

# **INDIAN CULTURE AND EARTH CARE**

**FACING OUR ECOLOGICAL CRISIS**

*by*

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There is a deep need to find out the causes of our ecological crisis that has been at the forefront of the whole of humanity for the last two decades. This paper on Indian Culture and Earth Care, represents a search for the causes and points to the ancient as well as the ever-existing values that abide at the base of human consciousness and culture.

Dr. Eric J Lott teaches at the United Theological College, Bangalore and is Professor of Indian Religions. He was invited to deliver late Shri Justice B Vasudevamurthy memorial lecture in 1985.

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# INDIAN CULTURE AND EARTH CARE

## FACING OUR ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Dr. ERIC J. LOTT

### **Environmental crisis not totally new human experience**

Crisis, even environmental crisis, is nothing new to the human race. In every period of human history and in pre-historic periods too, human communities, indeed communities of all life-forms, have been faced with and needed to cope with diverse kinds of critical situations. Crisis and response is the story of life-development on earth. To a large extent the myths and rituals found in the history of religions, which happens to be my field, illustrate this process: they are often the response of our ancestors, millennia ago, to some crisis of transition from one life-mode to another, with all that sense of threat and anxiety to the developing human psyche that this involved. Our myths and rituals were not created with the detached consciousness with which we often approach them in modern times. They are, rather, responses in the form of images and symbols from deep in the sub-conscious human psyche as that psyche relates itself in new ways to its environment. Myths, thus, are often stories of conflict and the resolving of conflict; and many rituals are 'rites of passage', rites to enable people to make a transition from one mode of life to another, as they are faced by new crises in their environment or in their life-pilgrimage. For example, there is the need to cope with the crisis of moving from childhood to adulthood, or to be 'initiated' into adult community life and responsibilities; there is the 'crisis' of moving from single to married state; the crisis of entering the afterlife, of moving through boundaries from one region to another, and so on. Most of the traditional Hindu samskaras are of the Life-transition kind. In general, then, crisis, or facing critical situations, is what it means to be human.

### **Cultural continuity with the past**

I begin with this point because we must not give the impression that our contemporary ecological crisis is *totally* new, that it has no precedent at all in the past. If we do this we imply that there is no continuity with the cultural values and resources of the past. There are, of course, radical interpreters of our condition today who would claim just this, who would say that our present crisis is so discontinuous with the past that any attempt to counter or resolve present problems by reference to traditional culture is not only irrelevant, it is; dangerous and reactionary. Thus, for example, the cultural revolution of the Red Guard in: China just a decade ago was an attempt to wipe out all trace of traditional cultural values, as impediments to the progress of the revolution and the emergence of the new kind of Chinese. Today, Chinese leadership denies the validity of this Red Guard approach to revolution. Our cultures have made us what we are just as much as we also create our own cultural forms in the process of change which is our human history. We ignore this fertile matrix of our existence to our own peril. And Indian culture expresses an immense fecundity of life-values and life attitudes that are of the greatest importance to India and to the human race as it is confronted by the present environmental crisis.

### **Technology's aggressive attitudes**

Despite the rich potential in Indian culture to create positive and, in the present crisis, very much needed ecological values, the fact is that there are equally strong 'counter cultural' pressures at work, not only in India but throughout the world. As modern industrial technology spreads its appeal wider and wider, as more and more peoples in the so-called 'third-world' come to see modern technology and all its accompanying, consumer goods as the *summum bonum*, the highest *purushartha*, of human existence, so their cultural values are radically changed and so they become increasingly alienated from

India's traditional cultural roots. It is, of course, especially in urban areas and among urban college educated young people that this alienation is most marked; but there is a similar process at work on a much wider scale. For a modern, consumerist, gadget-providing technology seems an attractive prospect to most people who have gone through a western-style education. The ground of life-attitudes will already have been prepared for acceptance of a different set of values; 'there is already a different perception of life, of the environment. The environment is to be mastered, utilized, exploited, not participated in gently. The environment is to be changed to suit human convenience and that violently if required, indeed, often even then violence is not required by the situation as such. I have before me an advertisement for some engineering company that lays pipes and suchlike. They project themselves in this advert by a horrifying image of an earth-moving machine grabbing up a huge block of trees and ripping up a great mass of earth along with them. At first I thought this was some pro-ecology advert, hitting against this needless violence *to* the earth. I was mistaken. This engineering company clearly glories in its power to do violence to the earth. The caption says in effect: 'In laying down pipes for your future, we show our power to change things'. And this is an advert in an Indian magazine. We are increasingly alienated from that cultural life-style that glories rather in non-violent, gentle participation with nature.

