

Theme 5 – The Role of Religious Institutions

Presentation: A Hindu Perspective

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Let there be peace in the heavens, the earth, the atmosphere, in the water, the herbs, the vegetation, among the divine beings and in Brahman, the absolute reality. Let everything be at peace and in peace. Only then will we find peace.

(Shukla Yajurveda 36:17)

The Hindu ethical ideal, comprehensively described as *dharma*, gathers in its sweep the total well-being of humans; it includes physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual values. *Dharma* is both individual and social, this worldly as well as other worldly. It is both stable and flexible. It provides for continuity, it can be related to new times and conditions. It contains a code of life and a philosophy of social and ethical relations.

Hindu ethics is inspired by the ideal of *Loka Samgraha*, ‘protection and welfare of the world’ taught in the Bhagavad Gita (III, 20), the most popular Hindu scripture. This ideal reveals a deep concern with human happiness and the stability of society. It requires from each member of society a way of life consistent with the general welfare of mankind.

In the third chapter of the Gita, Sri Krishna elucidates this ideal of the ‘welfare of the world’. He says that action or dynamism is a characteristic of life. For humans, there is no escape from action. The only question is: what kind of action is worthy and valuable? Sri Krishna’s answer is that any action that contributes to the welfare of the whole world with all the living beings in it, is valuable; and that which harms or hinders it is a negative value, and therefore immoral or *adharma*. The positive forces of life promote, and the negative forces of life hinder the conditions of general welfare and fulfilment of mankind. A sacrificial act (*Yajna*) is an altruistic and at the same time a most creative action. The conception of *Yajna* was much widened in the Bhagavad Gita, distinguishing the spirit of *Yajna* from its forms, and endowing it with a content that is at once social and ecological. Those acts which protect and enhance public utility and fulfilment are called *Yajna*.

Sacrificial performance has a cosmic concern; it is intended to reinvigorate the powers that sustain the world by securing cosmic stability and social order. It activates the positive forces of the universe, it brings rain and secures protection from degeneration.

Anything done for the benefit of society and the world is a sacrifice, and conversely every sacrifice is conducive to material prosperity and spiritual growth. The spiritual motivation for the act undermines egocentric materialism, orients our aspirations and initiates us into altruistic work, from which the whole world benefits.

Nature is a source of raw materials. These natural resources are given not for selfish exploitation by one group or nation or generation but to be shared by all creation. The natural elements of air, water, fire, sky and earth are all life-giving and life-promoting. They heal and rehabilitate, turning toxic materials into wholesome things.

Water sustains and preserves life on earth. It is one of the commonest of all substances, constituting about two thirds of the earth’s surface. Of this, 0.01 % consists in pure ground water from all the lakes, streams, rivers and rainfall, which is unevenly distributed throughout the world. Today water has become scarce due to the profound damage to the global water system. But without water, there can be no agriculture, fruits or vegetables. Actually, water is not only an environment for life, it is part of life itself.

Flourishing civilisations developed historically on river banks. It is at these centres that trade, commerce and transportation developed and connected the world with ideals of religion, philosophy and science.

Rivers are considered holy; for this reason they and their confluences became places of pilgrimage in ancient cultures. Ceremonies of initiation and death were, and still are performed at these places. It is because of their life giving and life fulfilling properties that the appellation 'mother' is bestowed on them, as with the Ganges, which becomes *Ganga Maiya*.

Hindus regard the earth also as mother, deserving our reverence. She feeds us, provides us with shelter and with material for our clothes; without her gifts, survival is impossible. If, as children, we do not take care of her, we diminish her ability to take care of us. Unfortunately, our industrial achievements are undermining the natural environment to such an extent that the earth itself has now become an area of concern.

Human short-sightedness and selfishness have propelled us into ecological crises of immense proportions. Natural resources are being depleted and degraded rapidly on a global scale. Industries are polluting the atmosphere, releasing chemical wastage in water. They are using up non-renewable energy resources without a thought for posterity. Exhaust fumes from millions of automobiles are causing acid rain. Chemical fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides pollute the air, water and vegetation, harming human health and welfare and even causing genetic damage. The disappearing ozone layer threatens our children with cancer, blindness and death. Global environmental problems cast into doubt our continued existence on the planet.

