

[Looking to Old Hindu Ecology For New Guides](#)

Category : [August 1990](#)

Published by Anonymous on Aug. 01, 1990

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India Seminar Explores Past Views of Forests, Housing and Eco-rites

From 160 miles in space the Himalayan mountain ranges look like human brain tissue magnified 10,000 times. The great rivers are visible as silvery arteries that stream out of a hundred passes delicately feathered with snow. They run south, east and west into an India that is grey green and curves off to a horizon of black space.

That is the view Rakesh Sharma had from a Russian space habitat as it circumnavigated Earth every 90 minutes. Later, Sharma wrote: "My mental boundaries expanded when I viewed the Earth against a black and uninviting vacuum, yet my country's rich traditions had conditioned me to look beyond man-made boundaries and prejudices. One does not have to undertake a space flight to come by this feeling."

Sharma is right. Man's divisions and categories fade to irrelevancy as Upanishadic unity is sensed, even momentarily. But can those same Hindu traditions - older than the Himalayas - guide us in grappling with man-made catastrophes, in the toxic realities of our present ecological crisis? I am at ground level in Thane, India, looking up into space, a sooty, dull blue sky laced with chemical aromas. Thane, near Bombay, is the largest industrial region in Asia. And it is here, on a single hot day in late April, that eighteen Hindu ecological thinkers are gathering for a first national seminar on Ecology & Ancient India, sponsored by the Institute of Oriental Studies, Thane.

The meeting is at the Golden Palace Hotel, in a conference room outfitted with fake wood paneling and air conditioning - reminders of plastic and chlorofluorocarbon pollution. It is early morning and several of the speakers are putting final touches on their papers and chatting with Dr. Vijay Bedekar, director of the Institute and the brain behind this event. Bedekar tells me this conference stems from his indignation that religion and rituals were being tossed aside as superstitious waste by so-called progressives. "Religious rituals connected with nature are not something to be ashamed of - they inculcate tolerance and respect for all life forms."

Thane mayor Mohan Gupta opened the conference, noting the appropriateness of an ecology seminar here. He cited the toxic waste problems he is facing in his city and promised to make available land for forest groves in the industrial belt. His principle message was to bring old wisdom to the scientist priests of technology: "You should take the wisdom of our ancients on environmental matters through interpretation of ancient texts to the modern scientists and technologists." He admonished scientists to shed their philosophical arrogance and be open to the archaic Hindu perspectives and techniques.

Institute director Bedekar in his welcome address stated it was not enough to be educated without appreciating the need to safeguard the environment and change modern lifestyles that continually consume or pollute natural resources. He noted that the tree-planting culture gaining popularity in India was only a superficial approach to environmental protection.

Presiding scholar Pandit S.B. Velankar stated that most of the Indian literature on ecology is not easily available and tremendous effort would have to be made to collect all the texts that revealed Hindu thinking on environmental issues.

By the day's end 25 papers were presented ranging from "Ecology in the Puranas" to "Ancient Indian House: A Bioclimatic Design." Lifestyle changes to simpler, dharmic, less consumer-oriented values were emphasized, as well as a re-awakening of nature rituals. British colonialism was blamed for altering India's traditional forest and river conservation into runaway environmental disasters. Velankar's observation on the need for systematic hunting of texts discussing ecological subjects emerged as a top agenda item - the number of texts accessed was limited. The overall effect was long on creating a reality of cooperation with intelligent nature, but shy on ecological policies and techniques. Yet, as the list

below shows, many concerns of yesteryear are the same today.

Leaving bad policies in the past is also a concern. One researcher brought forward the Arthashastra, but neglected to tell how this work describes the ideal country as having no wilderness tracts, no rocky environs and no wild beasts - forests are for timber, open land for mining; a kingdom of super-exploitation.

Bedekar sees this seminar as a priming of the pump for a major scouring of Hinduism's ecological library and for future seminars that can directly influence current environmental policy.

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THANE Declaration 1990

The final outcome of the seminar was the Thane Declaration 1990, an eloquent plea signed by all the delegates to tame man, not nature. It concluded:

We...request all governments, the United Nations, all agencies concerned with environment and ecology, and other voluntary organizations and the members of this Planet Earth to initiate a change in Man first and all our efforts and resources shall be directed to cultivate a sustainable Man who shall not consider himself an arrogant master of nature but shall always think subordinate to nature. He shall work in cooperation with nature and in participation with nature. He shall demand least and damage none.

OUTDOORS, OUTLOUD

HINDUISM TODAY spoke at length with several of the seminar participants to

gauge their personal closeness to India's environs and their views on a Hindu ecological will and government environmental policy. More of these profiles will run in future editions.

P.V. JOSHI is an environmental scientist with the Bhabha Atomic Research Center. He was a member of India's 8th expedition to Antarctica. In 1983 he started a trekking team called "Wayfarers India" formed from fellow Maharashtrians he met at a trekking and mountaineering camp at Kulu-manali in Himachal Pradesh. "I began trekking with friends at age 12 for seeing places and fun without any special consciousness of ecological matters," Joshi says. His home village in Maharashtra became a victim to deforestation for urban expansion. He recalls how he played with his friends during childhood in the forest, but when he returned in 1989 he was appalled to see almost the entire wooded area mowed down for a housing colony. In contrast, he feels the religious sacredness of such Himalayan locales as Badrinath and Kedarnath have created a reverential attitude toward nature and their forest glens have remained intact. He also points out the Himachal forests have been reduced from 39% total land area to 17% since India's independence in 1948.

