

University of San Diego

From the Selected Works of Lance E. Nelson

2008

Ecology (in Hinduism)

Lance E. Nelson, *University of San Diego*

Ecology

Lance E. Nelson

Possibilities and Potential Resources
Problematics
Gandhi and Current Developments
Concluding Reflections

When examining an ancient tradition, such as Hinduism, for material that speaks to our contemporary concern for ecology and the environment, one must begin with an awareness that this concern, along with its particular conceptual construction of "the environment," is quite new, dating perhaps from the mid-twentieth century when events first triggered awareness of an impending environmental crisis. This means that, as Rosemary Ruether has pointed out, "there is no ready-made ecological spirituality and ethic in past traditions" (1992: 206). The Hindu tradition has only fairly recently begun to address the environmental question directly. So when asking, as of any of the great religions, "What does it say about ecology?," we must perforce look for indirect rather than direct evidence, for ideas and practices that can now be reinterpreted by the living tradition itself to help meet the current crisis. This chapter surveys Hindu attitudes toward the natural world and the role of human beings therein, as expressed in theology, symbol, law, and practice. Contemporary developments are considered to the extent permitted within the limits of a short article.

The attitudes to nature found in Hinduism are as multifaceted as the tradition itself. As in other traditions, the visions are sometimes in conflict. Hinduism has elements that are potentially supportive of environmental awareness and action. It also has elements that are not. As we shall see, traditional attitudes range from the reverencing of nature as a manifestation of divinity through dismissal of the world, in relation to authentic spiritual existence, as illusory (*māyā*) and insignificant (*tuccha*). Passages here and there, especially in courtly poetry and drama (*kāvya*), express appreciation for the beauty of nature and the sustenance it provides to human beings. One has to look hard, however, for hints of the late modern awareness of nature as nature, where the natural world is valued in itself for its diversity, the

uniqueness and welfare of certain species, and so on. And always, the contrast between textual theory and actual practice, to be expected as a feature of all human traditions, may be so striking as to appear, or truly be, contradictory. In thinking about Hindu approaches to nature, moreover, caution must be taken to avoid reading contemporary concerns and outlooks into ancient texts, a practice that—in addition to being anachronistic—often results in a kind of inauthentic romanticism. There certainly are possibilities in the Hindu tradition when it comes to environmentally supportive material, but there are also problems. Both are explored in what follows.

Possibilities and Potential Resources

Hindus recognize the Vedic scriptures (*ca.* 1500–400 BCE) as the most ancient source of their tradition. The poetry of the Vedas was liturgical in nature, functioning largely as an element of a sometimes complex sacrificial ritual. The sacrificial milieu of Vedic religion was not without its own forms of violence—even cruelty, as Buddhists were wont to declare—involving as it did on occasion the ritual killing of animals. Nevertheless, the Vedic hymns show considerable evidence of the veneration, indeed divinization, of aspects of nature. Vedic deities include Earth (Pṛthvī), Dawn (Uṣas), Fire (Agni), Wind (Vāyu), and so on. The Pṛthvī Sūkta, “Hymn to the Earth,” of the *Atharva Veda* (*ca.* 1000 BCE) addresses the earth as a goddess, Devī Vasundharā, and the poet declares, “The earth is the mother, and I the son of the earth!” (12.12). The earth “bestows wealth liberally” (12.44) on humanity, and this fact seems indeed to be the primary concern of the poet. In appropriating her gifts, however, humanity must observe limits, not exceeding that which is renewable: “What, O earth, I dig out of thee, quickly shall that grow again: may I not, O pure one, pierce thy vital spot, (and) not thy heart!” (12.35). In their daily recitations of the sacred Gāyatrī-*mantra* (*Rg Veda* 3.52.10), generations of Hindus have paid homage to the sun and proclaimed their connectedness with “earth, atmosphere, and heaven” (see *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.3.6).

The Upaniṣads (*ca.* 900–400 BCE), part of the later Vedic corpus, develop the notion—important in differentiating the Hindu vision from that of Abrahamic monotheism—of the one ultimate Being that has become the universe, rather than having created it as an external product. This idea had already been adumbrated in *Rg Veda* 10.90, in which the cosmos is created through the sacrificial dismembering of the body of a divine “Person” (*puruṣa*). Moving from myth to philosophical theology, the *Chāndoyga Upaniṣad* (3.14.1) proclaims, “All this is Brahman,” a doctrine that has supported the variety of Hindu thought known as nondualism (*advaita*). Hindu nondualism, as formalized and elaborately articulated in several

schools of theology, sees the world—and indeed the inner spiritual self of all beings (not just humans)—as inseparable from ultimate reality. It is this trend of thought in particular that has inspired the idea that Hinduism sees all of nature as sacred and worthy of reverence.

