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December 6, 2016

**The Transformation of Religious Environmental Perceptions in Colonial India**

**Introduction**

In the past few decades, the relationship between religious and environmental thought has increasingly sparked the curiosity of both scholars and policymakers. Between 1996 and 1998 research on this relationship lead to a series of conferences hosted at the Harvard Divinity School. The conferences were followed with the publication of various research studies that evaluated the complex role that world religions play in environmental thinking and the global environmental crisis. Amongst the most discussed religions were those of Indic origin, which contain theoretical principles that are thought to be closely related to conservation ideals and modern environmental ethics (Tucker). The environmental value of Indian religions appears to be rather contradictory when analyzed against the rapid environmental degradation that the Indian continent is facing. When studying the historical roots of such contradiction, environmentalists and scholars often target population growth, industrialization and the economic transformation of India brought by British imperialism as the common culprits for the deterioration of India’s natural resources (Grove). Nonetheless, If we follow the findings that suggest that religious values are closely intertwined with the way people relate to the natural world, it seems appropriate to suggest that for a society that has thought of nature as sacred for millennia, environmental degradation is deeply connected to transformations in the perception of religious environmental values that go beyond economic and population shifts.

This article aims to understand the impact and legacy of British colonial rule in the religious environmental ethics of India and argues that there are two factors that played a role in transforming Indian society’s perception of religious environmental values during the period of British colonial rule. These are the ‘standard of civilization’ that promoted a view of Indian people, their religions and their environmental practices as inferior, and the forest conservation effort led by British interests that resulted in public mistrust towards environmental movements. To accomplish this goal we will first describe environmental principles found in Indian religions and give a brief account of the evolution of Indian environmental history before the period of British colonial rule.

**Environmental Ethics in Indian Religions**

Although India is a state of immense religious diversity, for the purposes of this article we will place special emphasis on exploring the relationship between Hinduism and environmental thought. Hinduism has remained one of the primary religions of India for most of its history and it is still today the most practiced in the state. As of the 2011 Census approximately 80% of the Indian population practiced this religion (Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs). Additionally, analyzing Hindu environmental thought can help us gain insight into environmental thought in Jainism and Buddhism, which derived from Hinduism and share many concepts and values regarding the relationship between human beings and nature. Hindu environmental thought is centered on the perception of nature as sacred and the belief in the interconnectedness of all living beings. In their article “Ancient traditions and Contemporary Dilemmas: A Hindu Perspective”, Shedev Kumar and Aaloka Mehndiratta note that there is an essential concept in Hinduism that marks the belief in the sanctity of nature: *Prana,* a life principle of harmony and the interrelatedness of all creation. *Prana* is manifested in various aspects of Hindu life and is especially notable in the Hindu view of food and the act of eating, which is considered a symbolic connection with the universe and all its creatures. Kumar and Mehndiratta also point out that the sanctity of nature in Hinduism is reflected in the portrayal of Hindu gods as animals and as custodians of the animal world. Another important concept to highlight is that Hindu dharma and karma to the environment is key to understanding Hindu environmental thought. In addition to concepts of divinity and interconnectedness associated with nature, Hinduism emphasizes human duty or dharma to God’s creation. In Hindu environmental ethics, karma is understood as the idea that adharmic action (unnecessary harm) towards other living beings results in negative consequences (Dwivedi).

Hinduism carries principles of nonviolence and just action towards the environment that are shared by Buddhist and Jain traditions. Similar concepts to dharma and karma (dhamma and kamma) are seen in the Buddhist tradition and are relevant to the environment in the sense that they are thought to be correlated with the principle of extending nonviolence and compassion to all living beings. Buddhists are encouraged to live a moral life by following the dhamma, abstaining from harming living beings (*ahimsa*) and practicing compassion (*karuna*) (Sponsel). Jainism is also characterized by intrinsic ideals of nonviolence, which are most evident in the Jain practice of veganism (Sivaramakrishnan).

