

Dharmic Ecology and the Neo-Pagan International: The Dangers of Religious Environmentalism in India

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1. Let me introduce the subject matter of my paper with a news story from the June 19th issue of *The Frontline*. The story is about a Pani yatra (or water pilgrimage) organized by the district collector of Osmanabad district of Maharashtra, in cooperation with 40 local NGOs, including scientists and environmentalists from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Osmanabad has suffered from a drought for many years, and the yatra was meant to increase the awareness of local water conservation methods. As a centerpiece for their yatra, the organizers took a pot, filled it with well water, which according to radio-carbon dating, was some 700-years old. They dressed up this pot with Hindu religious items (red cloth, garlands and coconuts) and took it around as they performed street plays and lectured on the importance of water conservation. According to the story, “people came out in large numbers to offer prayers to the kalash,” as they took in the rest of the political theater.
2. Pani yatra is by no means an isolated incidence. In order to mobilize the masses, the mainstream Indian environmentalists have not shied away from invoking Hindu imagery and myths. Just about every popular Hindu ritual or idea has been tapped for its potential for mobilization on behalf of the environment. Examples range from women tying rakhis to trees, mass recitations of bhagwat purana at the site of Chipko, fasts, religious vows on the river banks and temples, invocations of Krishna as the lord of cows and pastures, invocations of shakti, devi, bhu mata (or Narmada mata, or Ganga mata), karma, reincarnation, sacred trees, rivers, and even jati, reinterpreted as biological species living in harmony with their environment. *All* major environmental campaigns in recent years, including Chipko, Narmada Bachao Andolan, and even to some extent, the controversy over the GM seeds, have had their share of religious imagery, mixed in with the nostalgic invocations of the good old days.
3. I want to raise some fundamental questions regarding this kind of religious environmentalism of the mainstream, left-inclined social movements. I will show that the left-wing religious environmentalism has become in-distinguishable from the “dharmic ecology” propagated by the champions of Hinduism. Under the BJP government, dharmic ecology had already become a back-door through which Hindu temples and cults were being financed by the tax-payers money. Hindutva parties, in turn, have been attracting the attention of a host of potentially ultra- nationalistic neo-pagan movements from Europe and North America.

Time has come, in other words, to ask some tough questions.

4. But first I want to define my terms. What do I mean by religious environmentalism?

This preponderance of religious motifs in struggles over natural resources should not come as a surprise. India's new social movements have been dominated by a class of mostly urban, middle-class intellectuals and activists I have dubbed as "prophets facing backward," in my just published book.

Who are these prophets and why are they facing backward? They occupy a curious third position – a hybrid position, as postcolonial theorists would have it – between the traditional left and the traditional right: *they have radical left-wing politics, but a radical right-wing epistemology and cosmology*. That is to say, they claim to bear allegiance to the traditional left's political ideals of equality, peace, tolerance and ecological sustainability, but they have lost faith in the traditional left's cultural ideals of scientific reason, naturalism, humanism and secularism. They reject these Enlightenment ideas as the source of colonization of the non-Western societies, and a cause of the environmental and other problems facing the modern world. In India, this anti-Enlightenment left is largely made up of "crusading Gandhians" [Ramchandra Guha's description]. Globally, they have made common cause with postmodern and postcolonial theorists and other assorted critics of modern science that abound among social constructivists and feminists.

In matters of environmental politics, which is the subject of my talk today, these backward looking prophets routinely invoke religious idiom – almost always a Hindu idiom, by the way – to promote environmental and other public welfare objective. [Some examples include pani pooja (to promote water conservation), Krishna pooja, (to promote pastures for the cows, ANIL AGARWAL), and even AIDS pooja (to promote AID awareness)]

This conscious application of a religious attitude toward nature to contemporary environmental concerns is what I call religious environmentalism, or faith-based environmentalism, if I may borrow this adjective from George Bush.

5. PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND OF RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENTALISM

Why this intense preoccupation with the religious idiom?