The *Bhagavad Gītā*, certainly the most well known of Hindu scriptures, echoes this notion of God embodied in nature. The *Bhagavad Gītā*'s mystically sacralized view of the world is founded on an all-encompassing view of the Divine: "Of all manifestations," Lord Kṛṣṇa declares, "I am the beginning, the end, and the middle" (10.32). The true devotee, he says, "sees Me in all things, and all things in Me" (6.30). In chapter 10, "The Yoga of Divine Manifestations (*vibhūti*)," Kṛṣṇa identifies himself with elements of the natural universe: sun, moon, stars, the ocean, the Himalayas, the wind, and the holy Ganges. Chapter 11, "The Vision of the Universal Form (*viśva-rūpa*)," provides compelling intimations of the later Vaiṣṇava doctrine of the world as the body of God. "The sun and the moon," says Arjuna in awe, "are your eyes" (11.19).

The *Bhagavad Gītā* creatively integrates this vision of world-sacrality with an ethic of ascetic restraint and selfless activity. This, of course, is the famous teaching of *karmayoga*, in which the religious seeker—instead of renouncing worldly life and action—remains at his or her station, working without egoism, selfish desire, and attachment. The motivation for such activity is declared to be *loka-saṃgraha* (3.20), literally the "holding together" or "maintenance" of the world. The sage of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, we are told, acts out of concern for the "welfare of all beings" (*sarva-bhūta-hita*; 5.25). This ideal of social engagement for world-benefit through spiritually disciplined action was the chief basis of the esteem in which the *Bhagavad Gītā* was held by nineteenth-century Hindu nationalists, such as Mohandas K. Gandhi and Balwantrao Gangadhar Tilak (Nelson 2000: 132).

In the later theistic, devotional traditions of Hinduism, the idea of world as manifestation of God recurs and is accentuated. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* proclaims, "Verily, this whole [world] is the body of God" (*tat sarvaṃ vai hareḥ tanuḥ*; 1.12.38). The Vaiṣṇava theology of Rāmānuja (eleventh century CE) develops this image: The world is as intimately related to God as body (*śarīra*) to the soul that is embodied (*śarīrin*). In his *Siddhāntamuktāvalī*, the Kṛṣṇaite theologian Vallabha (sixteenth century CE) teaches the "pure nonduality" (*śuddhādvaita*) of God and world through a striking analogy. No devotee of Gaṅgā Devī (Goddess Ganges), he says, would worship her only as personified deity and fail to reverence her embodiment in the holy river. Instead, the devotees of Gaṅgā Devī go on pilgrimage to the holy river, bathe in and drink her water, and, if possible, live on her sacred shores. In the same way, no one who worships the universal Deity Kṛṣṇa should devalue the world, which is nothing less than his cosmic embodiment.

Among Vaiṣṇavas, as in the Veda, the earth is divinized, now as Bhū Devī (Goddess Earth), and when she is in danger of destruction by demonic forces, Lord Viṣṇu himself descends as *avatāra* to rescue her. Devout Vaiṣṇavas ask Earth in their daily prayers to forgive the abusive touch of their feet. Expanding this kind of sensitivity, it is understood that Earth/the earth is supported by human righteousness (*Atharva Veda* 12.1) and can be offended by immorality and by physical mistreatment. Human beings should act ethically or “risk the wrath or discomfiture of the earth itself” (Kinsley 1995: 58).

The subcontinent of India—crisscrossed by pilgrimage routes that connect holy places, many associated with rivers, mountains, and other natural features—assumes in Hindu eyes a kind of sacred topography (Kinsley 1998; Van Horn 2006). The phenomenon of *śākta-pīṭhas*, sacred sites connected with the Goddess, illustrates this mode of awareness. The myth of Satī, spouse of Śiva, describes the dismemberment of the goddess’ body, the parts being deposited at various locations throughout the subcontinent. At such locations, important goddess temples (*pīṭha*, literally “seats”) and pilgrimage centers were established. Though the exact number of these sites is disputed—often the number fifty-two is given—the myth and the system of interrelated shrines create a unifying topographic network. As David Kinsley writes, “Taken together, the *pīṭhas* constitute or point toward a transcendent (or, perhaps better, a universally immanent) goddess whose being encompasses, underlies, infuses, and unifies the Indian subcontinent as a whole” (1998: 230). A similar geographically sacralizing effect arises from the related system of the twelve Jyotir Liṅga, shrines dedicated to the god Śiva scattered across India. A more localized example would be the system of the Aṣṭa Vināyaka, the “Eight Gaṇeśas” and their temples, which sacralize the land of Maharashtra and give identity and sense of place to Maharashtrians.