### **Rigorous questioning of all 'development'**

The answer to this accelerating process of change, however, cannot be merely to try to recapture the past, as some reactionary groups appear to want to do. The past is put; but this does not mean we cannot do anything effective in redirecting the future, a future in which we would want to see a creative fusing of certain basic and potent Indian cultural values with the increasingly widespread life-attitudes of modern technology. This would result in a rigorous questioning of all so-called 'developments' in modern life. In this mode of transport, or that agricultural practice, or this production process, or this irrigation project, etc., etc., is there a contradiction to basic Indian cultural values? Or, most positively, does this new form of development in some way incorporate and express the basic perception of our environment that Indian cultural values affirm? In other words we cannot expect that all technology as such will be set aside (unless it finally destroys itself, which is a possibility, given the violent potentialities of nuclear weapons). But we can demand that infinitely more care be exercised in the application of technological methods. We might say that a far more truly scientific approach is needed in the outworking of the technological process. For only that developmental process which is more fitting to, more truly collaborative with, earth's life, and therefore that is less destructive, less threatening to all manner of life species — only such a technology can be called 'scientific'. Technologists, engineers and applied scientists must give more truly scientific attention to the consequences of their technology. And all this calls for a new perception, a new vision of our human role in relation to nature, and of our role as Indians in the emergence of the modern technological world.

### **Neither ecologists nor philosophers providing visionary dimension**

It is unfortunate that even ecologists, environmentalists, and other people deeply concerned about human relationships with the earth around us, generally seem to adopt a thoroughly empiricist and sometimes - pragmatic approach in their attempts to reverse the present destructive process. There is no doubt at all that empirical analysis of what is happening to the environment, carefully documented data must be part of the counter-attack. Perhaps this is the only kind of evidence that convinces a scientifically .educated generation. Much of the environmental material I receive and read, however, does not go beyond this method of empirical analysis. The point is, though, that such analysis is always conducted, recognized or not within a certain conceptual framework, with all manner of theoretical and perceptual assumptions underlying such analysis. And the ecological movement generally, in India at least, in the place where there are rich resources for the articulation of a perceptual framework to provide

such under girding, shorn a strange lack of concern, for this perceptual dimension. Our philosophers, to my mind with unbelievable lack of environmental sensitivity, generally are not engaging in this debate. Instead — as was witnessed to only last week by a friend of mine who, had toured a number of departments of philosophy in India — if there is a modern interest at all, the interest is more in Wittgenstein, Russell and anti-metaphysical linguistic and logical analysis from the West. On the other hand, many Indian philosophers never move beyond discussion, and necessarily an antiquarian discussion, of the traditional theories, with little attempt at contemporary interpretation or creative fusion.

The very fine study of aspects of Karnataka's environmental crisis edited by Cecil Saldanha (*Karnataka: State of Environment Report: 1983-84*) is one example of the environmentalists exclusively empiricist approach. There are a number of excellent articles, with wide-ranging analysis of the present altitude. Dr. K. S. Karanth has some pertinent reflections on rural cultural values that are significant for the way we perceive our environment. However add with the exception of a brief few lines from Madhav Gadgil, there is again a lack of this 'visionary' dimension. Some may regard talk of 'vision' as far too other-worldly and remote; as if see it only such attempts to provide a more holistic perception, if formulated in a theoretically convincing way that makes clear the empirical evidence has also been reckoned with, can provide the direction, purpose, will, conviction, in a word the 'spirit' that can effect the change of attitude that must be part of our response in the face of the present crisis. Ecology needs a visionary heart if it is to make its impact upon the body of society and thus of political decision-making. Human convictions and decisions for change are in the last resort made not on the grounds of carefully argued empirical evidence, but by reason of whatever emerges as our perception of things as a whole. We need an ecological vision if ecological changes are to take place.

