India's Ecological Mess
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ENVIRONMENT

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Too few Hindu leaders and institutions are responding to the crisis of pollution, deforestation, soil degradation and unchecked development

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India has a culture and tradition of holding every form of life in esteem. Indeed, even the unliving aspects of nature, the rivers and the mountains, the rocks and the forests, are imbued with divine significance. These beliefs had long been incorporated in our acts of daily living, making all the civilizations of this sub-continent which have preceded ours eco-friendly in a manner hard for the present-day world to appreciate fully.

The developed countries today attained their position of industrial and technical superiority through their centuries-long exploitation of the bounties of the Earth--whether these lay within their own lands or without. Their lifestyles continue to be highly wasteful of the limited resources of our ravaged planet.

The result is the alarming threat that faces our Earth and the myriad forms of life that share the planet with us. Hindu

philosophy has not kept this threat from India's sacred land. Vasudha Narayanan, professor of religion at the University of Florida insightfully observed, "The seductive power of consumer goods and the easy profits promised by large industries that have scant respect for the environment were powerful enough to overcome any vestiges of respect for theology."

How serious are India's environmental problems? Tata Energy Research Institute of New Delhi (TERI) is a think tank for sustainable development. A summary on their web site at www.teriin.org/greenindia/sum.htm paints a shocking picture, beginning with the amount of environmental degradation between Independence in 1947 and today. Most economic advancement during the last half century, they conclude, has come at severe environmental cost: falling water tables, soil loss, air pollution, water pollution, forest degradation, overgrazing, loss of species, unmanageable municipal waste, etc. In fact, when these are analyzed in terms of their long-term costs in money and impact on human health, the industrialization and urbanization of India represents a net loss in quality of life. Air pollution alone, TERI estimates, resulted in "2.5 million premature deaths in 1997." The cumulative effects of soil degradation have resulted in a loss of up to 26% of annual agriculture output. India's problems are not unique--most developing countries find themselves in the same situation.

If the present trends continue, TERI scientists predict that in 50 years, India's population will

reach 1.75 billion, her rivers will be little more than "open sewers," erosion will have ruined a million square miles of previously farmable land, and the forest lands will be diminishing at an ever-increasing rate. Continued economic development without addressing the environmental problem, conclude the scientists, is impossible.

The good news from TERI is that India could achieve a largely sustainable and environmentally friendly way of life in just 50 years--if the people, the businesses and the government went "green" overnight, putting every environmentally-friendly policy into effect right now--in TERI's words, "bringing about a major departure from India's past pattern of development."

But how to get there from here? I was assigned by Hinduism Today to meet and interview several of India's leading environmentalists, and seek their advice on how Hindus and Hindu institutions can bring about the necessary change in consciousness, through activism, education and concrete example.

Expert talk: Professor P.R. Trivedy is Chairman of the Indian Institute of Ecology and Environment, New Delhi (website: http://www.universityindia.edu). He concurs with the TERI report that "people are not educated regarding the disaster we will face." He contrasted the India situation with that of the West. "There, people are fully aware of the problem. In India, our lifestyle is environmentally friendly, but people are not educated on eco-ethics, eco-culture, eco-wisdom, eco-politics and eco-Dharma. We should catch children young and train them then, so that they in turn can influence their parents and their neighborhood."

"Hindu religious leaders can always help in protecting the environment," stated Dr. Trivedy. "In the Vedas and other religious books there are detailed discussions and descriptions on nature and how to protect it. But in the present context there is an urgent need to have a competent cadre of Hindu leaders educated and trained in

religion, culture and environment. Let there be trained saints having an eco-mind."

I next met with Dr. Roma Mukherjee of the National Environmental Science Academy. She said, "The problem is enormous due to industrialization. We've had tremendous but unplanned growth. Therefore there is pressure on energy, water, food, human settlement and basic infrastructure, like roads."

"One cannot stop development in the name of environment," she asserted. "If one uses nature, one must pay for it. Many environmentalists are against dams, but can we stop them? Our economy should also grow. We have to use eco-friendly technology and duly

compensate the masses."