The Wayfarers organize flora and fauna tours 2-3 times a year with the help of S.D. Jaywant, an expert on India's vast herbal medicine chest. The tours run at mid-monsoon and pre-winter when vegetation is rich and varied. "The Wayfarers plan to trek the entire coast of India. So far we have walked along the coasts of Kerala, Gujarat and Maharashtra." Speaking generally, he observes that the coastal area of Maharashtra and Gujarat are in relatively good condition because of low population density whereas the beaches and coastal areas in Kerala and south India have deteriorated with higher populations. However, the interiors of south India, including forests, are by and large intact, while the central states are suffering degradation. "For example, the Sahydari Ranges in Maharashtra are in a denuded state from tree felling, quarrying...and there is a lack of wildlife. But Silent Valley of Kerala is now the thickest forest in the country."

He feels that dam projects (such as the huge and embattled Narmada project) are harmful because of the build up of alluvial soils in the dammed areas preventing their natural disbursement. Plus this accrued siltation eventually fills dam reservoirs. "Industry," he avers, "must bear the responsibility and cost for pollution control." He comments that Japan exploits other countries like Malaysia for teak while selfishly preserving its own forest wood, and Japan imports ore from India while preserving its own mineral resources. "Environmental problems need to be tackled globally, and it is necessary to examine if developed nations like Japan and

the US are not exploiting developing nations environmentally." "Environment has not emerged as an issue in politics as there is as yet no green party in India or mention of environmental policy in election campaigns."

"A Hindu will on environment is too strong a word. Rather there is a Hindu consciousness such as manifest in dedication of forests to Gods - called "deo rai" - in Maharashtra, or vegetarian diet, tree worship and rituals to fire, earth, air, water and space." He has yet to encounter systematic reasoning for tree worship as such. "It is a blind faith." "There is, in fact, a Hindu faith on ecology, not a will. Ecological awareness has not crystallized into a will."

Digging Up Hindu Soil For Earth Clues

ATHARVAN SONGS

Dr. V.V. Gangal of the Somaiya Indological Research Institute analyzed the Atharva Veda, attributed to sage Atharvan. He thinks that the concept of "deep ecology" discussed by physicist Fritjof Capra as a perception of reality going beyond the scientific framework to an intuitive awareness of oneness of all life came close to sage Atharvan's spiritual ecology. Atharvan telescopes from a discussion of the whole planet to a survey of his immediate environs, paralleling the modern maxim "Think globally, act locally."

ROYAL PROTECTION

Raj Kumar Sen, an economist from Calcutta, harvested insights from the Arthashastra, a watershed political treatise written by a 3rd century BCE brahmin prime minister to guide the monarchy. Sen said because of the holistic approach to human society and universe, the environmental concern did not figure separately in old writings. The Arthashastra prescribed relocations if populations got too high in a region. Sanctuaries were set up for military elephants. Horses, ducks, peacocks, cuckoos, parrots and breeding cows and oxen were protected. Starting of fires was prohibited in the summer in dry regions. Codes were established for handling waste sewage and water.

HIMALAYAN PHARMACY

Dr. G.K. Gurjar - an expert in ayurvedic texts - explained how the Charaka Samhita (a principle ayurvedic text) taught of varying soil conditions for growing herbs and of the importance of the Himalayan locale as an ayurvedic habitat and living lab. He said Charaka (the author) appears it gave well understood the importance of 'climax forests' where diverse species coexisted and how reckless felling of trees created hillside and top soil erosion leading to river blockage and pasture flooding.

COSMIC PATTERN

Dr. V.N. Shintre described the Hindu law of nature, Rita, as a cyclical law governing the balance between the universe, nature and man, each part functioning in its own law but all parts interacting holistically. Humans were one part of totality, and animals and plants had equal status. Men was not allowed to wantonly destroy animal and plant life to meet his own physical needs. Shintre observed that ancient Hindu seers were concerned less with physical laws than with norms, less with order as such than with good order.

Shintre referenced the story of King Kuru, ruler of a vast empire that suffered a long drought during his childhood. The king concluded that the drought was connected somehow to the clearing of forests for cultivable land. He divided the land into arable sections near the towns and designated wilderness areas as protected forest reserves.

BIO-CLIMATE HOUSES

P.V. Joshi, science officer at the Bhabha Atomic Research Center, spoke on ancient house design. While the general climate is essentially unalterable, the climate of a specific region can be altered by proper design. Buildings in hot, dry areas were traditionally built with thick walls and roofs made of clay or stones. They absorbed solar radiation during the day and slowly reradiated it during night keeping the house cooler at day and warmer at night. In the coastal regions, he said, houses had light roofs with steep slopes, the rood end almost touching ground to withstand

hurricane winds. Sub-tropical homes were dominated by the central courtyard. Rooms extending off the courtyard allowed ventilation and reduced heat-capturing areas. Thick mat roofing acted as insulation and as an effective, quiet rain shield.

FOREST CLEARING

B.G. Tamaskar - president of the Indian Institute of Geography - was absent from the seminar, but his paper was most significant as it traced ecological changes from pre-Vedic to post-Vedic times. He cited a report that stated around 4,500 BCE Rajasthan was a green belt rather than a semi-desert, a change wrought by natural terrestrial forces. But in the post-Vedic period he conjectures that large forest areas were burned/cleared for cultivation. As a result desertification set in. He says this provoked Hindus to practice a sacred ecology, ascribing spiritual merit to forestry, irrigation and horticulture.

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