### **A recent rapprochement of religious & scientific dimension**

A step in this direction was made recently when the Asian Institute for Rural Development organized a seminar on 'Religious and Social Bases for Environmental Policies', with B. V. Krishnamurthy as convener. This must be one of the few times, if not the only time, that representative from all the major religious faiths of India met along with various social scientists to discuss environmental concerns. It was a salutary experience to hear what the various traditions had to say on human relationships with earth and the environment, then to hear what sociologists, anthropologists and the environmental disciplines had to say, and then to be part of the interaction between these two types of approaches. In reality there were more than two approaches of course; for both within our faiths and within our sciences, there are distinctive view-points. And from this seminar came one of the most dynamic and positive statements of what is to be done to meet the environmental crisis yet to be heard. This will no doubt be made available widely in a number of different languages and a small 'Environmental Working Group' has been set up that should help in its on going proposals to bridge the gap between the concerns of religious people, and scientists/ educationists. There are therefore some signs of hope for a more holistic approach.

### **Dichotomy of mind & matter as basis of technology**

So far in this lecture I have stressed the need for seeing some continuity with the past, and of incorporating aspects of our traditional Indian culture in order to recover a more authentic ecological vision. Our religious traditions do have something of great significance to say to the modern situation. At the same time we need to recognize that there are dimensions of our current crisis that the human race has not experienced before. The unprecedented scale of the destruction of our environment; and even threat of its total destruction, has arisen very simply because of our unprecedented technological skill. But present technological skill is based on a particular perception of the universe, dating especially from Descartes (who died in 1650AD) that sees a radical dichotomy between, mind and matter, and thus

between human life and all other life. Rational human mind is seen as able to master nature, and utilize natural resources for whatever ends are seen as desirable to the 'rational' mind. This results in a de-socialized world: nature, the earth and all her powers are no longer seen as sacred. This means that nature is given no direct, intrinsic value (or, rather, that such intrinsic value is removed from her). Nature is seen as of worth only in so far as she (it ?) provides some value and worth to the life of rational minds, only in so far as she (it ?) is enjoyable and usable by humankind. Only as thus exploitable does nature's life amount to anything in this radically anthropocentric worldview of the technologist.

### **Limitations to technological mastery**

A further step is made in this rationalist view with the assumption that the natural world possesses no mystery, no secrets that cannot be mastered, no powers that cannot be utilized for human ends. Indeed, if we were still in awe of nature and her powers we presumably would not now possess this awesome technological control over nature. Reducing nature to being an object of analyses and experimentation is what has given us such impressive sovereignty over her. There are however, very clear limits to this control. Bhopal, and its several thousand dead, is but one horrific instance of this. And in the end it will be the scientist who most clearly recognizes the limitations of scientific and technological power who will prove to be the best scientist, the most truly 'scientific', knowledgeable. For the scientist who is not blinded by arrogance, but retains an iota of humility, will see very clearly that technological sovereignty is far from absolute. In many ways scientists are still rather like children playing with fire. We have not mastered nature's mysteries. Even if what we can do to utilize nature's resources is impressive, what nature herself does is far more impressive, especially when we remember that there is in fact no part of human life — even our rationality — that is not participant in nature, and in various ways dependent upon nature. That we are in certain aspects of our humanness transcendent to nature does not preclude this participant and dependent dimension of our life with nature. And if we do not recognize this interactiveness with nature, then the manner in which nature will teach us what we truly are will in the end be the most impressive of all the phenomena in our cosmic pilgrimage!

