

## CHAPTER 8

### THE ENVIRONMENT<sup>40</sup>

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#### **The World View**

A core Hindu teaching is that the entire universe, without exception, is pervaded by the One Supreme Being. (*Isha Upanishad 1*) This is expressed in a poetic way in the Vedas: the universe emanated from the Divine Cosmic Person: the sun from His eyes, the moon from His mind, fire from His mouth, wind from His breath and so on. (*Rig Veda X.90*) The Vedas also speak of Divine manifestations in the most ordinary settings: As water, He dwells not only in the sacred rivers but also in little streams, puddles, ponds, lakes and wells; in the rain and in the clouds. (*Yajur Veda 16.37,38*) In short, since the Divine envelops and permeates every aspect of all that we experience, we should view every part of Nature as a celebration and manifestation of the Divine.

#### **Applying this world view in our lives**

Our scriptures also instruct us on how to apply this lofty world view in our daily lives. It is our obligation to play our part in the grand cosmic drama. The Bhagavad Gita explains that we owe our existence to food, which is fed by rain, that in turn is the result of cosmic processes presided over by the Creator. Nature and humans have a relationship of mutuality and one who does not honor this relationship “lives life in vain.” (*Bhagavad Gita verses 3.9-16*) Nature serves humans; and equally, humans are servants of Nature, not its masters or stewards. Through Nature, the Divine Mother expresses Her love and compassion for all living beings. In return, humans are asked to enjoy the bounties of Nature in a responsible way. (*Isha Upanishad 1*) When our greed and self-indulgence disturb the ecological balance, we violate the clear teachings of our scriptures.

#### **Ethical injunctions**

Respect for Nature is embedded in many of the fundamental values of Hinduism.<sup>41</sup> For example, *Aparigraha* (non-acquisitiveness) instructs us not to acquire possessions beyond our needs. Hindu philosophy teaches us that our happiness is to be found within ourselves rather than in external objects. Consumerism is contrary to this value because it sets us back on our spiritual journey while also greatly straining the environment. Another value with direct implications for the environment is *Ahimsa* (non-injury). Recognizing the presence of the divine in all beings, our scriptures require us to avoid injury to others, where “others” includes all beings. Thus, Hindu dietary laws prohibit eating beef and express a preference for a vegetarian diet. The

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<sup>41</sup> See the author’s note on Values.

ecological benefits of a vegetarian diet are gaining wider recognition. At a social level, non-injury implies the avoidance of violence and war that threaten the destruction of our environment.

### **Nurturing the forces of Nature**

The message that humans and the forces of Nature have a relationship of mutuality is reinforced in our scriptures through stories and practices. One scriptural story is that of the noble King Prithu.<sup>42</sup> When Prithu ascended the throne, a famine hobbled the land. The king was angry at Goddess Earth for withholding her produce and causing distress. She protested that she had been exploited for generations by his predecessors who had stolen her produce without returning to Earth what was her due. She pleaded with King Prithu to restore the respect due to her and to help her conserve rain water by landscaping the ground and creating water reservoirs. When Prithu agreed and offered to protect earth as his daughter, Goddess Earth again became prolific in her produce. Earth came to be known as Prithvi i.e. daughter of Prithu.

In another story, Lord Krishna eliminates the poisonous serpent Kaliya. (*Srimad Bhagavatam Book 10, Chapter 16*) Near Krishna's boyhood home, a pool of water was terribly polluted. Anyone who ventured near it and even the birds that flew over the area were killed by the poisonous fumes. The source of the poison was a giant venomous snake that had made this pool his abode. Krishna subdued the snake, banished him to the ocean, and restored the pool of water to its original purity.

Hindus worship God in multiple manifestations and in each of these manifestations God is associated with an animal or bird. This indirectly teaches Hindus to view all other living beings as possessing divinity. Two of the most popularly worshipped forms are Lord Ganesha who has an elephant head and Lord Hanuman who has the form of a monkey. The cow is regarded as particularly sacred and the eagle, snake, bull, lion, mouse, peacock, dog, fish, tortoise and owl are all associated with divinity. Fragrant flowers, coconuts and fruit form integral parts of ritual worship. Rituals in our life cycle involve sacred rivers, lakes and mountains.

Reverence for Fire is taught to show the interconnections between humans and the Divine. The very first mantra in the oldest Veda, the Rig Veda, invokes the blessings of Fire. With its infinite capacity to transform, Fire is seen as the "mouth" of the Divine, providing Divine guidance to humans and receiving the special offerings made by humans to propitiate Nature which Fire then transmits to the appropriate forces of the Divine. Our most important sacred vows, such as marriage, are witnessed by Fire.

Several simple prayers that we learn as children help us imbibe the message that the Divine is present everywhere: when we wake up we ask Mother Earth's forgiveness before stepping on her; before eating we remember that eating is a part of the cosmic drama presided over by the

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<sup>42</sup> Srimad Bhagavatam Book 4, Chapter 18

Divine; when we bathe, we remember the sacred rivers; we are taught never to disrespect books by putting our feet on them; we remember God before starting a new activity. Hindu homes tend to be filled with religious objects to remind us of God's presence. We are encouraged to take God's name at all times with or without reason! The personal names of most Hindus are derived from the many names of God or His qualities.

In short, our scriptures, our ethical injunctions, and the way we are brought up as Hindus emphasize that we humans are a part of the infinitely grand fabric of Nature. Humans and the natural environment are bound to each other in a mutual relationship where humans are required to nurture the forces of Nature even while enjoying its bounty.