

Resource Guide: Hinduism and the Environment

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The term “Hinduism” encompasses an enormous variety of religious texts, rituals, beliefs, etc. encountered on the subcontinent. Because of this variety, it’s impossible to state definitively what *the* Hindu conception is of the relationship between man and nature. Furthermore, it’s not clear that such a statement, even if possible, would be “ecological” or “environmentally friendly” in character, in the sense of providing behavioral prescriptions conducive to the constructive solution of current problems surrounding resource utilization and depletion. What is clear is that the man-nature relationship has a place in the domain of the “sacred” or the “spiritual” according to various Hindu teachings. As such, it is an arena for moral action, whether that action consists in meditative self-realization, elaborate ritual sacrifice, or some form of exploitation of nature.

The following resource guide provides a sample of passages from various Hindu scriptures that may serve to provoke reflection on how man should relate to the natural world. Discussion questions and further resource suggestions are also included.

Scriptural Quotes

From the *Bhagavad Gita* (III.21-25):

“Whatever the best do, that others do also.
This sets a standard that the world follows.
Partha, there is nothing for me to do in the three worlds,
nothing unattained to be attained;
yet I engage in action.
If I should not engage in tireless action at all,
people everywhere would follow my path, Partha.
If I should not perform action,
these worlds would be ruined;
I should be a maker of confusion,
and I should destroy these creatures.
“As the unwise act attached to action, Bharata,
so the wise should act unattached,
intending to maintain the world. . . .”

From the Mahabharata (*Vana Parva*):

“Vaisampayana said, ‘After reflecting for a moment seeking to find out the (proper) course by his *yoga* powers, Dhaumya, that foremost of all virtuous men, addressed Yudhishtira, in these words, ‘In days of old, all living beings that had been created were sorely afflicted with hunger. And like a father (unto all of them), *Savita* (the sun) took compassion upon them. And going first into the northern declension, the sun drew up water by his rays, and coming back to the southern declension, stayed over the earth, with his heat centered in himself. And while the sun so stayed over the earth, the lord of the vegetable world (the moon), converting the effects of the solar heat (vapours) into clouds and pouring them down in the shape of water, caused plants to spring up. Thus it is the sun himself, who, drenched by the lunar influence, is transformed, upon the sprouting of seeds, into holy vegetable furnished with the six tastes. And it is these which constitute the food of all creatures upon the earth. Thus the food that supporteth the lives of creatures is instinct with solar energy, and the sun is, therefore, the father of all creatures. Do thou, hence, O Yudhishtira, take refuge even in him. . . .

‘Yudhishtira said, “Thou art, O sun, the eye of the universe. Thou art the soul of all corporeal existences. Thou art the origin of all things. Thou art the embodiment of the acts of all religious men. Thou art the refuge of those versed in the *Sankhya* philosophy (the mysteries of the soul), and thou art the support of the *Yogins*. Thou art a door unfastened with bolts. Thou art the refuge of those wishing for emancipation. Thou sustainest and discoverest the world, and sanctifiest and supportest it from pure compassion. Brahmanas versed in the *Vedas* appearing before thee, adore thee in due time, reciting the hymns from the respective branches (of the *Vedas*) they refer. Thou art the adored of the *Rishis*. The *Siddhas*, and the *Charanas* and the *Gandharvas* and the *Yakshas*, and the *Guhyakas*, and the *Nagas*, desirous of obtaining boons follow thy car coursing through the skies. . . . There is nothing that I know in the entire seven worlds, including that of Brahma which is beyond thee. There are other beings both great and endued with energy; but none of them hath thy lustre and energy. All light is in thee, indeed, thou art the lord of all light. In thee are the (five) elements and all intelligence, and knowledge and asceticism and the ascetic properties. . . . In summer thou drawest, by thy rays, moisture from all corporeal existences and plants and liquid substances, and pourest it down in the rainy season. Thy rays warm and scorch, and becoming as clouds roar and flash with lightning and pour down showers when the season cometh. Neither fire nor shelter, nor woolen cloths give greater comfort to one suffering from chilling blasts than thy rays. Thou illuminest by thy rays the whole Earth with her thirteen islands. Thou alone are engaged in the welfare of the three worlds. If thou dost not rise, the universe becometh blind and the learned cannot employ themselves in the attainment of virtue, wealth and profit. It is through thy grace that the (three) orders of Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas are able to perform their various duties and sacrifices. . . . Thou art spoken of as swift of speed and the destroyer of darkness, and the possessor of yellow steeds. He that reverentially adoreth thee on the sixth or the seventh lunar day with humility and tranquillity of mind, obtaineth the grace of Lakshmi. They that with undivided attention adore and worship thee, are delivered from all dangers, agonies, and afflictions. And they that hold that thou art everywhere (being the soul of all things) living long, freed from sin and enjoying an immunity from all diseases. O lord of all food, it behoveth thee to grant food in abundance unto me who am desirous of food even

for entertaining all my guests with reverence. I bow also to all those followers of thine that have taken refuge at thy feet—*Mathara* and *Aruna* and *Danda* and others, including *Asani* and *Kshuva* and the others. And I bow also to the celestial mothers of all creatures, viz., *Kshuva* and *Maitri* and the others of the class. O, let them deliver me their supplicant.’

