can promote responsible action, as the Chipko and other environmental movements have shown.

The West: Setting the Agenda

The paper views contemporary Hindu concern for the environment as being largely initiated by the West. It also reckons that 'the enthusiastic way in which contemporary Hindus portray the tradition as essentially ecological seems more to be addressing the concerns and interests of a Western audience, than an issue which developed naturally and spontaneously from the Hindu tradition'. Such statements are highly contentious. True, ecology has acquired a central focus worldwide of late, and especially in the West, but this should not blind us to the ecological concerns shown by ordinary people who were oblivious of the agenda set by the West. This is particularly explicit in the lives of tribal and rural women of India who live close to and in harmony with nature. Their daily lives are sustained by Nature. For these women Nature is sacred. Trees in the forest are venerated as *Vana devatas* (forest deities) and they are closely linked with the land and its people. On the ecological front, rural women of India have taken an active part in non-violent campaigns to protect forest lands. Their knowledge of forest management is more ecological than that of the British whose interest in the Indian forests was purely commercial (Shiva, 1988: 61).

The roles played by the Bishnoi community in Rajasthan and the Chipko movement are treated lightly. Women's environmental action in India began long before the UN Women's Decade and the 1972 Stockholm Environment Conference (Shiva, 1988: 67). Some 300 years ago the Bishnoi women who sacrificed their lives

in the process of saving the trees might not have used ecological terms, but they lived and died for an environmental cause. They were prepared to give their lives to protect the forest which sustained their daily lives.

The Chipko (hug-the-tree) movement which began in the 1970s followed the trend set by Bishnoi women. Women in the Garhwal mountain regions of the Himalayas started the Chipko movement to protect the forests. Vandana Shiva—physicist, philosopher and feminist—has been actively involved in environmental projects, including the Chipko movement. She has evolved an appropriate ecological approach, drawing upon Hindu concepts such as *Shakti* (divine feminine/power principle), *Purusha* (masculine principle) and *Prakriti* (Nature) (1988: 38–40). The philosophy of Chipko spread to various parts of India and came to be applied in novel ways. For instance, women even ‘tied sacred threads to the trees as a token of their vow of protection’ (Shiva, 1988: 75). Another interesting example is that of some tribal women who ‘embraced the trunks and legs of the elephants’ which were dispatched to evict the tribes of Kumarikatta in Assam from the land which they had occupied. The women prayed to the elephant god Ganesha, anointed the elephants with sandal paste and red powder, and offered flowers which they would normally do on the special day. The elephants responded graciously to the prayers and turned back (Jain, 1986: 263).

The paper looks upon some examples of Hindu environmental action, in eurocentric terms. The authors point out that ‘it is easy to suspect in some examples of Hindu environmental action that the religious justification is an afterthought, and that the ecological agenda was set from outside the tradition by the West.’ For example, even the practice of planting trees, which has a long history in the Hindu tradition, is seen as coming from the West. Tree planting ceremony (*Vanamahotsava*) has a deeply religious and ecological significance. One has only to look at the various *Puranas* to understand the value of trees. Even today, trees are worshipped in the villages and in the mountainous regions of India. It begins to appear from the authors’ view that if Hinduism has anything at all of value, it has come from the outside. The ecological resources within the tradition are ignored. In other words, the tradition is stripped of its own meaning and authenticity.

Examples of Restrictive Readings

Although the authors do recognise the value of reinterpretation and point out Hinduism’s vitality and ability to adapt, their paper does not really seem to allow Hindus to reinterpret their tradition to make it relevant to the present situation. Any ecological reinterpretation of a concept/text is seen as an anachronistic reading. The authors go to great lengths to resurrect the now discredited one-sided reading of Hindu concepts such as *maya*, *lila*, *moksha*. They are seen as empty of any positive content. It appears that the underlying meaning/motivation/implication of any Hindu text/concept is not conducive to any real interest in the environment. Such a reading not only undervalues the symbolic meaning(s) but also does not allow for a broader understanding of these concepts. One has to acknowledge the plurality of meanings that a text/concept may generate. It does not serve any good purpose to

deny the right to reinterpret/reread in new ways. The words of Ashis Nandy, used in a different context, are applicable to the interpretation of Hinduism put forward by the authors: 'The West has not merely produced modern colonialism, it informs most interpretations of colonialism. It colours even the interpretation of interpretation' (1991: xii).