Hindu law books (*dharmaśāstra*) contain numerous edicts that might now be considered as ecofriendly, involving protection of animals, land, trees, rivers, and so on, such protection being described particularly as the responsibility of kings. Though these texts are of course not operating out of what we would call an ecological model, they “advocate conservation strategies and demonstrate awareness of the impact of human interaction with the environment” (McGee 2000: 80). Each of the great classes of Hindu society is conceived as having its particular *dharma* or sacred duty. The *dharma* of the ruler is to protect—not only people and polity but the land as well. A surprising number of synonyms for king in Sanskrit reflect the ruler’s duty to protect the earth: *bhū-pāla* and *bhū-pa*, Earth-Protector; *bhū-bharaṇa* and *bhū-bhartr*, Earth-Maintainer. Others suggest a special spousal, and therefore similarly protective, relationship with the earth: *bhū-*

pati, Earth-Husband; *bhū-ramaṇa* and *bhū-vallabha*, Beloved of the Earth (McGee 2000: 63). Included in the scope of a king's solemn responsibility is, as we might expect, the obligation to oversee the development of the earth's resources for the benefit of human beings. But there is also a clear awareness of humankind's dependence on nature. The texts prescribe for royalty balancing duties to ensure that the use of nature's resources remains within the limits of sustainability and to punish those who violate those limits. Crop rotation, planting of trees, various provisions for the protection of animals from cruelty, trees from cutting, and water from pollution are enjoined. Such measures include fines and other sanctions. As McGee observes: "It is clear from many classical Indian texts on the duties of kings that a king had a responsibility to reap the benefits of the nature's resources for the sake of his kingdom and its citizens; yet it is also clear that the successful and ideal king had to carefully manage these resources and respect the earth" (McGee 2000: 73).

Ann Grodzins Gold has studied villagers' reports of the ecological situation in the kingdom of Sawar in what is now Rajasthan, North India, as it prevailed under Vansh Pradip Singh, the state's last pre-independence ruler. During Vansh Pradip Singh's rule of more than thirty years, from 1914 to 1947, there is ample evidence that "the jungle was dense and wild animals were prosperous" (Gold 2000: 320). The king protected the forest and wildlife, and under his protection, both increased. Vansh Pradip Singh died in 1947, the year of India's independence, with no children. In any event, the princely states were being gradually incorporated into the Indian Republic, depriving the old rulers of their power. The people of Ghatiyali, part of Vansh Pradip Singh's former kingdom, report rapid deforestation of their region in the post-independence era and recollect as intertwined realities "the former ruling kings, old growths of indigenous trees, and wild animals." As Gold reports the villagers' experience, "These three came to an end together" (2000: 321). The king's ecological record was not perfect by modern standards—he once had large numbers of lizards exterminated on flimsy grounds. Still, Gold is able to report an extraordinary proclamation, as remembered by the villagers, for which Singh was well known: "*If you cut the smallest branch of a tree it is just as if you cut my finger*" (2000: 323; emphasis in original). In this graphic image, Gold argues, the king's "responsible authority" (*zimedārī*) for the preservation of the land was epitomized.

Problematics

In thinking about how such ideas and practices as those that have been described might function positively in terms of environmental awareness

in India, one needs to avoid premature enthusiasm. The problematics of Hindu attitudes toward nature and the environment must also receive some attention.

As a starting example, the notion of the sacred river in Hinduism is illustrative of some of the potentially detrimental dimensions of symbol systems that at first sight might appear to be ecologically positive. Indeed, an examination of this phenomenon raises questions about the value for ecology of the whole concept of sacralization of nature or aspects of nature. To take the most famous example, consider the holiness of the Ganges. The Ganges is not only a river, she is—as has been mentioned—a goddess, Gaṅgā Devī, and, as such, an object of pious veneration. She is not only inherently pure but powerfully purifying. Bathing in the Ganges is spiritually cleansing: It relieves one of kārmiic and other religious impurities going back lifetimes. Ganges water is a purifying substance, bottled and distributed for ritual use all over India and abroad.