### **Threat to earth's life by deforestation**

There are so many ways in which our dependency is seen, so many examples that could be given of how nature becomes a threat to us when we do not collaborate with her, when we go on acting recklessly in relation to her, acting as though we were a race of technological magicians with all nature's powers at our beck and call. Let us think briefly about the issue of deforestation. At the outset it has to be admitted that the loss of tree-cover throughout India in this century has not always been the direct result of reckless technological exploitation of forest resources. Much tree cover has, been lost simply as a result of household fuel needs by rural and towns-people alike; fuel needs are perhaps the great threat for the future. Thus, the individual's axe has hacked down a good many acres of forest as a direct result of the population explosion. Of course, the latter is, closely linked up with the introduction of various modern drugs, but that is another question. Taking India as a whole, however, by far the greatest menace to forest life in the past is the industrialist, the manufacturer and their contractors who actually supervise the destruction of the massive acreage of forest needed to feed this industrial appetite. The British no doubt began the process of destruction, despite their introduction of forest controls at the same time, by seeing India's forest life as a useful resource for western manufacturing needs. Since Independence, as is well known, the rate of forest destruction has increased at an alarming rate. Of late, of course, there has been growing awareness on the part of Forest Departments and some politicians, including the late Srimati Indira. Gandhi, that this process must somehow be reversed. It is not my intention here to provide exact figures of how many acres of forest have been lost, when, by whom, etc. That India would like to have perhaps 30% forest cover and has something nearer 8% of actual forest helps to give some

idea of the size of the problem.

What we need to perceive in all this is that when we destroy the earth's tree-cover, unless we are very careful indeed, we destroy the earth also, and along with the earth, ourselves. It is as though the earth says: Starve me of the tree-life that feeds me, and you too will eventually starve. Drain my life's blood, and human blood too must be shed; and this brings in an image common to rural religious life, of the intimate inter-relationship of our life and earth's life that we turn to in a moment; it is expressed in wholly non-scientific language, but has much to say to the scientist/technologist as he seeks to exploit nature's resources. In other words, there is always the danger of a process of retribution, nature turning on the intruding human and seeking revenge for his violence. With no trees, there is nothing to hold the soil together, nothing to shelter and filter the soil from the rains and winds, nothing to prevent erosion, erosion at a rapidly increasing rate of loss of soil; soil that took may be 1000 years for one inch to be produced. And in India we are watching that precious topsoil being washed away at the rate of millions of tons a year, 1.5 billion tons in the river Ganga alone. But this not only leaves an increasing acreage of sloping land, soilless and arid, it also silts the rivers, causes landslides and flooding, lowers the water-table, and undoubtedly affects climatic conditions, even if the scientists argue about this. For recent research shows that a forest recycles up to 75% of the moisture it receives, which is 10 times as much as occurs on bare and treeless land. Trees play a much more important role in weather generation than was previously believed by scientists. And one tree produces as much oxygen in a day as is needed by about 200 people (or one motor car in the same period). Obviously, the fewer trees, the less oxygen, and the less possibility of life.

These are but a few of the calamitous consequences to human life as well as to earth's life as a whole. The most appropriate metaphor, shocking though it may be, to use of the mindless, ruthless, often greedy destruction of the earth's tree-cover is that of rape. We humans act rapaciously towards the earth, stripping her of her life-giving clothing, satisfying our own greed, and using her for our own ends without giving any value to her for herself.

### **Crisis essentially perceptual**

Our contemporary crisis, then, is primarily a crisis of perception. We need an authentic ecological vision, in which attitudes and policies undergo the kind of radical change that alone can avert disaster for life on earth. This means that in India we have continually to question and at various points renounce attitudes that have increasingly been accepted from western modern technology. No one can any longer, for example, have that simple faith (such as has been long found in the West) in the 'validity of the reductionist, objectivist scientific model of reality, any more than a simple faith in the desirability of a purely secularist modern world-view, or simple faith in the continuing viability of technology as being able to solve all our problems. There is little doubt that some present ecological problems will be solved by more truly 'scientific' technology, i.e., an approach toward natural resources that is simply more cautious, less mindless. But, even in the West, there are an increasing number of philosophers of science who now question so many of the presuppositions on which the previously held 'objectivist' worldview was based. The problem is, on many fronts the technological wizardry that has emerged out of such an objectivist science has been very effective in achieving certain limited goals. And this has resulted in many of us becoming quite mesmerized by this new technological magic, mesmerized even in India of all places.