The following examples from the paper demonstrate that the authors' interpretations are very restrictive and selective:

1. Even if 'the traditional motivation behind asceticism and a simple life style was not environmental, but spiritual', as the authors point out, the latter is not detrimental to environmental progress. In other words, this spiritual goal is not necessarily opposed to environmental concerns. On the contrary, by minimising one's needs, one is contributing to an ecological lifestyle. As Klaus Klostermaier points out, 'Ecology, understood as a mode of thought as well as a way of life, demands discipline, and engenders discipline in its turn' (1995: 149). Moreover, the ascetic tradition of withdrawal from the world does not necessarily imply a lack of concern for the world. The *Bhagavadgita* sets a high value on working selflessly for the welfare of others (*loksamgraham*).

2. Similarly, the paper looks at the Hindu notion of vegetarianism in terms of the norms of purity and pollution, without relating it to the concept of *ahimsa* ('non-killing'), which has ethical and ecological implications. The divine is seen as present in all things, so causing injury to a living thing is causing injury to the divine itself. This calls for a respectful attitude to all forms of life. As Klostermaier states, 'In its higher forms, [*ahimsa*] inclucates not only a suppression of aggression but positive relations with all that lives, human as well as non-human' (1995: 149). Clearly this kind of attitude should promote ecological awareness.

3. The paper seems to be more concerned with examining the claims made for the tradition than with the relevance of textual resources for our present ecological crisis. The authors tend to look at selective hymns from the *Vedas* to emphasize their point. The well known hymn to the Earth from the *Atharva Veda* is cited as an example of 'what humans can gain from the earth'. The authors do not refer to those hymns in the *Atharva Veda* which show respect and care for the Earth. While the Earth is asked to bless us with wealth (12: 44), she is also assured of protection (12: 12). That one should not hurt the Earth is also explicit: 'What, O earth, I dig out of thee, quickly shall that grow again: may I not, O pure one, pierce thy vital spot, (and) they heart!' (12: 35). Even today it is a common practice among Hindus to ask the forgiveness of the earth before one builds a house, as it causes injury to it. As Panikkar points out, 'Man's work is not to make a shift in ownership, despoiling, as it were, the earth of her possessions and transferring them to the toiler. Man's work is to enjoy the blessings of the earth, because the earth is his home, his own family, his body' (1989: 121).

4. The authors' reading of the theistic and non-theistic *Vedanta* is very restrictive and reiterates Orientalist perceptions of Hinduism as being other-worldly and

mystical. All forms of Hinduism, whether it be *Advaita Vedanta* or theistic forms of *Vedanta*, are seen as devaluing this world. The paper fails to note that both world denial and world affirmation appear in Hindu thought and practice. 'Such negation', as Geoffrey Parrinder points out, 'has been one element, notably among forest ascetics, but how influential has it been in important philosophies and in general religion? At least it seems that affirmation of the world and life has been powerful, parallel to the world-denial of hermits' (1976: 91).

It is mainly Shankara's interpretation of this world as *maya* or illusion that is seen as devaluing the world. If this world is seen as being literally unreal, then nothing can have any meaning. Klostermaier states:

Not all of *Vedanta* is of that nature. For some, nature is a means to salvation, a marvel in and by itself, the basis for everything. Awareness of a higher reality need not result in contempt for everything else. On the contrary, by insisting that everything that is real is *brahman*, ultimate reality, nature gains infinite status and dignity. To the extent that the natural and social are taken as realities, they have to be seen as *brahman* and not as illusion. They must be taken as seriously as *brahman*, or one would fail to understand them properly....(1995: 149)

5. The paper reinforces negative understandings of concepts such as *maya* and *lila* (both have popular and philosophical connotations). They are seen as not encouraging people 'to take any action about the environmental crises'. Although *maya* is generally understood as 'illusion', it also means the creative power of the divine. The *Bhagavadgita* affirms the reality of this world which is seen as the manifestation of the divine creative power or *maya* (4, 6). As Julius Lipner (1995: 256) points out:

...*māyā* can also be used philosophically in a strongly realist (italics in original) sense to signify this world or worldly phenomena as expressing the deity's wondrous and bewildering power. The world or its phenomena are real enough, but they can take on a dazzling quality either as manifesting or as masking the divine action. (1994: 256)

Even from a monistic perspective, '*maya* is only an illusion from the viewpoint of the absolute Reality, while in the empirical world it is real' (Parrinder, 1976: 92).