A story is told of a king who happens to sleep on the banks of the holy river. Waking in the night, he sees a group of women, covered in the foulest dirt, going to bathe in the sacred waters. Having finished their bath, they emerge radiantly clean, only to vanish. Intrigued, the king comes again the next night and the next, witnessing each time the same phenomenon. Finally, his curiosity wins out and he asks the women, “Who are you?” “We are the rivers of India,” they reply. “Every day, the people bathe in us, and we absorb all their sin. We come to the Ganges so that we ourselves may be purified” (Narayanan 2000: 116). Residents of Banaras, who bathe daily in the river’s waters, say that, because Mother Ganges is the supreme purifier, she cannot be polluted.

But of course, the Ganges *is* polluted. Hindu awareness of a distinction between ritual-spiritual purity and physical cleanliness means that something can be ritually pure but physically dirty, and vice versa. The religious perceptions of devout pilgrims and the clerics who minister to them—actors quickly offended and put on the defensive by any suggestion that the holy Ganges could be polluted—may actually make it more difficult to mobilize action to clean up the river. The problems caused by divergences among religious, scientific, and political conceptions of the Ganges’ purity/pollution have been explored by Kelly Alley (1998).

In South India, there is a parallel situation with regard to the Kāverī River, referred to as Dakṣiṇā Gaṅgā (Ganges of the South) and Kāverī Amman (Mother Kāverī) and divinized as the spouse of Lord Viṣṇu. As such, local Hindus worship her in temple icons and remember her in folklore and festival. In the monsoon season, when the river is swollen by the rains, they say she is pregnant. Vasudha Narayanan (2000: 117–18) describes how

those who live along the river in Tamil Nadu celebrate the river's "pregnancy food cravings" through festival picnics along the banks of the river. Sadly, the neighboring state of Karnataka has dammed the river to the extent that the flow in Tamil Nadu often drops to a trickle, and the Kāverī is barely able to give life to the land. Politicians in both states continue to fight over the vital waters of this river, which in other contexts they might regard as a manifestation of maternal deity.

Further complexities of nature sacralization are discussed by Vijaya Nagarajan (1998), who has studied the ecological implications of the South Indian *kōlam*, ritual designs that women create on the ground in daily morning offerings to Bhū Devī, the goddess Earth. Village women understand that the beautiful and carefully laid out patterns help to cancel the human debt to Earth while being a gesture of thankfulness for her patient bearing of our lives and behavior, good and evil. The ritual designs also help to fulfill each household's duty to "feed a thousand souls every day." Feeding so many humans would be difficult, if not impossible. But, as the *kōlam* is made of rice powder, it becomes food for myriad smaller creatures (Nagarajan 1998: 275). In framing the meaning of this ritual, Nagarajan argues that human-nature interactions are embedded in complex cultural webs, so that what may appear "ecological" to the outsider may not be understood that way from within. "I was puzzled," Nagarajan writes, "by the contradiction between women's reverence for Bhū Devī and their seeming disrespect to her throughout the day, as they threw trash and garbage on the earth, the very same place that they considered to be sacred" (Nagarajan 1998: 275). She offers the notion of "intermittent sacrality" to explain this seemingly contradictory behavior. Awareness of sacrality is not, and perhaps cannot, be sustained: The sacrality of a given aspect of nature may wax and wane, the ritual relationship that recognizes that sacrality may lapse, or simple issues of survival may intervene (1998: 277–80).

It is clear that, in the Hindu context, to say that an aspect of nature is sacred is not automatically and unambiguously an ecological plus. Indeed, as Alley, Nagarajan, and others have noted, the sacralization of nature may paradoxically undermine ecological consciousness, particularly if, as is often the case with maternal goddess imagery, it portrays nature as protecting, cleansing, and forgiving—and powerfully needing no protection from humans in return. "The natural world is a divine being," Nagarajan observes, "and therefore capable of cleaning herself" (1998: 277). As she is our mother and we are her children, we can go on heedlessly, leaving her to clean up our mess. A feminist hermeneutic is obviously possible here. Narayanan discerns a parallel between the abuse of nature, especially rivers envisioned as female, and the abuse of women in India:

The rivers, flowing through India and personified as women...have absorbed the greed and follies of human beings and the slime, sludge, and excreta of human greed and consumption. It is hard not to draw a comparison between the rivers and the plight of women who are now the target of crimes of greed and power.