Part of it is *strategic*: religious imagery is being used to mobilize the masses for environmental causes. The assumption is that if people worship nature as embodiment of shakti, Shiva, Krishna (or in more philosophical, Vedantic terms) Brahman, they will naturally be inclined to take care of it, use it lightly, sparingly, with reverence. (I will challenge this assumption later in the talk. Evidence shows that while sacredness of nature leads to irrational fears and natural-law ethics, it does not always encourage sustainable use of natural resources. Indeed, an attitude of reverence toward the powers of nature may have actually contributed to irresponsible uses of nature.)

But the turn to religious cosmology goes *deeper than mere strategy* and has to do with the philosophical allegiance of the anti-Enlightenment left to the standpoint epistemologies, or local knowledges, of the “Other” of the West, including women, non-Western people (even the most elite in the non-Western contexts count as the “oppressed” and colonized vis-à-vis the Western, while male!). The epistemological assumption is that due to the combined sins of the Judeo-Christian heritage, the “violence” of the Scientific Revolution, patriarchy and capitalism, Western science is a reductionist and dualist science which separates matter and mind and treats nature as a mere object to be studied by a pure subject removed from it. The holy grail of the anti-Enlightenment left is to create a postmodern science which is non-dualist and holistic. Such a science will be more respectful of the embedded-ness of science and nature itself in the cultural context. Non-Western people, especially the oppressed among them, are supposed to provide the right kind of metaphysic and the right kind of non-dualistic, non-reductionist value orientation to study nature.

6. OK, definitions out of the way. It is time to ask those “tough questions” that have been bothering me about this whole business.

I start with a simple question: why is pani-yatra OK, if we think that Advani’s Rath yatra was not? Why should we as secularist scholars, activists and citizens participate or at least keep quiet when environmentalists inject religion into public debates over red-green issues, when we condemn the Hindutvawadis for injecting Ram into the saffron issues of the mosque in Ayodhya? Just because we believe – correctly – that our red-green goals are morally superior to their saffron ones, does it make it ok for us to invoke religiosity in what are essentially secular matters related to development and environmental policies? Does the perceived nobility of our ends justify the means? Shouldn’t secularism begin at home? Shouldn’t we demand a separation of faith and politics in new social movements, just as much as from the Sangh Parivar, or from the current Congress parivar? Should we allow environmentalism to become the chief agent of Hinduization of politics and culture?

7. In the rest of the time available to me, I want to convince you of the necessity of a secular, evidence-based, rational environmentalism that respects the modernist aspirations of the poor even as it seeks to sustain the land, rivers and air. Here is how I am going to proceed:

First I will show that religious environmentalism has become the Trojan horse for Hindutva. Dharmic ecology of the right wing is in-distinguishable from the anti-Enlightenment left.

Second, Dharmic ecology of Hindutva right is emerging as the hub of a new neo-pagan International. Neo-paganism in Europe and America has deep and historic ties with Nazi and Neo-Nazi groups.

Three, I will argue that sacredness of nature does not protect nature. Just because people venerate trees and rivers does not mean that they will take care of them.

I will conclude with a suggestion that, in fact, a secular, promethean environmentalism is more in keeping with the aspirations of the poor in India. The poor are not *postmodern*, they are *pro-modern*.

8. The SHARED GROUND between the anti-Enlightenment left and the Hindu right.

Through the decade of the nineties, just as anti-Enlightenment theory was at its height, and just as Hindu nationalists had come to power, a new academic discipline called “Dharmic ecology,” or Hindu ecology was taking shape with active participation of Hindu philosophers, world-renowned Sanskritists and Indologists, the Goddess feminists, anthropologists, religious cults like Hare Krishnas, Hindutva propagandists, and sadly, the representatives of our own Crusading Gandhians, the prophets facing backward. (Anil Agarwal, Sundarlal Bahuguna, Shiva as participants or as informers. Chipko and NBA cited as examples of Dharmic ecology). Two major books, one by Harvard Divinity School. *Hinduism Today* took up the cause, as has the magazine of the Hare Krishnas, *Back to Godhead*.

