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The Portrayal of Environmental Issues in Religious Texts: A Study on the Importance of Religion with Respect to Climate Change

 **Avyakt Mishra** ^{1*},  **Prof. Bikram Keshari Mishra** ²

¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Sociology, Ravenshaw University, Odisha, India

² Head of the Department, Department of Sociology, Ravenshaw University, Odisha, India

Corresponding Author: *Avyakt Mishra 

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Abstract

Until the 1960s, knowledge of the environment was taught only to students in Biology classes, using ecological concepts. In the 1970s, it began to be taught as a subject in its own right after it was learned that humans had affected the environment. As the impacts of climate change grow, the world is becoming more religious; the share of the world population with a religious affiliation is expected to rise from 84% in 2010 to 87% by 2050. Every religion, whether through texts or practices, has always focused on sustainability. Most religions, religious traditions, and cultures value creation and see it as a gift from God. This paper examines the effects of Hindu religious beliefs on environmental outlooks and determines whether theological insights can offer a unique solution to promote sustainable development and alleviate concerns about climate change. The traditional Hindu religion revolved around the worship of nature. Even at the onset of the Indus Valley Civilization, various forces of nature were worshipped, as evidenced by excavated sculptures and seals. Vedic culture is believed to be a nature-based culture. This paper draws on Hindu doctrines, including teachings on creation, incarnation, and redemption, to offer examples and practices that can foster lifestyle changes. Religion provides ethical values and morals; therefore, is it also equipped to generate public awareness on the conservation of the environment? It is unimaginable to sit idle without defending the few stretches of land that sustain human life in the entire galaxy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental Issues: A Conceptual Understanding

The environment can be defined as the collection of all living and non-living elements and their effects on mankind. While all living (biotic) factors are fauna (animals, fish, birds), & flora (plants, forests), non-living (abiotic) factors include the atmosphere, hydrosphere, and lithosphere, as well as external factors such as the sun and the moon.

Pollution occurs when harmful substances are introduced into the environment, rendering it unsuitable for life. The various kinds of pollution include Air, Water, Soil, and Noise pollution, among others. These types of pollution give rise to Climate Change and/or Global Warming. The major source of this pollution is anthropogenic activities. The Earth's temperature has risen dramatically over the past century, with the most significant increases occurring in recent decades. Since 1992, each year has been among the warmest on record. The Industrial Revolution, excessive emissions from factories and vehicles, and large-scale development projects that fail to consider the environment are the main reasons behind this temperature rise. In focusing on lucrative infrastructure development, environmental issues have not received adequate attention and have often been neglected, leading to further environmental deterioration.

The phrase 'environmental issues' has been used very commonly in world forums in recent times. It refers to the devastating effects of human activity on the environment. The phrase entails, among others, Climate Change and Global Warming. Climate change refers to long-term changes in weather patterns worldwide driven by anthropogenic activities, while global warming refers to the significant rise in Earth's temperature over the last few decades. Both have been blamed for natural calamities, disasters, etc., be it the recent heatwaves in the South Asian region or the annual cyclones hitting the coastal regions of the Indian Peninsula. The proposed solution to such environmental issues is "sustainable development." The term was initially introduced in the 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission titled "Our Common Future." Sustainable development is that which provides the current generation with an adequate standard of living without sacrificing the needs of future generations with respect to resources or environmental issues (Wright, 2005).

There is a constant hue and cry on social and print media that religious and cultural practices are also to be blamed for contributing to environmental degradation (e.g., Diwali firecrackers). This study emerged as an attempt to understand whether such practices are actually liable or merely oblivious to the original ideas. In any case, the general aim was to determine whether religion has a role to play in achieving sustainable development in the current context. As a starting point, this paper aims to examine the effects of Hindu religious beliefs on environmental outlook and to determine whether theological insights can offer a unique solution to alleviate concerns about climate change.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As the effects of climate change intensify, there is a notable trend towards increased religiosity worldwide. The percentage of the global population with a religious affiliation is projected to grow from 84% in 2010 to 87% by 2050. Is there a way to use this to our advantage? The following section attempts to understand the findings of experts who have already delved into answering this question and the questions mentioned above.

Sandler and Cafaro (2005) view the current environmental crisis primarily as a moral crisis. They note that most religions, faiths, and cultures treat creation as a divine gift. In essence, religious faiths can significantly contribute to a sustainable future by engaging deeply with other social systems at a structural level, reinforcing shared values at a cultural level, and renewing effective ethics and morals at a personal level. However, this positive influence is not guaranteed, and each religious faith must make difficult decisions to achieve this goal. There is a need to examine how modern lifestyles have significantly strained our environments, and how religious leaders can inspire committed ethical action in response to the ongoing environmental emergency.