(2000: 118)

Even in theology, however, the sacralization of nature goes only so far. It is often claimed that Hinduism's unitary vision of world as Brahman involves the sacralization of not just particular aspects of nature but the entire cosmos. Although there is some evidence for such a conclusion, as we have seen above, it is less true than one might suppose. The prestigious Nondualist or Advaita Vedānta, in its classical formulation, achieves its monism not by divinizing the world but by eliminating it, as *māyā*, from the realm of the real. Advaita and other Hindu theologies in fact involve the same kind of hierarchical dualism of God-world, spirit-matter, soul-body that is often portrayed as a purely Western affliction. Adherents must practice "discrimination" (*viveka*) between these elements, characterized as "the eternal and the noneternal." Manuals of nondualist spirituality encourage detachment from the material world, recommending that aspirants think of it as mere straw, a dead rat, dog vomit, or crow excrement (Nelson 1998: 70–81). Although theistic Hindu theology, unlike Advaita, recognizes the reality of the world, it also displays a tendency to denigrate physical existence in favor of the more highly valued spiritual body (*siddha-deha*) and transcendent realms (*śuddha-sattva*, *goloka*, and so on).

A number of contemporary Hindu ecofeminists have attempted to reconfigure the notion of *prakṛti*—perhaps the closest concept in Sanskrit texts to the Western idea of Nature—as supportive of an Indian ecological ethic. For example, Vandana Shiva—an important environmental activist and thinker—writes: "Nature as *prakṛti* is inherently active, a powerful, productive force in the dialectic of the creation, renewal, and sustenance of all life" (1989: 48; see also Vatsyana 1995). Any attempt, however, to revalorize *prakṛti* as a locus of ultimate concern or resource for ecofeminist thinking will not be authentic unless it begins with a recognition that the traditional Hindu understanding of *prakṛti* is embedded in the same hierarchical dualism that pervades much of Hindu religious thought. Outside its Tantric transformations, *prakṛti* is everywhere in Hindu theology regarded as unconscious matter (*jaḍa* or *acit*), devalued in relation to conscious spirit (*puruṣa*, *ātman*, *jīva*, and so on). This is, of course, true for classical Sāṃkhya thought but also for the Advaita theologian Śaṅkara and for Rāmānuja, Madhva, Nimbārka, the Gauḍīya Gosvāmins, and other Vaiṣṇava theologians (Nelson 2000: 157–58). No doubt, *prakṛti* is grammatically feminine and is

symbolically construed as such by the tradition. But we have seen how the maternal imagery used for India's rivers is fraught with difficulties. So too, the construal of nature as a powerful feminine force in Hinduism comes with problematic baggage, issues that are not all that different from those that beset the symbolism of "Mother Nature" in the West.

The ultimate religious goal for most Hindus is of course *mokṣa*, defined as "liberation" of the individual from rebirth in the natural world (*saṃsāra*). This world-transcending ambition is supported by the traditional Hindu view of cosmic time, which predicts that the world for thousands of years hence will progressively and inevitably decline into increasing levels of moral, social, and environmental chaos. In this vision, the Kali Yuga, or Dark Age, in which we live is inescapably polluted and morally bankrupt, and things are only getting worse. Together, these elements further sharpen the spirit-matter dualism and—to whatever extent they are taken seriously—provide potential disincentives to ecological activism.

It is well known that Hindus believe in reincarnation. Indeed, Hinduism regards all beings—"from [the god] Brahmā down to a blade of grass," to use a frequently repeated formula—as having equal spiritual potential by virtue of their being equally endowed with *ātman*. Thus, human beings are not the only animals to possess souls. This idea—potentially fruitful in terms of ecological awareness—is among the considerations underlying the Hindu ethics of nonviolence (*ahimsā*) and vegetarianism, about which more could be said if space permitted (see Bryant 2006; Nelson 2006). Still, the tradition does not escape a pronounced anthropocentrism. All humans were once, in their long chain of existences, incarnated as animals and even plants. Nevertheless there is a hierarchy of births, and human birth is the highest, even superior to birth as a god, because only humans, with rare exceptions, may attain *mokṣa*. On the other hand, humans who commit evil deeds are threatened with rebirth in "lowly wombs," that is, those of animals or insects (Nelson 2006).