Every ancient high-Hindu text from the Rig Veda to the Upanishads, along with Manusmriti, Bhagvat Gita, Bhagvat Purana, Ramayana and Mahabharata has been reinterpreted as supporting a unique eco-spirituality which encourages an ecological ethic suitable for the contemporary 21st century world. Every Brahminical Hindu concept, from the obnoxious theory of karma and reincarnation has been appropriated as a source of ecological wisdom. Every major god and goddess has been inducted as an ecologist.

What is Dharmic ecology? It is basically an unabashedly Hindu supremacist, nationalistic version of the same religious environmentalism that the anti-Enlightenment left has been preaching and practicing. Proponents of Dharmic ecology agree with their left-wing anti-Enlightenment counterparts that

a. because Hindus find gods in nature, because they see nature as embodiment of the divine, they must therefore, by definition have a more evolved ecological ethic; and

- b. it is because of the colonization of the mind by Western reductionist science that Indians have forgotten this holistic worldview; and
- c. that a revival of this “holistic” “non-dualistic” worldview is needed in order to encourage environmentally responsible development.

The difference between the two is while the left tries to find all these ecological virtues in the Hinduism of the poor peasants, hill people, women and other marginalized groups, the right-wing unproblematically locates it in the Brahminical Hinduism itself. It makes no attempt to subalternize the Hindu ecological ethic.

9. Chipko as the bridge between the Right and the Left

I will very briefly use the example of Chipko to illustrate how close the left and the right are on salient points.

Thanks to the painstaking and careful research by people like Haripriya Rangan, Emma Mawdsley and numerous other Indian and Western researchers, it is by now very clear that Chipko was not an assertion of traditional values or even traditional forest rights of non-modern villagers and women against commercial forestry. Chipko was not a rejection of commercial forestry but a struggle for a preferred access to markets, credit, jobs and subsidies for the local people in the industry.

In the Hindu ecology literature, however, Shiva and Sundarlal Bahuguna’s interpretation of Chipko as the civilizational and religious expression of women and hill people are taken as canonical. Chipko is presented in the Hindu ecology literature as, quote, the “application of foundational ideas of Hindu philosophy to environmental action” and an “affirmation of spiritual value of nature.” (George James, from Chapple’s anthology). The recitation of Bhagwat Katha, probably arranged by Sundar Lal Bahuguna and women tying rakhi to trees are taken as evidence of the influence of Hindu religiosity.

10. Dharmic ecology opens the door to Hinduism in politics.

The success of Chipko and the various anti-dam campaigns, especially the anti-Tehri dam movement are used as exemplars of how Hinduism can make a positive contribution to the global environmental movements. Not surprisingly, under the BJP rule, government began to actively fund temples, pilgrimage sites and religious cults for reforestation and maintenance of sacred groves. A few examples will suffice:

- G. B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Ecology has been working with the temple of Badrinath. Scientists produce the saplings, the priests bless them and distribute them as prasad
- Indian government funded in part the work of ISKCON (Hare Krishna) in reforestation of Vrindavan
- Department of environment is supporting temples to maintain sacred groves.
- Ecological aspects of Sanatana dharma have been included in the school text books of at least one state, UP.

11. The Hindutva – Neo-Pagan connection

If you think this is bad, wait, it gets worse.

In the hands of Hindutva's deep thinkers, notably Ram Swarup and Sita Ram Goel, dharmic ecology takes an explicitly anti-monotheistic turn, aimed superficially at Christianity. Goel notably, but also many others like N.S. Rajaram and Koenrard Elst hold "Semitic monotheism" responsible for the crisis of modernity: they take the left's critique of the scientific revolution as disenchanting the world, but blame it on Christianity, rather than on science per se. All the ills of modernity that the left and right both agree upon are pinned on to the monotheistic conception of God who stands outside nature, creating this split between man and nature.