### **Ecological vision of human life participant in earth's life**

The new ecological vision we need, then, involves a world-view in which human life is seen as humbly dependent on and dynamically participant in nature's life. The accusation has frequently been

made that ecologically sensitive people are very often socially insensitive, or that ecology is a fad of the affluent, a concern of those who do not put first the social and economic needs of deprived people, and are not committed to changing the unjust structures of our present human society. There may well be some truth in this accusation. There may well be mixed motives in some ecologists in the west who argue that if there is to be a 'sustainable and participant' policy in relation to earth's resources, all humans, especially people of developing countries, must accept less affluence and a less aggressive use of the earth's resources. But to put all this concern down to western jealous determination that developing countries shall not enjoy the same standard of life that the so-called developed countries have enjoyed is sheer nonsense. And it is sheer blindness not to see that a number of our global economic problems are closely bound up with our misplaced ecological policies; when we are not in harmony with the earth whose life we share, we shall certainly not be in harmony with other humans with whom we are to share it. Dislocated relationships and alienation begin with the way we relate to earth's life. On the other hand, an authentic ecological vision is one that necessarily includes in its wholeness of outlook all other humans too with whom we can be in relationship. A truly ecological person will be fully committed to the common and harmonious sharing of earth's life by whole human race, and will be concerned in particular for those fellow-humans who share that life in his or her own locality. Commitment to ecology is commitment to the just and sustainable sharing of local resources. Ecology and economy belong together in this holistic vision of life; indeed 'ecology' is the ordering of human life in relation to the environment, and 'economy' means the ordering of human life as humans relate one to another. And you cannot have one without the other.

### **India's perceptual contribution needed by world**

This ecological vision is needed not only for the survival and proper development of India (and any un-ecological 'development' will be anti-development). The human community on a global scale at this time of crucial redirection needs the input of Indian values; the world, needs Indian insights into what kind of relationship humans are to have with the environment. It may be that the global community will not appropriate India's traditions in exactly the same way as India has in the past. Indeed, India herself will need to reinterpret, just as a process of new interpretation of images from the past, from the fertile matrix of her traditions, has always been going on during the past few millenia. This is precisely the point about the deep images of reality that are found in the sub-conscious world they carry their own potency, their own transforming power. And they say different things to different people; they are interpreted in diverse kinds of conceptual systems. Within India's 'systems', for example, the same basic images are interpreted very differently, by, say, Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhya, Vallabha, and this, within, the one systematic discipline, Vedanta, How much more the conceptual diversity if one includes systems of thought beyond Vedanta, such as Yoga, Samkhya, even Buddhism and Jainism.

If the human race is to survive — and the instinct for survival is strongly developed in humans, despite periodic aberrations towards a death wish — there will need to be a very radical perceptual change, a paradigmatic shift as some philosophers of science call such radical changes of outlook. Such shifts of perception by the human community can happen; they can, in fact, happen in relatively short periods. And the Indian input into the shaping of such a perceptual change is imperative. Perhaps this is already happening, as more and more westerners come to some understanding of what the Indian traditions are. Yoga, for example, has spread very rapidly as a personal discipline in the past 20 years. But now a more dynamic interaction is called for. Instead of the mere *practice* of yoga, for example, there needs to be deeper reflection on the values and on the images of reality accompanying the yogic practice. In this way a more creative cross-cultural fusion of perceptions can take place. This, I would contend, is what has been happening in my own perceptual experience over the past 26 or 27 years that I have spent in India and in my seeking to understand at depth the religious life of India. Increasingly in the past 2 or 3 years I have tried to reflect on the meaning of some of the primary images of India's

religious life. This is what we have tried to do, too, in the exhibition, 'Earth, God & Our Environmental Crisis: Images from Religions of India', that has accompanied this lecture here at the Indian Institute of World Culture, an exhibition comprised in the main of paintings by Jyoti Sahi and his team of artists from the School of Art for Peace, with a detailed commentary-text by myself. When we look at these primal, archetypal images, and just reflect on them as part of a process of responding to life today, we ourselves can be changed.