Gandhi and Current Developments

In the modern era, among the most interesting and well-known exponents of Hindu values—as they were then beginning to intersect with international currents—was Mohandas K. Gandhi. Living still prior to the awareness of the ecological crisis that emerged in the 1960s, Mahātmā Gandhi nevertheless has been an inspiration for ecological thought and action in India. Indeed, historian Ramchandra Guha has identified him as "the patron saint of the Indian environmental movement" (1998: 65). In his method of Satyāgraha, or "holding to the truth," Gandhi expanded the ancient Indian ethic of *ahimsā*, or nonharming, from a morality of noninterference and letting things be to

a practice for political change. In this transformation of ancient Indic ideals, he was of course influenced by certain Western strands of thought, but he was equally supported by Hindu notions, particularly the ideal of detached action for “world-maintenance” derived from the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Gandhi’s activist revisioning of the traditional nonviolence ethic renders it political without, however, stripping it of its moral sensitivity. Gandhian *ahimsā* includes an awareness of the multifaceted and interconnected negative ramifications of violence, an awareness that parallels ecological thinking about sensitive environmental networks and the unforeseen consequences of environmental interference. Thus, contemporary Gandhians are able to speak of ecological violence while simultaneously possessing effective tools for resistance to such violence.

Also supported by the *Bhagavad Gītā*’s vision of ascetic detachment and desire-free (*niṣkāma*) living—and by the yogic ethic of “nonpossession” (*aparigraha*)—is the Gandhian ideal of simple living, one that nowadays we would associate with notions of “low ecological footprint” and “sustainability.” This side of Gandhi’s vision is made plain in this stern but provocative reminder of the difference between human need and human greed: “God never creates more than what is strictly needed for the moment. Therefore whoever appropriates more than the minimum that is really necessary for him is guilty of theft” (Gandhi 1960: 5). Partly as an extension of this mode of thought, Gandhi also, to the dismay of some of his developmentalist contemporaries, propagated the vision of an India based on decentralized, self-reliant village economies. In so doing, he anticipated on one hand our contemporary concern for the dangers of globalization and on the other the “small is beautiful” economics of E. F. Schumacher. He was among the first in India to lament—in addition to the physical assault on land and health—the moral, spiritual, and aesthetic debilitation wrought by industrialization:

This land of ours was once, we are told, the abode of the Gods. It is not possible to conceive Gods inhabiting a land which is made hideous by the smoke and the din of mill chimneys and factories and whose roadways are traversed by rushing engines, dragging numerous cars crowded with men mostly who know not what they are after....I refer to these things because they are held to be symbolical of material progress. But they add not an atom to our happiness.

(Gandhi n.d.: 354)

In thinking of resources for environmentalism in India, the question of leadership also arises: specifically, what kind of leadership is likely to be most successful in motivating India to ecological action? Here Gandhi also

contributes. His beloved *Bhagavad Gītā* held up for emulation and admiration not only frugal living, but especially the iconic figure of the detached and enlightened ascetic, free from selfish ambition, which became for Hindus a cultural ideal of sainthood. Gandhi, whether consciously or unconsciously, successfully embodied this Hindu archetype for his followers, giving him marvelous effectiveness as a leader in mobilizing people for change. The Gandhian tradition has continued, most notably but by no means exclusively in the Sarvodaya (Universal Uplift) movement (Shepard 1987), galvanized by such leaders as Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayan, Narayan Desai, and Sunderlal Bahuguna. Its concerns, originally political and social, have gradually taken on ecological dimensions as awareness of environmental issues suffused the activist community in India.

The most-cited example of a modern environmental movement with Gandhian inspiration is the Chipko *andolan*, which began as a peasant protest movement in the early 1970s in the Gharwal region of Uttaranchal (then the northernmost district of Uttar Pradesh) in the foothills of the Indian Himalaya. The name *Chipko*—from the Hindi verb *cipkānā*, “to stick, to cling, to embrace”—came from the nonviolent tactic of village women and men “hugging” trees to prevent their being felled by outside lumber companies. Whether or not it was known to these villagers and their leaders, this tactic had historical precedent in the actions of the Bīṣṇōīs, a people of Rajasthan who venerated trees out of religious commitment. In the mid-eighteenth century, more than three hundred Bīṣṇōīs are said to have sacrificed their lives clinging to trees to protect them from being felled by the army of a local king (Callicott 1994: 220; Gold 2000: 327–28). The modern Chipko movement began when the government—oblivious to the suffering that massive deforestation was causing the locals—gave a sporting goods company permission to log trees for tennis racquets, having just refused long-established forest access to a local Gandhian cooperative movement, the Dasoli Gram Svarajya Sangh (Dasholi District Self-rule Association). This group had sought a small amount of wood for making agricultural implements. In the face of an advancing phalanx of loggers, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, leader of the Sangh, famously proclaimed, “Let them know that we will not allow the felling of ash trees. When they aim their axes upon them, we will embrace the trees” (cited in Weber 1989: 40). The movement spread rapidly, and by 1981, its campaigns had convinced then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to impose a fifteen-year moratorium on commercial tree-felling in the Himalayan forests (Callicott 1994: 218). Its leaders, Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna, have become India’s most well-known environmentalists (Gadgil and Guha 1992: 224).

