

## **Nature in Religious Broadcasting: Exploring the Religious Aspect of Conservation**

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*From the earliest times, human beings have been striving to share a harmonious relationship with nature. Almost all the early efforts of individuals to survive in a harsh environment included a conservation process, aimed to pacify the natural forces of wind, rain, storm, etc. An avid respect for nature is evident in all the religions that came up during the transition of human being from the ape like mammal to a thinking individual. Today, in this age of reckless destruction of natural resources, there is a need to look into our culture and spiritual traditions and find effective solutions to destruction of the environment. The various religions of the world can provide avenues for a probe into the conscience of the masses and formulate policies for adopting effective practices that conserve the environment.*

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### **I. THE SOCIETY – NATURE INTERFACE**

The pre-historic society represented by a hunter-gatherer community, and later, the agrarian societies, reflects an age when man lived in complete harmony with nature. Even today, the various forces of nature depicted as deities are worshipped and revered in almost all human societies. In the horticultural societies of the southeastern Europe in the period between 7,000 to 3,500 BC, feminine deities represented the natural fertility and generative power of nature. The people of the Indus Valley civilization worshipped the mother goddess (earth) whose figurines have been found in archeological excavations. She personified prosperity and fertility in tune with nature's bounties. In many of the aboriginal and Native American societies, 'Mother Earth' or 'the Great Mother' was regarded as the 'beginning and end of all life on Earth'. The reverence for nature deities was and is present in spiritual traditions of Shamanism, Pantheism, Paganism, and Hinduism. The goddess Earth in various civilizations took the form of Isis (Egypt), Ishtar (Mesopotamia), Demeter and Gaia (Greece), Ceres (Roman), all of whom were the harbingers of life on Earth and symbolized creation.

The concept of species chauvinism or anthropo-centrism, as it is addressed today, gradually began to evolve in these civilizations. Man was considered the all powerful element in creation and his priority was to attain prosperity over those of other species. In ancient Mesopotamia, humans claimed a divine right to tame the monstrous chaos of nature while classical Greek humanists (Aristotle, Plato) and the early stoics claimed that the resources of nature were there for the exclusive use of mankind. The Judeo- Christian edicts, which command humans to 'have domain over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth over the earth" (genesis, 1:26), has in its philosophy a deeply anthropocentric approach in religious and spiritual thought. Even though the Universe was still seen as organic, spiritual, and living, humankind's space in that Universe was regarded as separate and above that of nature and all that was non-human. Bacon and Descartes, Newton and Hobbes, and all 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophers enlightened the ascent of man over nature, which was central to humankind's progress. Mechanistic materialism, rationality and scientific reductionism became the ideological cornerstones of the Industrial revolution of the west. The power of human beings in controlling the forces of nature was considered possible, given the advancement in science and technology. The core of the religion of humanism emerged as the supreme faith in human reason- its ability to confront and solve the many problems that humans face, its ability to rearrange the world of nature for the prosperity of humankind. As humanism is committed to this unquestioning faith in the power of reason, it rejects other assertions, including the power of God, supernatural forces, and even the undirected power of nature in league with blind chance.

The industrial revolution and the consequent race for development, which is often the pursuit of affluence, rather than moderation, has heralded an unprecedented rate of ecological crisis. In the pursuit of a high standard of living and economic prosperity, humankind is ignoring the ecological crisis that it has triggered off, and which is endangering the existence of all on the planet. A number of national and international organizations are working to find a feasible solution to this problem of nest fouling; there has been a growing realization to finding solutions to environmental degradation in the deep rooted value systems and spirituality.

There is an urgent need to find spiritual or religious avenues to promote peace in the planet. Human identity and personal fulfillment depend upon our relationship with nature. The human need for nature is linked not just to the material exploitation of environment, but also to the influence of the natural world on our emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and even spiritual development. Transformation changes cannot occur without a deep insight into the realm of values and beliefs that form the spiritual consciousness of humanity. Developing a sustainable relationship with the environment requires a deep awareness not only of the bio-physical environment within which we live, but also of one's own spirituality. In most religions there are places that are sacred and places of worship of deities are often present in such places. For e.g., Mt. Kailas is sacred as a mountain and is the abode of lord Shiva. Indeed all mountains are sacred in Hinduism as they afford us access to the higher realms of meditation. The Ganga is sacred as a river. In Hinduism the divine takes the form of sacred animals, plants, rocks, planets and stars. Hindu temples contain not only human representations but also deities with animal heads and animal bodies.

They contain sacred plants, flowers, rocks, fire and water as well. For the Hindus the Earth is sacred as the very manifestation of the Divine Mother. She is Bhumi Devi, the Earth Goddess. One of the reasons that Hindus honor cows is that the cow represents the energies and qualities of the Earth, selfless caring, sharing and the providing of nourishment to all. Hindu prayers are done at the rising of the Sun, at noon and at sunset, honoring the Divine light that comes to us through the Sun. Nature is always included in the Hindu approach. Even the great Hindu Yogis retire into nature to pursue their practices, taking refuge in the Himalayas and other mountains and wilderness areas where there is a more direct contact with the Divine. Since nature is considered divine and godly in most of the religions, religious or scientific television programs could inculcate a sense of concern for the environment among people by broadcasting programs with a religious-nature interface.