### **Which Indian imagery? (a) Birds as 'messengers'**

Of the many images from India's rich store of symbolism, which should I now focus our attention on? Which are likely to speak to us most potently in our time of ecological need? I could try to draw out the bird and animal images — especially as it happens that birdlife is my first love. It is typical of many primal religions, of course, that they see in certain species of birds, animals, even trees and plants, all those qualities and powers they most value in life. The very life of these sacred creatures is seen as source of corporate life and strength of the clan. The peacock, or eagle, or swan, for example, is seen as embodying all that is sacred to the clan, and this bird is seen as the link between human life and that mysterious power with which all life is continuous and on which it is dependent. Thus, by sharing the peacock's life-qualities, the 'peacock-man' really lives, is really in touch with the sustaining power of life. Now, obviously, when the peacock is held thus to be sacred, perhaps even becoming the Vahana of one of the other less immediately accessible deities (as many of the sacred birds and animals of India's tribes became vehicles for the 'higher' deities with which they became incorporated) — with one bird as sacred all birds to some extent become sacred. Perhaps they are seen as in some lesser way messengers of the world beyond, links with the world of mystery. There are many examples in Indian devotional poetry of birds and animals becoming messengers between the devotee and his or her God, perhaps a God who has become remote and distant for the time being. Nammalvar, for example, distraught with grief because his beloved Lord Krishna had seemingly forsaken him, turns to herons and koels to take messages of enquiry and love to his Lord.

### **(b) Sacred places protected**

Or we may think of the way in which sacred places — waters, hills, trees, etc. — have led the devotees of that place to be protective of all life in that area. At Sringeri, for example, place of the first monastic community established by Sankara, the Mahseer fish in the river Tunga running beside the temple and monastery are held to be sacred, and can even be fed by hand, large fish swim along the bathing ghat in huge numbers. In other sacred places, such as at Melkote, one of the Vaishnava shrines made even more famous by the presence of Ramanuja while in exile from Sri Rangam, we find a fine garden of bushes, flowers and herbs, held to be sacred because from it are taken the flowers and herbs to be offered in the sacred shrine of Vishnu (in the form of Narasimha).

### **(c) Images of restraint**

Or we could take a very different set of images — those which express single-minded commitment to restraint, perhaps to the yogic discipline. One of the most expressive of such 'images' is the figure of Gomatesvara at Sravana Belagola, where such stillness and purification of soul has been achieved that the saint has merged with earth, and creepers entwine him and an anthill begins to cover him. Or there is the tranquility of the Buddha, when all desire, seen as the root of all disquiet and suffering, is overcome and perfect peace and inward bliss is attained. As the *Dhammapada* puts it: "He who destroys life, who speaks untruth, who takes what is not given..... even in this world digs up his own root. Know this, that evil things befall the unrestrained. Let not greed and evil bring you to grief" (18.12). Or as the Jaina's *Nava Tattva* summarizes the Jaina faith: 'The 10 virtuous acts are: Mildness

that restrains anger ; humility that subdues pride; simplicity opposed to cunning ; spirituality opposed to worldly-mindedness ; fasting and austerities ; self-restraint; speaking the truth ; tender regard for all creatures ; abandonment of all worldly possession ; celibacy and chastity'. If much of the destruction of earth's life results from human greed and aggression, there is clearly a need for developing life-standards and a life-style that accepts self-restraint as a necessary part of viable human living. No doubt the extreme form of *jiva-ahimsa* adopted by devout Jains can serve only as a kind of ideal and somewhat remote model of human restraint towards other life-forms. There will, however, be great value in reflecting on such living images as that of Gomatesvara and other Jinas, as well as on the Buddha in tranquil meditation. For one reason their restraint is not merely a negative abstinence from life-injury; a very positive compassion for all creatures is also part of the faith underlying these images of restraint and stillness. Both dimensions of these traditions stand in contradiction to the basically aggressive attitude of modern technological culture.

#### **(d) Potency of divine-My image**

In Jina-meditation we see one traditional way of taking the body as a focal point of reflection. However, there are several other aspects of Indian religious and cultural practice in which the body is a central image. There is, for example, that key-image of the Vaishnava tradition, the *deha-atma-bhava*, or *sctirira-sariri-bhava*, brought to such prominence by Ramanuja and quite clearly of central import in various traditional scriptures from Rig-Veda(e.g. the Purusa-sukta of 10.90), the Antaryami-Brahmana of Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, Bhagavad-Gita, Vishnu Purana as well as the Vaishnava Agamas. Indeed, the same image is not lacking, in the Saiva tradition. The theological point of great import that Ramanuja draws out from this body-image is that the Supreme Self relates to the universe (and to human life within that universe) as soul relates to body. And this becomes the basis for an inclusive philosophy of *bhakti* with far-reaching ramifications.