Tucker and Grim (1997) suggest that, despite their complexity, religions remain vital sources of symbolic values, spiritual insights, and moral principles that can guide social change. The ideology put forward by Schultz and Gould (2021), who assert that it is essential to address the fundamental connections between humans and nature to better address environmental issues, deserves special mention. The personalized ideas that individuals have about the earthly environment are an important factor in human-nature connections.

Chuvieco (2018) argued that there are differences in environmental attitudes across cultures. Thus, there can be no complete study of the nature of connections between man and nature without taking into account the role of cultural norms, ideas, and values. He also explained the need for a significant overhaul of the current education syllabi offered by colleges and universities, which do not include environmental education. Specific attention needs to be given to environmentally moral behaviour, without which perspectives on environmental issues will remain incomplete and incomprehensive.

Michelle Kim (2007), a scientist and religious educator, advocates for an interdisciplinary approach to tackle the contemporary environmental crisis. She emphasizes the importance of integrating insights from both science and religion to develop effective models for teaching about environmental issues. This concerns formal teaching models. However, "Informal education" pertains to learning that occurs naturally in daily life without specific objectives. It is a lifelong process through which individuals gain attitudes, values, skills, and knowledge from their everyday experiences and resources around them, such as family, neighbours, work, play, the marketplace, libraries, and mass media (UNESCO). Non-formal environmental education may provide broader opportunities for the public to better understand various environmental issues. Consequently, religious leaders could have a significant role in

non-formal environmental education, thus helping us address various environmental issues and activities.

Gary Gardner (2002) identified three main strengths and leadership qualities of religion in promoting sustainability:

- **Engagement:** Religion has the potential to rally faith-based communities to address environmental challenges, using its moral influence to offer ethical direction and leadership in promoting sustainable living.
- **Meaning:** Religious doctrines shape perspectives on the world, connecting traditional beliefs to modern environmental concerns like plastic waste, resource depletion, and deforestation.
- **Wealth:** Affluent religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, possess the financial means to implement sustainable practices without straining their budgets.

Gore (2013) asserted that religion serves as "the most powerful source of ethical guidance for our civilization." Similarly, Rozita emphasized that religion significantly influences societal knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour towards the environment. Hence, leveraging religion is a suitable way to improve environmental literacy within the community. In his 2002 paper, Gardner highlighted several significant roles of religion in environmental conservation. These included, among others, shaping the public's worldviews, exercising moral authority, having a large number of followers, possessing abundant physical and financial resources, and generating social capital.

Bhagwat, Ormsby, and Rutte (2011) gathered insights from various researchers regarding the significance of religion in environmental conservation, concluding that religion provides ethical values and morals and can raise public awareness about environmental conservation. In a 2007 article, Posas explored the role of religion in tackling the global warming crisis and identified three primary roles of religion in climate change issues based on its unique traditional and societal functions: spreading ethical knowledge, having the capacity to reach and influence people, and inspiring followers to take action. Posas also detailed 14 specific ways in which religion can contribute to addressing climate change problems.

Skirbekk *et al.* (2020) discovered an intriguing correlation between religiosity and resource usage in nations. They found that countries with fewer religious inhabitants tend to consume more resources and generate higher emissions. However, these nations are often better equipped to address environmental challenges due to their greater wealth. Conversely, nations with more religious populations typically use fewer resources but have less capacity to tackle environmental issues and face more adverse outcomes, partly because of higher poverty levels. This shows that income is another factor that could be important to understanding individual action towards climate change. However, this has not been taken into consideration in this study.

In his 1967 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," Lynn White Jr. contended that religion, specifically Judeo-Christian beliefs, significantly contributes to contemporary environmental issues. White attributed this problem to the Judeo-Christian doctrine that grants humans

"dominion" over the Earth and all its creatures. He emphasized that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen." Researchers such as Ian McHarg and Max Nicholson concurred with White's perspective. This presents a different idea than the ones we have come across so far.

However, Eastern concepts of religion and environment, such as those proposed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, aim to negate the propositions White offers. Nasr argued that the disruption of the harmony between humans and nature stems from the breakdown of the harmony between humans and God. He suggested that restoring this balance requires reviving metaphysical knowledge about nature and reestablishing its sacred quality. Consequently, numerous studies, including those by Boyd, Kinsley, Palmer, and Finlay, have examined the compatibility of different religions with nature, aiming to demonstrate that religion can be environmentally friendly. Religious communities have also actively engaged in various environmental programs to counter White's argument, showcasing that their beliefs align with environmental protection. In the next section, to draw a better inference about the relationship between religion and nature, we focus on how Hinduism perceives nature and the environment. For simplicity, only one broad generic religion has been considered.