#### **Spirituality Oriented Channels and focus on nature from a spiritual perspective**

The advent of satellite television has witnessed a mushrooming of religious television channels in India. The considerable viewership of programs on these channels has reiterated the view that spiritual television is fulfilling the religious needs of viewers and is providing a spiritual gratification. These are 24 hours a day channels that relay documentaries, religious discourses, films and features on matters of religious and spiritual importance. There are about 43 religious television channels in India. Sanskar, Aastha, Sadhna, Jeevan are some popular channels being beamed across the country today. Dinesh Kabra, Managing Director of Sanskar TV with its headquarters in Mumbai, says: "Times have changed. Young people are more stressed, and they find their answers in spiritual discourses. Today, our audience profile consists of 25-year-olds, a drastic drop in age from the 35-plus audiences we had when we started three years ago. Now people get into spirituality at 25 and by the time they are 30-something, they are deeply into it." During the Kumbh Mela, Television Audience Measurement Media Research (Tam India) recorded the following figures: in July 2003 Sanskar recorded 6.9 million viewers, Aastha had 5.7 million, Sadhna 0.8 million, and God channel had 0.6 million viewers.

While selling religion through TV channels has become a norm with the changing media landscape in India, it is a matter of interest to examine how far these channels focus on nature related programs from a spiritual perspective. Aastha's aim, according to its website, is to "vividly portray this strong heritage of India, for the upliftment of human life in all its spheres... Aastha aims at exposing and reminding people all over the world and more particularly the new generation of our strong roots to reinforce our mettle." The Ahimsaa TV started with a focus on programming on environmental and women's issues. The SVBC channel owned by the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams regularly broadcasts programs related to nature in the hills of Tirumala and its divine significance. Thus it becomes imperative that media can be the channels for environmental communication and the content for environmental communication.

Programs on various places of worship such as the Vishnava Devi temple, Amarnath, Kedarnath and even the Kumbh mela reflect a spiritual reverence for the splendor and beauty of nature, as well as the will to behold and preserve it. As environmental institutions and organizations emerged during the last century, they have used various traditional and new media channels to communicate their concerns to the public in spiritual perspectives. Apart from these exclusive spiritual channels, several cable networks dedicated to the coverage of environmental issues including the Discovery Channel, Animal Planet and National Geographic are also exploring a spiritual angle to the issue of environmental conservation. An analysis of 7 TV channels namely, Aastha, Sanskar, Jeevan, Discovery, National Geographic, Sadhna, SVBC revealed that spiritual programs on television are indeed conveying a message for environmental conservation, sometimes by creating awareness on the rich flora of a religious place and at other times by throwing light on holy and sacred fauna and flora. The study was conducted over a period of 6 months from September to March 2012. The various programs in these

channels was analysed for spiritual messages that had an environmental conservation orientation. The results of the study are as follows:

| Name of the channel | Type of program that focused on spiritual-environment orientation |   |  |  |  |   |
|---------------------|---|---|--|--|--|---|
|                     | Environmental messages from mythology                             | Rich flora and fauna of a religious place | Pollution of religious places due to religious tourism | Conservation efforts in religious/spiritual places | Religious traditions that focus on conservation of flora and fauna | Sacred flora and fauna in various religions |
| Aastha              | 7   | 3   | 2  | 1  | 13   | 7   |
| Sanskar             | 10  | 11  | 7  | -  | 9  | 3   |
| Jeevan              | 15  | 5   | 3  | -  | 3  | 6   |
| Discovery           | 6   | 6   | 21   | 12   | 22   | 13  |
| National Geographic | 12  | 19  | 14   | 16   | 24   | 18  |
| Sadhna              | 13  | 5   | 8  | 2  | 6  | 5   |
| SVBC                | 25  | 13  | 11   | 8  | 25   | 12  |
| Total               | 88  | 62  | 66   | 39   | 102  | 64  |

The above table shows that most number of programs on the channels in the study focused on Religious traditions that focus on conservation of flora and fauna (102). Also, National Geographic and Discovery channels tend to focus more on conveying environment related messages through spiritual/religion/mythology based programs. Among the Indian channels, SVBC channel showed a significantly higher rate of conveying environment related messages through various spiritual and religion related programs. The use of broadcast media, especially the religious channels can be a great way to increase education and awareness on the environment. Fostering of a sense of religious commitment and spiritual fervor in media towards environmental conservation can be useful tools to educate the public about environmental concerns. Since people in most civilizations tend to worship all things related to religion as sacred, reporting environmental issues from a spiritual angle could help raise the commitment of people towards conservation. The media programs could focus on nature centered spiritual traditions. The reverence for nature centered deities is profound in almost all the religions and philosophies.

Though mankind's future well-being is heavily dependent on the potency of the environment, widespread ecological degradation has led doomsday prophets to prophecy the end of human race along with its cohabitants on this biotype. Developing a sense of ecological perception and awareness is the first step towards overcoming the destructive myopia and denial, which is at the foundation of modern ecological crisis. Spiritual religions provide an alternate path for influencing individual belief systems towards conserving the environment. Most nature centered spiritual traditions, Asian philosophies in particular, have deeply influenced the relationship between man and his environment. The media, especially religious/spiritual/ science based television channels could focus on a religious/spiritual angle to ecological conservation that would go a long way in conserving the environment. Spiritual values and beliefs can guide humanity effectively through modern ecological crisis. There is a need for bringing about fundamental changes in ecological consciousness of man, and the ideal starting point is from within. To the degree that religions and spiritual traditions influence social norms and behaviors, they provide the inspiration and personal commitment so needed for ecological self-discipline and activism.

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