Demonstrating the Gandhian dimensions of this movement, Bahuguna has sought to embody the ideal of leader as religious ascetic who, like Gandhi,

has abandoned self-seeking in favor of concern for the masses. He has on a number of occasions used the hunger strike as a weapon of nonviolent protest. This happened in the Chipko campaigns both against deforestation and, more recently and in the same region, in the struggle against the construction of the massive Tehri Dam on the Bhāgīrathī River, the main tributary of the Ganges. This dam threatens devastating consequences for an area that is at once highly seismic and the home of some of the most sacred sites for Hindus. Bahuguna's fasts, which have lasted as long as seventy-four days and have led to his being arrested by the authorities, have been accompanied by ritual recitations of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Bahuguna has not been without controversy. Among other reasons is his recent openness to Hindu nationalist involvement in his causes, particularly the Tehri Dam campaign. This points to a disturbing aspect of the melding of environmentalism and religion in India: the potential of right-wing Hindu nationalists harnessing, or even diverting, the energies of ecological movements in service of Hindu chauvinist goals. The Tehri Dam, by its very nature and design, was intended to obstruct and manipulate the flow of the river most sacred to Hindus, the Ganges. Moreover, the enormous structure's possible failure (the region, as indicated, is prone to earthquakes) would entail catastrophic consequences for the sacred sites, religious institutions and leaders, and masses of Hindu pilgrims downstream. On this basis, the project has been played up by the Visva Hindu Pariṣad (the World Hindu Council)—not as a threat to the ecology or the villagers of the region—but rather as a threat to Hinduism and Hindutva, the essential “Hinduness” of the nation. Furthermore, the cause has been charged with anti-Muslim, communalist sentiment through comparison of the dam with the Babri Masjid, a mosque in Ayodhya branded a symbol of Muslim oppression and destroyed by Hindu militants in 1992. To this end, it has also been identified as a likely target—easy but potentially devastating—for Islamic-Pakistani terrorists seeking to destroy the heart of Hindu India. Emma Mawdsley (2005) argues that, in all this, environmental and resettlement issues, of vital importance to the people of the region and the original inspiration of the anti-dam movement, have been subordinated to the Parisad's quest for political power and its goal of Hindu nationhood. More starkly, Meera Nanda (2004) sees the Parisad's “dharmic ecology” as a “Trojan horse,” part of a stealth campaign to hijack the ecological movement as a vehicle of Hindutva ideology. One is reminded here how the perhaps overly close association of Gandhi and the Congress Party with Hindu symbolism during India's independence struggle led to disaffection among non-Hindus and helped to move India toward the tragedy of Partition (see Coward 2003). At the very least, assuming that the environment of India belongs to all Indians, there are dangers in associating the environmental movement too exclusively with Hinduism.

Concluding Reflections

India today boasts perhaps the world's largest environmental movement (Peritore 1993). As Peritore reports, it is well organized and intellectually sophisticated, with rich cultural and religious resources to draw on, not the least the legacy of Gandhi. Conversely, it is hampered by governmental corruption, paralyzing bureaucratic inertia, and—more recently—the emergence of a divisive communalist politics that complicates especially any effort to harness religious symbolism to environmental causes. All of this is framed by the problem of India's relentless population growth and the environmental stress caused by, on the one hand, the country's burgeoning consumerist middle class (supposedly the largest in the world) and, on the other, its masses of rural and urban poor. Thus, Peritore concludes: "The movement, far from being a vanguard, is fighting a rearguard action for cultural and ecological survival" (1993: 818).

The word "survival" is important here. It reminds us that the concern for nature as nature and the universalizing environmental ethics and spirituality of postmodern "religiously inspired environmentalism" may not have much relevance in India or any other developing country (Tomalin 2002). Situations understood in a wider framework as ecological problems by Westerners, or indigenous Western-educated elites, are likely to be read as human-centered problems of justice and survival by villagers. As Emma Tomalin (2002: 19–26) and others have pointed out, the latter may adopt elements of religion to their "ecological" struggles more for their pragmatic utility as symbolic motivators and legitimators than out of any overarching spiritual or ecological sensibility that outsiders might impute. Indeed, it is a real question as to whether religion "is an appropriate or sufficient frame through which to tackle the massive environmental problems confronting modern India" (Mawdsley 2005: 2). Nevertheless, it is both desirable and inevitable that Hindus will continue to engage in a conscious, thoughtful, sustained, and finally pragmatic effort to reconstruct their traditions so as to address contemporary concerns, be they environmental or otherwise. And it is clear they have plenty of resources to do so.