Hinduism speaks of harmony with nature and with the whole creation. It speaks of the moral and spiritual laws of life as precious parts of the very structure of the universe. These laws are expressed in terms of truthfulness, humility, unity of humanity, reverence for life and care of the environment. Hindus have chosen their places of pilgrimage on tops of mountains, or the banks of rivers, wherever there was some natural beauty or grandeur. They speak of father sky, mother earth and uncle moon. Rivers such as the Ganges, Jamuna, Godavari, Cauveri and mountains such as the Himalayas, Vindhya and Malaya are considered sacred, because they are life giving, life sustaining and life promoting. The same is the case for oceans and trees.

Religious leaders can and must impress upon their followers the importance of the cleanliness of river waters and the protection of forests and mountains. In this connection, the childhood and early life of Sri Krishna - the eighth incarnation of God - spent among the cowherds is very inspiring. He is concerned with the preservation of the life sustaining waters of Jamuna, the life promoting Govardhan mountain, and the life supporting qualities of the animal world in Vrindavan. The Supreme Divinity plays with common, simple and pure cowherds (*gopas* and *gopis*). Bred in this atmosphere, Sri Krishna endears himself not only to his contemporaries and humanity at large, but also to all creatures and the natural environment.

It is important to make mention not just of physical pollution but also of mental pollution: for this is the underlying cause of physical and environmental ravages. Greed, lust and anger are the causes; disharmony, conflict, sickness and degradation of nature are their results. They are the result of the desire for profit, power, and self-aggrandisement. For the important thing about actions is the psychological and social motivations that drive them. All actions start in the mind, which in turn is the expression of the ego: if the ego is allowed to grow, it generates anger, greed, lust, hatred, and it makes life miserable for all. All of these vices should be sacrificed in the fire of self-purification. The mental - and not just the physical - environment has to be kept clean and focused. *Yajna* is the sacrificing of one's ego and the burning of impurities. When it is accomplished, it is not just oneself but also one's society and environment that are purified. A wiser thought, a cleaner vision and a greater kindness appear then honesty, love and selfless service emerge in life.

Whenever worship-service is performed in the Hindu tradition, it is preceded by purification of the elements, *bhutasuddhi*. The five elements are purified both within and without. Purification is the prerequisite for sanctification; it establishes harmony between the macrocosm and the microcosm. The offerings that are made to the deity represent the best of each of the five elements: the fragrance offered represents the essence of earth, the offering of a flower represents the sky (openness, blossoming), incense represents the wind, water represents itself, and light represents fire. Only when these elements are pure or purified, can they be offered in worship.

All forms of life are an integral part of nature. All species need to be appreciated and respected. There are

birds, fishes, and animals of all kinds. As life on this planet is a single weave, the value of the non-human world is to be recognised. It is not there for exploitation. Human and non-human creations are interdependent, not isolated. We are participants in a vast affirmation of life in *all* ventures. Such an outlook could on the one hand, reverse the trend to degrade the environment, and on the other help to enrich it. In this endeavour, traditional prescriptions, transmitted orally, are still in order:

Cause wells to be dug; cause trees to be planted; cause water tanks to be built; cause flower gardens and parks to be made; wherever you cremate a dead body, plant a tree; don't cut green trees; don't pluck flowers at night; don't disturb water at night; let foreign particles settle down; don't pollute river banks; make life-styles less violent and less extravagant; minimise consumption and minimise the harm to the environment; reuse and recycle durable materials; enhance the quality of life, not just the standard of living; encourage interfaith dialogue and support for environmental protection.

Nature is our friend, not our enemy. We are born and live and play in the lap of nature and receive sustenance from her; our debt to nature is therefore immense, and it is incumbent upon us to discharge our debt by giving back a fraction of what we have taken from her. Nature is not to be exploited or conquered, but to be nourished and cherished. We should develop friendly and responsible relationships with nature.

To conclude, it may be worthwhile to contemplate briefly the life of a tree: it gives its leaves to animals; shares its flowers with bees; gives its fruits to peoples; provides shelter to birds and insects; takes carbon dioxide and gives oxygen to the living world. Finally, it sacrifices itself to be used as construction material or as fuel. It lives and dies for the service of others. However, it never asks anything in return: the least humankind can do is to offer it our appreciation and goodwill.

According to the Atharvaveda, a Vedic seer stood in front of a mighty tree thousands of years ago and addressed it thus:

May the axe be far from you;
May the fire be far from you;
May there be rains for you without storms;
May you be blessed Mighty tree,
And may I be blessed too.