From the *Ramayana* (Book I, Canto XXVI): Pathless and dark it seems to be,
 Where birds in thousands wander free;
 Where shrill cicadas’ cries resound,
 And fowl of dismal note abound,
 Lion, rhinoceros, and bear,
 Boar, tiger, elephant, are there,
 There shrubs and thorns run wild:
 Dháo, Sál, Bignonia, Bel, are found,
 And every tree that grows on ground.
 How is the forest styled?’
 The glorious saint this answer made:
 ‘Dear child of Raghu, hear
 Who dwells within the horrid shade
 That looks so dark and drear.
 Where now is wood, long ere this day
 Two broad and fertile lands,
 Malaja and Karúsha lay.
 Adorned by heavenly hands.
 Here, mourning friendship’s broken ties,
 Lord Indra of the thousand eyes
 Hungered and sorrowed many a day,
 His brightness soiled with mud and clay,
 When in a storm of passion he
 Had slain his dear friend Namuchi.
 Then came the Gods and saints who bore
 Their golden pitchers brimming o’er
 With holy streams that banish stain,
 And bathed Lord Indra pure again.
 When in this land the God was freed
 From spot and stain of impious deed
 For that his own dear friend he slew,
 High transport thrilled his bosom through.
 Then in his joy the lands he blessed,
 And gave a boon they long possessed:
 ‘Because these fertile lands retain
 The washings of the blot and stain,’
 ‘Twas thus Lord Indra sware,
 ‘Malaja and Karúsha’s name
 Shall celebrate with deathless fame
 My malady and care.’

Ráma and Lakshman heard the roar,
 That louder grew and louder yet,
 Of waves by dashing waters met.
 Then Ráma asked the mighty seer:
 ‘What is the tumult that I hear
 Of waters cleft in mid career?’
 Soon as the speech of Ráma, stirred
 By deep desire to know, he heard,
 The pious saint began to tell
 What paused the waters’ roar and swell:
 ‘On high Kailása’s distant hill
 There lies a noble lake
 Whose waters, born from Brahmá’s will,
 The name of Mánas take.
 Thence, hallowing where’er they flow,
 The streams of Sarjú fall,
 And wandering through the plains below
 Embrace Ayodhyá’s wall.
 Still, still preserved in Sarjú’s name
 Sarovar’s fame we trace.
 The flood of Brahma whence she came
 To run her holy race.
 To meet great Gangá here she hies
 With tributary wave:
 Hence the loud roar ye hear arise,
 Of floods that swell and rave.
 Here, pride of Raghu’s line, do thou
 In humble adoration bow.’
 He spoke. The princes both obeyed,
 And reverence to each river paid
 They reached the southern shore at last,
 And gaily on their journey passed.
 A little space beyond there stood
 A gloomy awe-inspiring wood.
 The monarch’s noble son began
 To question thus the holy man:
 ‘Whose gloomy forest meets mine eye
 Like some vast cloud that fills the sky?’

‘So be it,’ all the Immortals cried,
 When Indra’s speech they heard,
 And with acclaim they ratified
 The names his lips conferred.
 Long time, O victor of thy foes,
 These happy lands had sweet repose,
 And higher still in fortune rose.
 At length a spirit, loving ill,
 Tádaká , wearing shapes at will,
 Whose mighty strength, exceeding vast
 A thousand elephants, surpassed,
 Was to fierce Sunda, lord and head
 Of all the demon armies, wed.
 From her, Lord Indra’s peer in might
 Giant Mária sprang to light:
 And she, a constant plague and pest,
 These two fair realms has long distressed.

Now dwelling in her dark abode
 A league away she bars the road:
 And we, O Ráma, hence must go
 Where lies the forest of the foe.
 Now on thine own right arm rely,
 And my command obey:
 Smite the foul monster that she die.
 And take the plague away.
 To reach this country none may dare
 Fallen from its old estate,
 Which she, whose fury naught can bear,
 Has left so desolate.
 And now my truthful tale is told
 How with accursed sway
 The spirit plagued this wood of old,
 And ceases not to-day.’

From the *Atharvaveda* (XII: 1.1, 1.3, 1.6, 1.27, translation from Dwivedi and Tiwari 1987):

The earth is our mother, Aditi is cause of birth, and Space is our brother. May these all save us from sin. Sky is our father. May he be auspicious to us in our faults with forefathers. Let me not fall from the world by offending against relatives. Truth, the great and fierce cosmic law, vow, penance, the ultimate truth bear the earth. She, wife of past and future, may make a wide space for us. From whom ocean, rivers and waters, food and fields have come into existence (are born). The whole world comes to life in her breathing and moving. May earth give such to us. Let us behave in accordance with the earth, treasure of all and mother of herbs, the firm earth bore by the truth and which is the auspicious seat.

