

(UNIT 5) Hinduism and the Environment

With regard to their ecological legacy, the major Eastern religions have not typically been subjected to the same level of scrutiny as the Judeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, it is often assumed that, since key concepts such as *dharma*, *karma* and *samsara* point to the universe as a complex system of interdependent relationships, Eastern religious traditions lend themselves more easily than the Abrahamic faiths to efforts to construct a responsible environmental ethic. And yet, the cities of Hindu-majority India are frequently ranked among the world's most polluted, suggesting that the supposed 'eco-friendly' attitudes embedded in the culture have not translated into practice. In this unit, we examine Hindu perspectives on the natural world and attempt to assess the extent to which Hinduism may truly be regarded as 'ecologically ideal'.

Essential Reading

The reading for unit 5 begins with the essay by David Haberman for the *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* ('**Hinduism: Devotional Love of the World**' – link on Moodle). In this chapter, Haberman, through a discussion of what he terms the four 's's (*sarvatma-bhava*, *svarupa*, *seva* and *sambandha*), explores the potential contribution of devotional (*bhakti*) traditions to the development of new modalities of caring for the earth. Helpfully, Haberman is also quick to note the ambivalence of religion on the topic of the environment, and there is an acknowledgement that, while it undoubtedly has the resources by which to support the formulation of a positive ecological ethic, Hinduism can sometimes resist the 'eco-friendly' tag with which it is so often identified.

Next is the entry on Hinduism by O. P. Dwivedi in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* ('**Hindu Religion and Environmental Well-Being**' – link on Moodle). This essay examines a range of Hindu concepts that can be used to foster positive earth-human relations, and suggests a strategy by which the Hindu religion and its leaders can put into practice the 'eco-care vision' at the heart of the tradition. The environmental message of Hinduism is presented in overwhelmingly positive terms, Dwivedi seemingly unwilling to concede that the religion may, on occasion, act as a barrier to sustainable living (India's environmental crisis is blamed by Dwivedi on the forces of materialism and consumerism having suppressed 'ancient values which encouraged respect and due regard for God's creation'). A perhaps more balanced analysis is offered by Vasudha Narayanan in the essay '**Water, Wood, and Wisdom: Ecological Perspectives from the Hindu Traditions**' (PDF file on Moodle). While Narayanan expounds on the various ways in which Hinduism can be a positive resource for thinking about the environment, she is also quick to acknowledge its limitations and constraints. Narayanan even goes as far to claim that certain Hindu religious traditions have had an active hand in the destruction of the natural world. The belief that sacred rivers like the Ganga and Yamuna are so inherently pure that they cannot be defiled is adduced as evidence of this.

The more critical approach of Narayanan is taken one step further by Catherine Robinson and Denise Cush who, in their article **'The Sacred Cow: Hinduism and Ecology'** (PDF file on Moodle), set out to dispel the idea of Hinduism as ecologically ideal, and to warn against reading back an anachronistic agenda into its ancient texts and traditions. That is not to say that the authors see no value in attempting to seek support from Hindu tradition for the ecological project (Robinson and Cush conclude by emphasizing 'the power of religion to support and sustain ecology'). Rather, they are arguing for a more transparent hermeneutical process; in other words, that the reinterpreting or reconstructing of Hindu tradition in the light of ecological degradation does not 'blur the difference between the real and ideal, the actual and potential, scholarship and vision'. This viewpoint has proven controversial. In a direct response to Robinson and Cush, Sharada Sugirtharajah takes the scholars to task for failing to articulate the ways in which Hinduism may contribute positively to a discussion of green issues (**'Talking about Hinduism "Till the Sacred Cows Come Home": a response to "Hinduism and ecology" by Catherine Robinson & Denise Cush'** – PDF file on Moodle). The reading of Hinduism advanced by Robinson and Cush, argues Sugirtharajah, undermines the ecological potential of the religion, rehashing the 'outmoded missionary and colonial interpretations of Hinduism which devalued the tradition'.

Finally, there is the chapter on **'Hindu Traditions: Dharmic Ecology'** (link on Moodle) in Daniel Scheid's book, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*. Drawing heavily on the work of Hindu theologians such as Dwivedi and Narayanan, Scheid examines how the concept of *dharma* (or, religious/social duty) can function as a mechanism to encourage positive attitudes towards nature. In so doing, he makes the case that dharmic texts and traditions are more conducive to formulating a responsible environmental ethic than those texts and traditions whose chief concern is liberation (*moksha*).

Suggested Further Reading

There are various entries relevant to the topic of Hinduism and ecology in the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. A handful of these (**'Ecology'**, **'Sacred Animals'**, and **'Sacred Geography'**) have been combined into a single PDF file given on Moodle. Also of interest is the chapter on Hinduism in Lisa Kemmerer's ***Animals and World Religions*** (link on Moodle), although, the view of Hinduism's ecological outlook offered by Kemmerer is largely an uncritical one.

A number of excellent longer studies on the relationship between Hinduism and ecology have been produced in recent years. Among the most highly regarded are those by Prime (***Hinduism and Ecology: Seeds of Truth***), Nelson (***Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India***), Chapple and Tucker (***Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water***), and Jain (***Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability***). Unfortunately, none of these publications are available as e-books from the University library. However, Nelson and Jain have been uploaded to the Moodle page as PDF files. The others can be viewed in Google Books, albeit with the usual restrictions.

Questions to Consider

- 1) What, according to the different readings for this unit, are some of Hinduism's main teachings in relation to the environment? Which models do you find most helpful and why?
- 2) What are some of the potential difficulties in looking to Hinduism for an ecological ethic? Are there any attitudes, perspectives or traditions within Hinduism that could be considered less ecologically satisfying?
- 3) To what extent do you agree with the argument of both Narayanan and Scheid that dharmic texts and traditions are more conducive to formulating a responsible environmental ethic than those whose chief concern is liberation?
- 4) Does the solution to India's ecological crisis lie in the restoration of ancient Hindu values and practices? To what extent can Hinduism truly be regarded as 'ecologically ideal'?