3. Hindu Religious Worldviews

Considered by many scholars to be the world's oldest religion, Hinduism can be traced to the four Vedas. These religious textbooks address how life originated, the relevance of human existence, and the ultimate pursuit of knowledge. They are regarded as the "direct gift of God to man; hence, they are regarded as the greatest veneration". Vedic culture is often viewed as nature-centric. The Rig Veda, the oldest of all, mentions 33 gods, with 11 residing in heaven, 11 on Earth, and 11 in the sky. It also refers to the "Vedic Triad," which includes Agni (fire), Surya (sun), and Vayu (wind), or alternatively, Indra (rain). (Wilkins, 1975) The Rig Veda also described in detail the role of nature in controlling climatic events and enhancing mortal lives, thereby drawing attention to a close connection with nature. The Rig Veda contains several suktas in which Rishis honour the natural elements as deities, emphasizing their importance to human life and all living beings. For example, the Vayu-sukta of the Rigveda highlights Vayu, or the air, as the essence of all living beings (Rigveda, 10-186.2).

In the Early Vedic Age, the God of fire, Agni, was worshipped most; Indra (the God of rain) was worshipped for power and prosperity, and Varuna (the God of water) was also worshipped. In the Later Vedic Age, Vishnu, the almighty creator, started to be worshipped. All other gods were manifestations of various forces of nature and concepts. The clear goal of attaining salvation was through worship of nature in the most basic sense. Land was not considered property; it was sacred. One having the greatest number of cattle was considered wealthy.

In the Atharva Veda, several trees are regarded as the abode of various Gods and Goddesses. In the Yajur Veda, it is suggested that fauna should be held in high regard to showcase our

goodwill rather than promoting our supremacy or ascendancy over them. In fact, traditional Hinduism has always revolved around the worship of nature. Even at the onset of the Indus Valley Civilization, various forces of nature were worshipped, as evidenced by excavated sculptures and seals. Examples include the mother goddess figure, a woman with a plant rising from her womb, the Pashupati seal, a man sitting cross-legged with animals surrounding him, etc.

Hinduism teaches that the environment is made up of five fundamental elements—space, air, fire, water, and Earth—all originating from *Prakriti*, the primal energy. In his 2011 work *Ten Key Hindu Environmental Teachings*, Dr. Pankaj Jain explains that Hinduism views the human body as composed of these same elements, each associated with one of the five senses: the nose with Earth, the tongue with water, the eyes with fire, the skin with air, and the ears with space. This deep connection between our senses and the elements forms the foundation of our relationship with the natural world.

The ancient Hindu scriptures also provide guidance on preserving the environment. The Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata emphasizes the importance of respecting and preserving nature. It states that not offering fire as a purifying material during havans, cutting down trees on auspicious days, and contaminating water with human waste, spit, and cough are considered great sins. The Matsyapurana emphasizes the importance of tree care and protection, highlighting their significant benefits to humans and the environment. Meanwhile, the Padma Purana issues a stern warning against environmental harm: "A person engaged in killing creatures, polluting wells, and ponds and tanks, and destroying gardens, certainly goes to hell" (Padmapurana, Bhoomikhanda 96.7-8). The Mahabharata also warns people about the need to care for and protect trees. (Rana, 2019) The Rig Veda contains hymns that underline the importance of trees in maintaining oxygen levels and removing impurities. (Rig Veda 6:48:17) Additionally, the Yajurveda underscores the importance of preserving the atmosphere (Yajur Veda 5:43).

Indian culture, a rich mosaic of various religions, has long embraced nature worship as a form of conservation and environmental awareness. Gardens often encompass Hindu temples, and even vagrants cultivate forests that provide flowers and fruits integral to Hindu rituals. These gardens also served as arboreta, housing diverse clusters of plants with curative and remedial properties. To ensure adequate time for the plants to regrow, the flowers and fruits offered to separate Gods were specific to certain seasons and changed thereafter. For example, white flowers are used for worshipping Lord Shiva in summer, red ones for revering Goddess Kali, and Sthalkamals (*Hibiscus mutabilis*) to please Goddess Durga in the autumn season. Offering flowers and fruits likely began as a way to recognize and preserve essential plants. Their regular use necessitated their conservation and propagation. These temple forests, known as 'tapovans' or meditation forests, supported a diverse range of birds and animals, forming unique ecosystems.

Remnants of such forests can still be found around some ancient temples in India, serving as a testament to the intertwined relationship between religious practices and environmental conservation. These temple forests provided an ideal setting for meditation and air purification and served as a vital source of medicinal plants. In addition, animals were revered as vehicles (vahanas) of the Gods and Goddesses, making their harm or killing an offence. Vahanas included, for example, the Tiger of Durga, the Mouse of Ganesha, the Peacock of Karthikeya, the Swan of Saraswati, the Owl of Lakshmi, the Elephant of Indra, the Horses of Surya (Sun), and so on. This reverence led to the conservation of various species and helped maintain ecological balance.