From the *Yajurveda* (3.35.36.3, translation from Dwivedi and Tiwari 1987):

We contemplate that adorable glory of the Deity—which is in the earth, the sky, the heaven

May he stimulate our mental power

From *How to Serve the Cow*, by Gandhiji, pp.3-4:

The central fact of Hinduism is cow protection. Cow protection is one of the most wonderful phenomena in human evolution. It takes man beyond his species. The cow to me means the entire subhuman world. Man, through the cows is enjoined to realize his

identity with all that lives. . . protection of the cow means the protection of the whole dumb creation of God. . . .

Discussion Questions

1. *Dharma* in Hinduism refers generally to “right conduct,” to the performance of one’s duties. In chapter 3 of the *Gita*, Krishna suggests that action is superior to inaction, that doing one’s duty and actively maintaining the body and the world are superior to indifference and neglect (see quote above). At the same time he suggests that “It is far better to discharge one’s prescribed duties, even though faultily, than another’s duties perfectly. Destruction in the course of performing one’s own duty is better than engaging in another’s duties, for to follow another’s path is dangerous” (3.35). What does this imply about the scope of individual responsibility? Are individuals only to attend to the duties immediately pertaining to their own lives, or are they responsible for the greater good? Are *all* individuals responsible for the greater good, or are only some meant to set the example for others to follow? Does responsibility for the whole rest only with the divine, leaving humans to think only about their own affairs, or are we commanded to take responsibility for nature as part of our duties?
2. The *Itihasas* (epics)—*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*—are at the heart of the *Smriti* component of Hindu sacred literature. Forests, as well as cities, play a prominent role in both of these works. In each, the heroes must spend a period of time immersed in nature. Ostensibly this is a punishment in both cases, but in each the protagonists gain valuable knowledge, achievements, gifts, and allies from their sojourns without which they would not be able to complete their tasks. Natural entities—the sun, rivers, etc. —are objects of worship and reverence, to be respected even by the mightiest humans. At the same time, the wilderness is home to some of the most sinister of creatures—*bhuts* and *raksasas* (ghosts, demons, monsters) —who must be destroyed to return light and order to wild spaces. (See above quotes for both of these perspectives). How are we to balance these viewpoints? Is the forest “ultimately” a place of good or evil or is this dichotomy far too simplistic to capture the subtleties of the texts? Is the forest a place of heightened mystery/magic and therefore of heightened contact with the sacred? What is the role of exposure to nature in the cultivation of the (heroic) self? Is it merely one of conquest, or are there more subtle lessons to be learned? What kinds of characters ordinarily inhabit the cities and which the forests and what is their relationship? Finally, how does the tradition of “sacred groves” factor into Hindu perceptions of trees/forests?
3. The Vedas are difficult and obscure texts for those of us so far removed from the traditional, ancient contexts in which they were recited. Nevertheless, they lie at the foundation of Hindu civilization and purportedly of much that is distinctive about Hindu culture and the Hindu world view. Do the Vedas provide us with a vision of man’s relation to nature different from the Western one putatively

centered on domination and exploitation? Is nature itself and are nature's creatures sacred/divine in their own right or merely as reflections of a higher spiritual being? Does nature have intrinsic value, or is she merely to be valued derivatively on the basis of her gifts/bounty/largesse (see quotes above)? What is the significance of sacrifice and of ritual purity?

4. *Ahimsa* is a Hindu concept that has garnered a lot of attention, mostly because of its revolutionary use by Gandhiji during the Indian independence movement (*satyagraha*). Yet the roots of this concept are ancient, and its scope extends well beyond the political (see quote above on cow protection). Literally *ahimsa* is about respecting and protecting all life. But how far should we take this concept? What precisely constitutes injury or violence toward a living thing, and how is it possible to reconcile the demand for non-injury with the demands of survival and well-being? What individuals, literary or real, best embody the concept of *ahimsa* and what can they teach us about our obligations toward the natural world?

Further Resources

Web sites:

Alliance of Faiths and Ecology, Hindu Faith Statement

<http://www.arcworld.org/faiths.asp?pageID=77>

- Good starting point for an environmentalist perspective on Hinduism.

Holy Cow, Hinduism's Sacred Animal:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/holycow/hinduism.html>

- A succinct piece with information on other resources.

Forum on Religion and Ecology: Hinduism, Jainism, and Ecology:

<http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/hinduism/index.html>

- Excellent site, scholarly but accessible.

Books and articles:

Chapple, Christopher Key and Tucker, Mary Evelyn, eds. 2000. *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Dwivedi, O. P. and B. N. Tiwari. 1987. *Environmental Crisis and Hindu Religion*. New Delhi: Gitanjali.

Jena, Nirranjan. 2002. *Ecological Awareness Reflected in the Atharvaveda*. Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan.

Van Horn, Gavin. 2006. "Hindu Traditions and Nature: Survey Article," *Worldviews* 10 (1): 5-39.