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A Spiritual Response to the Environment

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In 1972, international leaders met at Stockholm and expressed grave concern over the deteriorating environment. Since then, thousands of conferences, seminars and symposia have been held all over the world, and millions of dollars spent. Hosts of 'expert' bodies have cropped up. Non-governmental organisations have sprouted like mushrooms. But what has been the net income of all this? During the twenty-year period between Stockholm and Rio de Janeiro (1992), the world's environment has deteriorated further and ecological imbalance intensified.

This is happening because awareness of environmental problems is only skin-deep. Unfortunately, our thinking and actions are still being shaped by a mechanical view of nature. Unless concern for the environment acquires a spiritual base and becomes a part of contemporary man's psyche, declarations will not get converted into commitments and no real change in existing practices and no real improvement in existing conditions will take place. Could religious and cultural traditions help bring the desired change? Could ancient values be regenerated to evolve a new ethos which would enable the present-day man to perceive life as an organic entity and understand that sea, soil, forests, clouds, mountains and teeming millions spread over the earth are inseparable parts of the cosmic web? My answer to both questions is in the affirmative.

No religion, perhaps, lays as much emphasis on environmental ethics as Hinduism. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas and Smriti contain the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance. Nature, or Earth, has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. In fact, man is forbidden from exploiting nature. He is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. The Mahabharata hints that

the basic elements of nature constitute the Cosmic Being-the mountains His bones, the earth His flesh, the sea His blood, the sky His abdomen, the air His breath and agni (fire) His energy. The whole emphasis of the ancient Hindu scriptures is that human beings cannot separate themselves from natural surroundings and Earth has the same relationship with man as the mother with her child.

Planting and preservation of trees are made sacred in religious functions. The Varah Purana says, "One who plants one peepal, one neem, one bar, ten flowering plants or creepers, two pomegranates, two oranges and five mangos, does not go to hell." In the Charak Sanhita, destruction of forests is taken as destruction of the state, and reforestation an act of rebuilding the state and advancing its welfare. Protection of animals is considered a sacred duty. Our scriptures warn, "Oh wicked persons! If you roast a bird, then your bathing in sacred rivers, pilgrimage, worship and yagnas are useless." In our ancient mythology, birds and animals have always been identified with gods and goddesses.

The current deplorable condition demands a spiritual response. A fundamental reorientation of human consciousness, accompanied by action that is born out of inner commitment, is very much needed. One of the measures that could help a great deal to fulfill this need is to regenerate and rejuvenate basic values of Hindu culture and propagate them.

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