Islam has also played a pivotal role in the history of the Indic region and in today’s India it is the fastest growing religion (Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs). Because of this historical importance some basic environmental concepts in Islam are explored in this article. Although the relationship between Islamic thought and environmental values may not seem as clear as that of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, early Islam was characterized by a reverence of nature that was widely practiced as it spread through Africa, Europe and the Indian subcontinent. Islam’s environmental ethics are linked to the belief in the interdependency of ecological systems, similar to Hinduism and Hindu-derived religions. The view of humanity as stewards of Allah’s creation is also a key concept that can be interpreted as a calling to protect natural resources (Saniotis). From this general explanation of some environmental values that are found in a few of the religions of India we can illustrate that religion plays a role in a society’s understanding of its relationship with the natural world. This is especially true for societies that consider religion a central part of every day life. Yet, one should not assume that valuing nature as sacred automatically translates to positive environmental action. As most scholars that study world religions emphasize, religious values are subject to a wide variety of interpretations and perception can be transformed by historical forces. Religious environmental ethics in India is no exception, taking a look to the historical evolution of India’s environment and the grave environmental issues that India faces today is sufficient to realize this.

**A Brief Historical Account of Indian Environmental Thought and Action Prior to British Colonization**

It is important to restate that the goal of this essay is to analyze how perceptions of religious environmental ethics were transformed in India during British rule. Note that there is a direct emphasis on perception and this is because although ancient religious texts and principles may not have gone through extensive transformations, the way principles were perceived by society has proven to be subject to historical change. This section is dedicated to briefly document the historical evolution of Indian society’s relationship to the environment and the contradictions that existed between religious ecologic principles and environmental action long before British colonization.

Christopher V. Hill’s book *South Asia: An Environmental History* studies Indian society and its relationship to the natural environment beginning with the first Aryan populations that settled in the Indus Valley. Early Indian settlements were primarily agrarian and were characterized by nature’s spiritual link to Hinduism. As an agrarian society that depended on favorable climate and natural resources for survival, principles of natural preservation were widely practiced (Hill 8). This society however was marked by power struggles and warfare that resulted in environmental destruction. Following periods of extensive warfare during the transition to Mauryan rule, King Ashoka (269-232 BCE), one of the most admired figures in India’s history, emerges and extends environmental action based on Buddhist principles of nonviolence throughout his empire (Hill 29-31). This period of religious and environmental cohesion did not last very long; Ashoka’s ideas and impacts began to disintegrate shortly after his death. Hill argues that in the Common Era a factor that impacted greatly Indian beliefs about their relationship to the natural world was the arrival of Islam to North India in the eight-century (Hill 52). From the previous section of this article we learned that environmental principles are also part of Islam. Nonetheless, Abrahamic religions are argued to carry an anthropocentric rhetoric that could potentially correlate with negative impacts on the world’s ecology (White). This issue is highly controversial and beyond the complexity of this text. In historical terms however, the expansion of Islam and advent of Muslim rule in the Indian region coincided with transformations in the perception of the relationship between humankind and the environment and increasing degradation of natural resources (Hill 54-55). Hill later mentions that the medieval period was an era of constant warfare and the effects on forest and jungles were devastating (Hill 60). During the transition to the early modern era we encounter an India with an environment that has been greatly abused and is starting to go through increasing population growth. The need for agricultural land added to Mughal hunting and cultivation preferences and the demand for resources that comes with the arrival of the East India Company further contribute to the deterioration of India’s natural richness (Hill 61-82).