This body-focused perception of the universe is interesting for one thing because Ramanuja was, of course, fully aware of the Vedantic teaching on *deha-atma-bhrama*, i.e. the fundamental delusion that confuses the body as one's- self, one's true being. And Vedanta is quite right to affirm that if we do not look beyond the psycho-physical organism to the Self that transcends this outward body, and thus to the Supreme Self of all, we have missed the point of life. According to much Indian thought, then, not to see selfhood, and in the end Godhood, behind the physical world is the basic lack of insight that vitiates so much human thinking and perceiving. And in very different terms this is just the delusion of the reductionist scientific viewpoint. And along with this 'insightful' way of looking at things that the Indian religious traditions invite us into, we are also to see everything in the universe as a divine body, all 'inseparably related' to the ground-self, the 'inner controlling' self of all. To give but one supporting text: 'He who dwells in all things, yet whom no beings know, who is the body of all beings, who controls all beings from within, He is yourself, the inner controller, the immortal (Antaiyami-Brahmana). Then there is the corollary theme, brought out in yogic theory, that this individual body of mine is a microcosm of the great cosmic body which is the Supreme Being's mode of self-expression. But the significance of this point I cannot stay to draw out here.

#### **Reality of Earth's life**

When critics of Indian religion tell us that the world and its life has little value because Indian religion sees the universe as unreal, we need to request such critics to be a little more discriminating. The great Vaishnava Acharyas, Ramanuja, Madhva and others became most indignant at times when some Indian teachers did seem to teach the unreality of the world. Said Ramanuja, in effect: How dare you call the world *mithya* and *asatya*, when it all participates in the body of God who is the Reality of all realities, when every part of earth's; life is inseparably related to God's life, when each thing in the world of

experience in the end refers to God, the Source of all, Anyone reflecting on this image of the world as God's body (as one of Jyoti Sahi's paintings in our exhibition does, by depicting mountains and valleys in the shape of a mysterious form), can no longer but treat this earth with the utmost respect and affection. The world itself becomes vehicle of loving devotion (*prema-bhakti*) to God. Such a perception may well lead to the traditional morning prayer when the first footstep is placed on the earth: 'Forgive me, even for treading on you'.

### **Earth as Sacred Mother**

If our image of the universe is that of a divine body, it can so easily also be seen as a sacred Mother, one who sustains and nourishes, one whose dependent children we are. Let us look at just a few lines from the long hymn to Bhumi in Atharva Veda :

*Bearer of all things, hoard of treasures rare,  
Sustaining Mother, Earth the golden-breasted.....  
Impart to us those vitalizing forces  
That come, O Bath, front deep within your body.....  
The Earth is Mother, I am son of Earth.....  
Whatever I dig up of you, O Earth,  
May you of that have quick replenishment.  
O purifying one, may my thrust never  
Reach right into your vital points, your heart. ....  
May Earth, who bears mankind, each different grouping  
Maintaining its own customs and its speech,  
Yield up for me a thousand streams of treasure,  
Like a placid cow that ne'er resists the hand.* (lines from AV 12.1. 6-45)

### **Focal - Points of Divine Embodiment**

When the whole earth is seen as a divine body, it is also necessary in religious experience to see certain focal points of that embodiment, points where the divine Presence is perceived with special clarity. There are sacred places where the divine Mahatmyam is recounted in some specially graphic form, on which site a sacred shrine or temple will be built, with a variety of images both in the 'womb-room' and side shrines, and portrayed on walls, pillars, etc. as focal points for the sacred. Such sacred temples too will often have special environmental significance, the very site having special environmental features, such as being a grove of trees, or a hill top, or beside a river.

And there are other special, embodiments of God, experienced in different ways in various faiths. For many in the Hindu tradition Krishna is the point at which the divine beauty, the divine bliss, the divine vigour, the divine playfulness is perceived with maximum potency. And Krishna too becomes the restorer of cosmic dharma, like all *avatars*; as Venugopala he is divine protector of cows, and indeed in his action as Giri-dhar, when he lifted tip the top of Mount Govardhana, he is seen as Saviour of all living creatures from the flooding that threatened them, as well as being one able to attract and draw to himself all creatures — cows and cowgirls especially — by the fascinating notes of his flute. Krishna too, than, provides a divine 'image' that stimulates a new perception of other creatures and of our Whole environment, and encourages an attitude of caring towards earth and her creatures. No doubt Siva as Pasupati can be seen as encouraging a similarly caring attitude, as much of his mythic activity is for the saving of creatures, not for destruction as he is often depicted. His great *tandava-dance*, performed spontaneously and so vigorously by Siva as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance, certainly overflows

into violence, such is its creative potency. But essentially it is a dance of sheer creativity and unbounded bliss; with all the worlds of seen as springing out from his dancing feet.