4. Hitherto Interventions

Some initiatives already undertaken give us hope that we are moving in the right direction, suggesting that religion could play a significant role in achieving sustainable development. A few of these initiatives are described below.

The World Bank has been actively collaborating with faith-based groups to address poverty and promote environmental conservation in developing countries. One notable initiative by WWF Malaysia involved engaging imams in conservation programs for turtles in Terengganu and tigers in Perak. These efforts highlight the importance of involving religious communities in environmental conservation. Another great example is the Recycling of Cooking Oil for Biodiesel Programme, led by the Selangor Water Management Authority (LUAS), which is conducted in various mosques and suraus in Selangor. This initiative demonstrates how religious settings can be leveraged for environmental conservation efforts.

Similarly, recognizing the profound influence of religion in driving change, Australia's religious leaders are actively combating climate change. Their advisory group recommends educating clergy about environmental issues and constructing energy-efficient churches.

Indeed, despite India's deep spiritual traditions, its influence on environmental policies has been limited. Recognizing this gap, in 1990, WWF-UK aimed to explore the connection between India's spiritual traditions and environmental challenges by commissioning a book on Hindu ecology. The book, titled "Hinduism and Ecology: The Best of Two Worlds" by Ranchor Prime, delves into how Hindu myths and values can contribute to ecological harmony.

WWF took another significant step by commissioning an environmental curriculum in Hindi from the Centre for Environmental Education in Ahmedabad. This curriculum incorporated Vrindavan's religious and cultural traditions, creating a more relatable and impactful educational experience for students. Additionally, WWF appointed part-time "environment teachers" in each of the 35 schools in Vrindavan and organized regular training workshops for them. During a protest against the destruction of hundreds of old trees to make way for a new road, hundreds of school children and their teachers took part in a peaceful yet powerful procession. This turnout was a remarkable reflection of the community's

commitment to environmental conservation, fostered through education. What made this demonstration particularly unique was its adherence to the traditional Vrindavan custom of religious street processions, featuring singing and musical instruments, but centred around a specific environmental cause. This powerful blend of religion and environmental activism was so effective that it immediately halted the destruction of the trees.

5. RESULTS

Thus, while few highlight the role of religion in exacerbating environmental issues, it's largely true that mobilizing established religions in support of environmental causes could help achieve a green, sustainable future. Since religion is a source of many moral laws and ethical principles, it can shape, inspire, and influence human perceptions, decisions, and actions. If all religions lend their support to environmental causes, significant progress could be made. Furthermore, all major religions have texts and traditions promoting sustainability.

The debate has made it abundantly clear that religion has a part to play in helping the environment recover. The problem, however, that persists is how these ideas will be passed on to the religious fraternities, especially those religious postulates that are specific in helping to bring environmental damage under control. This is where it becomes essential to understand the role of religious leaders, because they are the ones who can ensure the public understands their role in environmental conservation. So, it becomes necessary to identify these religious leaders who can mobilize the broader public to change the minds of governments that are reluctant to protect the environment. But this is easier said than done and doesn't come without its own set of challenges, two of which have been elaborated by Heitshusen:

1. The over-dependency on religious leaders: Leaders can only communicate those ideas to the general public that they know. Thus, the environmental ideas that they are uninformed about will be left out of the awareness campaigns. This uncertainty will be detrimental to environmental education.
2. The view that religious faith is personal and thus conflicts with science's objective nature.

6. CONCLUSION

In the Vedic period, cutting down vegetation was frowned upon. It could be said, although arguably, that no other religious faith was as empathetic to water bodies as Hindus were not so long ago. Our ideas underwent a dramatic shift once they came under the sway of the so-called occidental culture. The first-ever official record of affixing sewage lines to water bodies dates back to Varanasi, when it was under the ill-advised guidance of a British administrator named Hawkins in 1832. The dividend-yielding mentality of the contemporary world is damaging all our natural resources, including but not limited to water bodies. The new enlightened era has called for the mindless exploitation of nature for human needs. Thus, the old

customs of preserving and protecting nature were eliminated. In those 100-300 years, the entire face of the human-nature relationship changed rapidly. Interestingly, the first city to face the wrath of pollution was London. In the 1900s, smog (a mixture of smoke and fog) fell upon the city for the first time due to severe air pollution. However, all is not lost, and there is time to reverse the effects if we act quickly enough.

Mobilizing established religions in support of environmental causes could help achieve a green, sustainable future. Religion is a significant contributor to achieving sustainable development because it directly affects individuals' mindsets. Religious leaders, congregations, and fraternities have the power to achieve paradigm shifts by changing society's worldview.

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About the Author

Avyakt Mishra is a PhD Scholar in the Department of Sociology at Ravenshaw University, Odisha, India. His research interests include social change, culture, and contemporary sociological issues, with a focus on empirical analysis and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding society.