This historical account is given with the purpose of illustrating that pre-colonial India was not the golden age of ecological harmony and that society’s environmental thought and action were constantly affected by external forces. Although some historians argue that India’s environmental deterioration during the colonial period was only a continuation of historical processes that had already had major impacts on the environment (Grove), there is much more academic consensus on the idea that the socio-political framework of colonial regime that subjected the natural resources of the Indian region to continuous exploitation accelerated environmental degradation to a critical stage (Swami). The economic, sociological and infrastructural transformation of India during colonial rule has received a lot of attention, however, there has not yet been a targeted analysis of how imported ideas about the superiority of western technology, the undermining of local sustainable practices based on religious traditions, and the British-led conservation movement impacted how the people of India viewed environmental values derived from their religions.

**Impacts of Colonial Rule on Perceptions of Environmental Values and Legacy**

It is not argued in this article that economic forces and industrialization do not play a major role in the environmental degradation of colonial and post-colonial India. Instead, our purpose is to argue that in addition to these forces, there was a transformation in the Indian perception of religious environmental ethics that was prompted by ideas introduced during British rule. Two main factors that triggered this transformation were: the portrayal of Indian people, their religions and their environmental practices as inferior; and the forest conservation effort led by British interests that left a legacy of mistrust towards environmental movements.

The first factor evolves from what has been termed in international relations literature as ‘standard of civilization’. Andrew Linklater precisely explains the term as a principle used by imperial powers to justify colonization by self-appointing to a civilizing mission. Colonized populations were often portrayed as inferior and in need of western technology to fulfill their potential. In India, this inferiority perception encompassed everything from race to the environment. Dirt and disease were often blamed on the climatic differences of the Indian region, and the utility of land, water, and forests were seen as being wasted by the ‘unsustainable’ religious practices of locals (Hill 88-90). Traditional environmental management practices were ignored as a result of this logic. One clear example of how ancient traditions that carried the environmental knowledge of many generations were ignored and lost in the rhetoric of the superiority of western technology was the outlawing of shifting cultivation in parts of India. Shifting cultivation refers to an agricultural practice that involves rotation of the land cultivated in order to allow the soil to rest and naturally recover. Shifting cultivation seen through the eyes of colonial administrators appeared to be a wasteful practice and the leading cause of the removal of trees that were of economic interest to the empire. As a result this practice was suppressed in extensive areas of the region (Pouchepadass). Although there is some debate over the sustainability of the practice of shifting cultivation because of its impact on forests, what is crucial to understand about this example and the inferiority rhetoric is that it strengthened the cultural transition from practices and beliefs based on religious traditions to western technology. As Hill concludes in his chapter on colonial environmental history, the idea that environmental practices based on religious tradition were inferior was expanded across the empire and inevitably changed the Indian culture. Such a demeaning rhetoric toward cultural beliefs resulted in locals viewing their own traditions and beliefs as inferior and contributed to transforming their relationship with the natural world.

The second factor concerns the impact that the colonial forest conservation policies had on Indian society’s perception of environmental movements. The Forest Department under British rule had the goal of protecting varieties of trees that were essential for timber production and had other commercial values that benefited the empire. With the justification of forest conservation and positive environmental action, the Forest Department displaced communities and disintegrated groups that practiced traditional forestry and management systems. Moving tribes often had to settle in confined areas and their cultures and relationship with the environment were forcibly changed (Swami). The displacement of communities to grow or maintain varieties of trees that were of value to the empire created an association of conservation and environmental movements with land usurpation and political agendas (Hill 118). Despite the time that has passed since these colonial forestry policies took effect, the relics of the association that they created are still visible in independent India. Government-led environmental initiatives are often resisted due to fear in a hidden political agenda. This distrust is evidenced in the immediate response to the incorporation of Hindu ethics on environmental movements as an excuse to push Hindu nationalism (Sivaramakrishnan). The exclusionary character of basing an environmental movement in the values of only one religion in such as diverse country like India is not disputed in this essay. Nevertheless, the point highlighted from this case is that that societal trust in the transparency of environmental action is disrupted.