And this anti-Christian turn makes dharmic ecology very friendly to the anti-Christian, neo-pagan groups that are mushrooming in Europe, notably in mostly protestant countries such as England, Ireland, Germany, Iceland, Belgium, Lithuania, Norway and even in Russia.

Western Neo-pagans are mostly disillusioned Christians. They reject the transcendent God of Abrahamic faiths, who created the natural order, but now stands outside nature. They are attracted to paganism which sees the sacred as manifested in nature more rationally and aesthetically convincing.

Where are they going to find this paganism? Well, they try to revive the local gods of the pre-Christian European tribes. Thus there is a revival of such European nature gods as Odin, Thor, Wotan, the old Germanic and Nordic gods, combined with practices associated with occult, Celtic druidism and witchcraft. Of course, there is another place they can turn to for inspiration and support – and that is Hinduism, the living religion of nature. It is this pagan connection that has brought people like Koenrard Elst, David Frawley and many others in close collaboration with Hindu nationalists.

Not surprisingly, Hindu nationalists are very keen on winning the Western neo-pagans to their side. This will give them a chance to hollow out Christianity from within and give Hinduism a global scope. There are contacts between the RSS ideologues and the British, Irish and Lithuanian neo-pagans. (give details of the mutual overtures). Dharmic ecology becomes the polite, politically correct face of the pagan outlook.

12. THE FASCISM QUESTION: All neo-pagans are not fascists. Not at all. Indeed, neo-paganism can stand by itself as a genuine religion, with no necessary connections with fascist, racist politics. And I have no evidence at all that the neo-pagan groups that Hindutva is trying to bring into its own fold have any overt connections with Nazi or neo-Nazi groups.

What worry me are three things

- The long history of the Nazi and neo-Nazi involvement with occult and paganism. Most people don't realize that the Nazism was a revolt against universalistic and secular elements of Christianity which the Nazis' ascribed to the influence of the Jews. Why this attraction for the occult and paganism:
 - local gods are more blood and soil gods.
 - Nature religions allow their adherents a great deal of hubris. They feel they are acting in accord with nature itself and don't have to obey either the positive law of the land, or the traditional ethics, all of which they see as merely man-made law.
- Non-political, perfectly decent neopagans might attract racist groups. For e.g., wicca or even deep ecologists who have no rightwing sympathies tend to attract neo-Nazi groups who are into occult and the cult of Odin.
- The more prominence Hinduism gets abroad, even for wrong reasons like the new age and paganism, the more prestige it gains in India.

13. But the defenders of religious environmentalism might still ask: So what? Just because the right-wing is opportunistically jumping on the ecology bandwagon, and bringing foreign neo-pagans along, does not prove that religion cannot be an effective check against environmental degradation.

But by now there is sufficient evidence from anthropological studies that nature worship plays a highly ambiguous role in how people relate to nature. Just because people hold some rivers, trees, stones, animals as sacred does not mean

- a. That they do it out of environmental concerns. Wish-fulfillment (e.g., for better rains, higher crop yields), fear, ancestor worship are fairly common motivations for nature worship. (Examples from Baviskar, Jackson).
- b. Those natural entities deemed sacred for whatever reason will be better taken care of (e.g. Ganga, sacred groves).

My point is that the underlying assumption of religious environmentalism – that a religious attitude of sacredness and reverence toward nature encourages wise use of nature – is not supported by sound evidence from field studies.

14. In closing, I would like to return to a hard-learned, but mostly forgotten, lesson of the environmental movement in India. The lesson is this: most poor people participate in environmental movements for *secular* reasons. In study after study, it has come to light that the *primary* motivation of the poor people to take action on behalf of the trees, rivers and land is their interest in a better life materially for themselves and for their children. The poor are nowhere as technology averse, as their urban middle class activist “consciousness-raisers” are. Most of the time, they are fighting to get a better deal out of development projects, not to stop them altogether.

15. This secular motivation for environmental action is an untapped resource for *secular environmentalism*. Rather than drape the cloak of sacredness on nature,

environmentalism in India can become a source of secularism and a class-based collective action.