Within my own Christian experience it is, of course, Christ who takes this focal point of divine embodiment. Thus we say of him that 'He is the image of the invisible God' (Colossians). Many of his divine actions, too, are acts of healing the broken body of creation and the diseased body of humankind. His characteristic word is: 'Go in peace and wholeness; your faith makes you whole'. Or as spoken to the stormy lake: 'Be at peace: be still', Similarly his resurrection body bears witness to our hope of a renewed body of creation. We have to be aware, of course, that some religious traditions find it objectionable to speak of any mortal being as the real image of God, with whom nothing finite and embodied can be compared or identified. As our Sikh brothers say:

*There is one God.....Timeless is his image;  
Not begotten, being of his own being;  
By the grace of the Guru made known to humans.  
Through his Will he creates all forms of beings;  
But who can express what the form of his Will is?  
All life is shaped by his directing.*

*He cannot be installed like an idol; no man can Shape his likeness.  
In the realm of Truth dwelleth the Formless One,  
Who, having created, watches over his creation. (Lines from Japji)*

### **Humans as divine representatives gently caring**

Yet, all would affirm that we humans in some way bear God's special mark, a strange God-like power that has been given us. We are to be 'Kalifa' on earth, acting as God's special representatives in carrying out God's Will for his creation. The Hebrew Genesis I account first says that as we bear God's special image we are to subdue the 'earth'. These could be dangerous words taken on their own, as it is to be regretted some western Christians have seemed to do in their aggressive attitude towards creation. But the text also says: 'You are from the dust, of the earth. Now go and *care* for the earth and for your fellow-creatures on earth' (I paraphrase the text of Genesis 2:7, 15). It is this positively caring approach, based on a sense of responsibility for the earth because we have been entrusted with earth's life and have been given divine-like powers humbly and in dependence on the Creator to exercise this caring relationship towards the earth, that is the special Jewish (and Muslim too perhaps?) contribution to human-earth relationships. In the Christian tradition this image-bearing, care-exercising role of humans is further focused through Christ's restoring ministry, in which all people are called to share. And, all these approaches stressing human responsibility also need the Indian perception that we too are dependent on and participate in earth's life.

### **Need for mutual. Sharing & image revitalizing**

What seems clear to me is that we need each other's insights and images. It is so easy, in our separated idiosyncratic states, to become either too aggressive (the western tendency) or to become too passive and even indifferent towards earth's life (the eastern temptation). We need a sense of positive caring, a sense of unique responsibility towards earth's life. We thus need to go beyond an attitude of general respect and compassion; we rather need a commitment to earth-caring acts that will compel us to question and redirect the technological process. A positive engagement, without exploitative aggression is what is required. And such a perceptual change, accompanied by practical policies of responsible caring, will only emerge, I believe, when we turn to such deeply rooted religion/cultural

images as I have referred to, reflect upon them in the depths of our consciousness, then draw them into the daily processes of our life today. Thus these deep images of life will again become a living part of our contextual experience and we will be conscious of their significance in our present life-crisis. In other words I am asking for a *sadhana* and *dkyana* based on these ancient images that places them in life-context for, whatever meaning these images may have for us within our various traditions, now they need to become revitalised and contextualised. We can liken this process to a beautiful sculpting, say of Nataraj. The image does not transmit its life-transforming potency merely by being a fine piece of sculpture. It is given 'life' when it is drawn into the ritual life of a community, linked with a specific mahatmyam. Just so, the splendid 'images' found in our traditions need to be drawn into our life-context today, brought into interaction with our environmental life, and thus become a living part of our life context and its crises. It is in this way that we can recover an authentic ecological vision and respond to our ecological crisis.

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