Scholars such as Richard Grove have pointed out that it is a mistake to focus too much on the importance of the inferiority rhetoric seen in the colonial period and to dismiss the value of British-led forest conservation in colonial India because it proved to be innovative, complex, and was successful in protecting Indian forests. The issue with this argument is that it does not take into account the long lasting cultural impacts that the discussed factors had on Indian society. As it was mentioned before, the association of the British-led forest conservation effort with land usurpation and political agendas left a legacy of mistrust toward environmental movements and polices. On the other hand, the spread of the idea that traditional environmental practices based on religious beliefs are inferior led to a transformation in society’s perception of their own traditions and their relationship with nature that was carried over to independent India. A clear case that demonstrates this legacy is seen in the fact that despite Gandhi’s efforts to incorporate environmental reform and Hindu, Buddhist and Jain ideas of nonviolence towards nature in the Indian independence crusade, independent India emerged as a society that embraced one of the major doctrines of imperialism: the belief that the commodification of nature and western technology are indispensable for the advancement of society. Ironically, India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru referred to the first large damn constructed in independent India at its inauguration as “the new temple of resurgent India” (Hill 180-181).

Despite the spread of research that explains the inherent worth of environmental ethics found in religious traditions, which has sparked the interest of policymakers and leaders of environmental organizations to incorporate the value of ancient traditions in the promotion of sustainable environmental practices, these ideas are still resisted in many parts of Indian society. Recently however, and perhaps because the negative consequences of widespread environmental degradation have become more evident, those who are most affected by environmental injustices have practiced active resistance and found inspiration in the religious teachings of their ancestors to advocate for a balanced relationship with the natural world. The Chipko movement and the spread of Buddhist environmentalism are examples (Dwivedi). For an India that is currently ranked as one of the most polluted countries in the world but that still holds natural resources that are vital to not only the well being of its people, but that of the entire world (The World Bank), one can only hope that this society is inspired by the wisdom of its ancient teachings an insistence to give value to its natural richness becomes increasingly evident in policy and practice.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this essay we have presented the theoretical connections of Indian religions and environmental ethics, their historic evolution and how forces introduced during colonialism dramatically transformed perceptions of those connections. Although core concepts found in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Islam call to nature as a sacred entity and draw on the importance of practicing nonviolence and compassion towards all living beings, the history of India’s environment shows us that society has not always been loyal to these principles and has disturbed its natural world to great extends. An accelerated deterioration of India’s environment has been evidenced since the era of British rule. Despite arguments that explain this deterioration as a mere continuation of the environmental destruction that had been taking place for centuries, there is substantial academic agreement on the idea that changes brought by colonialism pushed environmental abuse to limits that have led to India’s current environmental crisis. Colonial economic forces such as industrialization have been studied and linked to this crisis. Our purpose, however, was exploring ideological changes in India’s society brought by colonialism, more specifically, the transformation in perception of religious environmental ethics. Two factors were discussed: the first, an inferiority rhetoric towards Indian traditional environmental beliefs and practices brought by the imperial ‘standard of civilization’ that caused locals to doubt their own beliefs and carry to independent India the conviction that the commodification of nature and western technology were necessary for their advancement. The second, a forest conservation effort that took place during colonial rule and intended to protect trees of economic interest to the empire. This effort left a legacy of land usurpation and hidden political agendas that various parts of Indian society now associate with environmental movements. These impacts on a society’s perception of their relationship with their environment have deep roots that along side economic and population forces can be linked with the environmental crisis that India faces today. On a wider scope we intend to demonstrate the intrinsic environmental value that religions can carry and propose that there is potential in the connection between religious teachings and positive environmental action to create solutions for the grave environmental disruption that not only Indian society but the entire world has created. Although beliefs and religious traditions are always subject to interpretation and vulnerable to historical transformations, the possibility of looking back at the wisdom of generations through these teachings always exists. Studying how people have viewed their relationship with their environment throughout history and understanding why there has been a divide between environmental ethics and action can serve as inspiration to propose solutions and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

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