References Cited

- Alley, Kelly D. 1998. "Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Gaṅgā's Purity and Pollution." In Lance E. Nelson, ed., *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, 297–330. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Atharva Veda. 1973 [1897]. *Hymns of the Atharva Veda* (trans. Maurice Bloomfield). New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Bryant, Edwin. 2006. "Strategies of Subversion: The Emergence of Vegetarianism in Post-Vedic India." In Kimberley Patton and Paul Waldau, eds., *A Communion of*

- Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*, 194–203. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Callicott, J. Baird. 1994. *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Coward, Harold, ed. 2003. *Indian Critiques of Gandhi*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Gadgil, Madhav and Ramachandra Guha. 1992. *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gandhi, M. K. 1960. *Trusteeship* (ed. Ravindra Kelekar). Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust.
- Gandhi, M. K. n.d. [1933]. *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*. Madras: G. A. Natesan.
- Gold, Ann Grodzins. 2000. " 'If You Cut a Branch You Cut My Finger': Court, Forest, and Environmental Ethics in Rajasthan." In Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds., *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, 317–36. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Guha, Ramachandra. 1998. "Mahatma Gandhi and the Environmental Movement in India." In Åren Kalland and Gerard Persoon, eds., *Environmental Movements in Asia*, 65–82. Richmond: Curzon.
- Kinsley, David. 1995. *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in a Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Kinsley, David. 1998. "Learning the Story of the Land: Reflections on the Liberating Power of Geography and Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition." In Lance E. Nelson, ed., *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, 225–46. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mawdsley, Emma. 2005. "The Abuse of Religion and Ecology: The Vishva Hindu Parishad and Tehri Dam." *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 9, 1: 1–24.
- McGee, Mary. 2000. "State Responsibility for Environmental Management: Perspectives from Hindu Texts on Polity." In Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds., *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, 59–100. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Nagarajan, Vijaya Rettakudi. 1998. "The Earth as Goddess Bhū Devī: Toward a Theory of 'Embedded Ecologies' in Folk Hinduism." In Lance E. Nelson, ed., *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, 269–95. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Nanda, Meera. 2004. "Dharmic Ecology and the Neo-Pagan International: The Dangers of Religious Environmentalism In India." Paper presented at the Eighteenth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, Lunds University, Sweden, July 6–9.
- Narayanan, Vasudha. 2000. "'One Tree is Equal to Ten Sons': Some Hindu Responses to the Problems of Ecology, Population, and Consumerism." In Harold Coward and Daniel C. Maguire, eds., *Visions of a New Earth: Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption, and Ecology*, 111–29. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Nelson, Lance E. 1998. "The Dualism of Nondualism: Advaita Vedānta and the Irrelevance of Nature." In Lance E. Nelson, ed., *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, 61–88. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Nelson, Lance E. 2000. "Reading the *Bhagavadgītā* from an Ecological Perspective." In Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds., *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, 127–64. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Nelson, Lance E. 2006. "Cows, Elephants, Dogs, and Other Lesser Embodiments of Ātman: Reflections on Hindu Attitudes Towards Non-Human Animals." In Kimberley Patton and Paul Waldau, eds., *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, and Ethics*, 179–93. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Peritore, N. Patrick. 1993. "Environmental Attitudes of Indian Elites: Challenging Western Postmodernist Models." *Asian Survey* 33 (August): 804–18.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1992. *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Shepard, Mark. 1987. *Gandhi Today: The Story of Mahatma Gandhi's Successors*. Washington, D.C.: Seven Locks Press.
- Shiva, Vandana. 1989. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*. London: Zed Books.
- Tomalin, Emma. 2002. "The Limitations of Religious Environmentalism for India." *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 6, 1: 12–30.
- Van Horn, Gavin. 2006. "Hindu Traditions and Nature: Survey Article." *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 10, 1: 5–39.
- Vatsyayan, Kapila, ed. 1995. *Prakṛti: The Integral Vision*. 5 volumes. New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.
- Weber, Thomas. 1989. *Hugging the Trees: The Story of the Chipko Movement*. New Delhi: Viking Penguin.