"In India, each and every issue that has direct or indirect relation to environment is neglected," laments Dr. Arnab Kumar Hazra, "right from forests and wildlife to air and water pollution to global warming and acid rain." Hazra is a specialist on environmental economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. "Environmental ethics is an integral part of any religion," states Hazra. "All religions talk of protecting the trees, as a duty for all citizens. Religions talk against greed of all kind, but everybody is into making money, more and more. Religion is followed only up to the point of convenience." He advises, "The common people must educate themselves on the issues and spread them. The policy makers will definitely then take this up,

as votes are important. Industry, too, will respond."

Dr. Suman Sahai is a noted genealogist and chief of Gene Campaign, a powerful movement for farmers' rights. She observes that "the environment movement got branded as an urban, fashionable movement in India because of its obvious links to Western movements. For example, recently a fashion show was organized to protect animals; the common rural and semi-rural people could not see any link between fashion and environment, hence they don't see how it is a people's movement."

"Environment is not a new invention for Hinduism," Sahai said. "Hinduism teaches us that every creature is dependent. But

the religion has not responded, as Christianity did after the Green Movement began [in the early 60s]. No saints seem to be doing anything about it, whereas our philosophy is so rich! For more than 5,000 years we've revealed greatness--unifying all streams of life into one large stream, respecting all forms of life. It is the philosophy, but we are forgetting it."

"Religious leaders can do wonders, but have done nothing so far," states Dr. J.N. Puri, environmentalist and social activist in New Delhi. "Yes, we have a great tradition. After taking our bath, we offer water to the Sun God, plants and trees. We used to live in joint families, waste little, eat vegetarian food. We used to live in houses made with local, environmentally-friendly materials. Now

plastic bags choke our drains. Temples were built in such a way that without loudspeakers we could listen to good words of sages. Now-a-days noise pollution has penetrated. Before eating we used to offer a portion of our food for animals, birds. That is preserving nature. We are forgetting the tradition."

Dr. Vandana Shiva is one of India's most famous (and busiest--I caught her only between flights) environmentalists. She is director of Delhi's Research Foundation for Science & Technology and Ecology. She was one of the first to question and then vehemently oppose the "Green Revolution" of the 1960s for its inappropriate and ultimately destructive high-tech, intensive agricultural methods--especially introduced hybrid seeds. "We are not living within limits,"

she said. "Globalization and consumerism changed us. The country is headed to disaster. We are obsessed with peripheral issues and not thinking about water, trees, nature, etc. I predict great damage in 2020, caused by a severe crisis of water and resulting conflict, destitution and famine, like took place in Bengal in 1942, but this time all over the country. By 2100, after the damage, a new conservation-based society would emerge. After destruction, construction."

"I know several Hindu religious leaders active in the environmental movement," Vandana said. "Swami Chidanand of Shivanand Ashram, Haridwar, blessed the struggle against Tehri dam. He also blessed the Chipko movement. Mahant from Brindaban temple is thinking about ecological issues and doing good works in

Brajbhumi. Mahant in Banaras is taking up the issue of cleaning the Ganga."

Successful projects: There is a significant level of environmental activism among some Hindu leaders and institutions. Temples are running well-planned programs to restore entire forests in Badrinath [see page 22] and Vrindaban. Activists Medha Patkar and Sunderlal Bahaguna are attempting to cancel or at least modify some of the largest river development projects in the world. India's richest temple, Tirumala Tirupati temple in Andhra Pradesh, has organized the planting of several million trees, both near the temple and across India. They've made the trees part of the pilgrims' devotional observances. Even poor sadhus, like 80-year-old Swami Vankhandi, made a difference. He

replanted 15 acres of deforested land on Hidimba mountain in Uttar Pradesh and personally enforced regulations against logging.

Summary: Our experts tell us this: 1) India's environmental problems are much the same as the rest of the world's; 2) India faces catastrophic environmental crisis unless changes are made across all levels of society; 3) Hindu philosophy provides a basis for those changes, but has not been effective in preventing the crisis; 4) Hindu leaders and institutions, with notable exceptions, can do much more than they are; 5) The crucial immediate goal is education; 6) There are many large and small projects effective at not only education, but also at making a real impact upon the root problems.

Vashudha Narayanan succinctly summarizes the situation in her essay, "One Tree is Equal to Ten Sons, Hindu Responses to the Problems of Ecology, Population and Consumption." "The Earth belongs to us only in our egos and avaricious hands," she writes. "In reality, it is we who belong to Earth, and by wrongly usurping what is not ours and what should be shared with the future generations of human beings, we are indulging in adharmic, unrighteous behavior."

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