Similarly the concept *lila* ('play' or 'sport') is much misunderstood. It indicates the creative activity of God. The fact that the world is seen as the product of divine 'sport' or *lila* does not mean that it has no ultimate significance or that the Divine has no serious concern for welfare of the world. Again to cite Julius Lipner:

Hinduism has sometimes been criticised because the concept of the divine *līlā* intimates that God does not take the world or human affairs seriously, and that the world is not an arena for responsible divine action. This charge is quite misdirected, and has no philosophical-theological backing in the major strands of Hinduism. (1994: 255)

In fact, the divine's concern for humanity and the world is illustrated in the concept of *avatara* and this is explicit in the *Bhagavadgita* which encourages us to

act selflessly. (The path of action (*karma marga*) came to be given a primary emphasis during the Indian freedom struggle.) Clearly this has important ethical and ecological implications.

6. The paper offers a very limited understanding of both theistic and nontheistic concepts of *moksha* and they are seen to relativize concern for the material world. However a positive understanding of *moksha* does not lead to a devaluation of the world. On the contrary, spiritual liberation is to be gained here and now. The liberated individuals or *jivan muktas* work unceasingly for the transformation of the world. In the words of Anant Anand Rambachan, 'Moksha frees one for a non-competitive relationship with other living things. The *jivan-mukta*'s security is not primarily in what he possesses, but in what he unalterably is.' He goes on to say:

The sense of contendedness and fulfilment accompanying the appreciation of the completeness of our being does not imply a self-concerned narcissism....To appreciate the fullness and dignity of my Self is to see the fullness and dignity of all life. Unfortunately, the implications of this scriptural truth have not always been consistently reflected and explored in many of the social structures which have accompanied the growth of Hinduism....There is a need and a challenge for drawing out the ideal of *moksha*, its implications for life in society, and seeking to mould the latter in the light of the former...(1984: 5-6)

For a Hindu theist, *moksha* implies a positive state of relationship with all forms of life. God is seen as the embodiment of love and this world is seen as the body of God. In the words of Sivaraman, the Saivite scholar, 'The love of God means avowedly a corresponding love towards the concrete, individual, unique here and now. It is in the meeting of the these two that *moksha* liberates and enlarges human existence' (1978: 134).

7. The authors' critique of Mahatma Gandhi from an ecological point of view is unfair. To look for an explicit ecological agenda in his work serves no purpose. If Gandhi's life and work have 'inspired ecological projects', then he has contributed to an ecological way of thinking and living. Although Mahatma Gandhi's primary goal was focused on freedom from foreign rule, he was aware of the damage that industrialization would bring to India. The authors seem to ignore his concern for a healthy village economy which he believed would provide a livelihood for millions of villagers.

8. Again, the purpose of including Swami Vivekananda is not clear. The authors point out that ecology was not an agenda of his time and that it would be 'anachronistic to look for an ecological message' in his life and work. If that is the case, why examine Swami Vivekananda's teachings from an ecological perspective?

Conclusion

In an era of multi-faith dialogue, one would have expected a more critically enlightened response from the authors, and not one that appears to be a recurrence

of some outmoded missionary and colonial interpretations of Hinduism which devalued the tradition. My major criticism is that the authors' readings of Hinduism tend to undermine the ecological resources within the tradition which can be tapped for evolving a Hindu ecology relevant to our times. Klostermaier sums up the hermeneutical agenda I have in mind:

The crucial question for Hinduism today is how to wed local ancient traditions with modern science and technology, how to align age-old sensibilities with the realities of the late twentieth century, so as to have continuity as well as sustainability, decency as well as prosperity. Perhaps it is possible to harmonize nature and humankind, economy and ethics, on the basis of wisdom as well as science and create a more humane world for our children to live in than we have known it in our lifetime (1995: 152).

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