

Hindu Worldviews and the Religious-Environmental Movement **By Gopal Patel and Mat McDermott**

Hindu worldviews

Hindu environmental action starts with an understanding of the concept of *ṛta*: that there is a highly evolved, purposeful order to the cosmic ecosystem that we inhabit. The worldview engendered by *ṛta* is holistic, with all of us making up this order being interconnected as part of a natural system. It suggests that we should contemplate the manifestation and organization of nature as a whole before we do something that may influence it. As humans, we are not separate from nature. We cannot cause permanent harm to nature without, to some degree, also harming ourselves. This is from where three dynamic ideas in Hindu thought emerge: *dharma*, *karma*, and *ahimsa*.

Dharma, broadly defined, is a set of principles and practices that both sustains the cosmic order and binds us in harmony with that order. It outlines and guides the expectations of how to act in relationship with others. An understanding of *dharma* informs how we behave and guides what we do, on a daily basis as well as throughout our lives, as we attempt to have a good life, look for inspiration and insight, seek to offer love to those around us, and ultimately strive for liberation. Each stage of life has its own *dharma* to follow. *Dharma* also varies based on what one does in life. The welfare of society, the welfare of all beings, depends on the labor, the effort, and the contribution of all its members. Each of us has an important role to play, even if at times our efforts seem to have little effect, so that the welfare of all beings is maintained.

At its most basic, coming from its root in Sanskrit, *karma* is action. Expanded slightly, *karma* is the universal principle of cause and effect. All of our actions have a cause, a long series of events influencing present action. In turn, whatever action we take inevitably has ripple effects, moving outwards influencing future events, with the influence sometimes being obvious and direct, and other times very subtle or indirect. Occasionally the effects are felt relatively quickly. Often though, it may take months, years, or lifetimes to witness the ripening of the fruit of our actions.

None of this is strictly deterministic, contrary to popular perception. Rather, *karma* predisposes us to certain actions and thoughts. It makes certain future choices more likely, easier to be taken, than others. Though our past actions, thoughts, and beliefs create predispositions for certain choices, we do have free will. It is up to each of us to decide to either go along with the sometimes deeply ingrained habits *karma* has created for us, or to go against habit and choose a different course of action. In time, through the effort of breaking from habit, this particular *karmic* tendency is eliminated.

Ahimsa (non-harming) is the development of thoughtfulness. In this worldview, every living being is a spiritual person. To be cruel to another person is to disturb their life and cause them suffering. By considering ourselves and others to be vulnerable to suffering, we can resolve not to be the cause of that suffering. Initially we will stop knowingly and unavoidably killing any life form. Then we will be careful in all our actions, and then our words, and then even our thoughts, all of which can cause harm. The understanding and practice of *ahimsa* is an essential principle of Hindu environmentalism, focusing on how to appreciate, respect, and serve all life.

This holistic approach to the world has a parallel in a holistic approach to self-awareness. The most basic question in developing this self-awareness is, “Who am I?” In attempting to come up with an answer, Indian thinkers have considered our biological identity, our cultural identity, our psychological identity, our intellectual identity, and our spiritual identity. The first four of these identities are mutable. What does not change, say Hindu sages, is our eternal spiritual nature, the *atma*. Identifying primarily with our biological, cultural, psychological, or intellectual identities is identifying with the temporary, identifying with a type of illusion. This has terrible consequences for our environmental relationships. Identifying with *atma* promotes our spiritual desires, naturally restrains our material desires, and helps us consider another dimension in our relationships. When Hindus join palms together in front of the heart and say “*namaste*,” they are referring, linguistically at least, to the *atma*, the energy of life. Everywhere that we see life, we see spiritual energy, and we offer it respect.

Working in multi-faith environments

Through our experience with the Bhumi Project, we have found that when Hindus engage in environmental action, these teachings significantly underpin their thinking. When we have worked with people from other *dharmic* traditions — Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists — we have found commonality in worldviews that are often in contrast with Abrahamic traditions.

For example, in July 2015, GreenFaith and the OurVoices campaign organized a three-day multi-faith religious environmental leadership training program in Rome, Italy. The event brought together 100 faith leaders from 21 to 40 years old from all over the world. Twenty of the participants were from Hindu backgrounds and came from North America, Europe, India and Australasia. A highlight of the event was a procession through central Rome that culminated in St. Peter’s Square. The procession featured many signs and posters calling for environmental change and action. One prominent banner featured the slogan “Fossil fuels are from hell. Solar power is from the heavens.” When the event was over, many of the Hindu participants expressed their objection to the banner. They expressed that it did not reflect their worldview and that it was overtly Abrahamic in tone.

Hindus are taught to understand that there are always shades of grey, that good and bad are only seen as such in accordance with time, place, and circumstance. Furthermore, just as there is no absolute good or evil, there is absolutely no concept of eternal heaven or hell in Hindu theology. Our actions, individual and collective, may bring about circumstances that we perceive as heavenly or hellish. People may behave in ways that in specific circumstances might be described as good or evil, but these are not inherent characteristics of any action. Hindu theology does set up polarities in descriptions of particular actions—harming versus non-harming, ignorance versus insight, suffering versus non-suffering, for example—but these still are shades of grey conditioned by circumstance. The absoluteness of the terms good and evil rarely if ever enter into a Hindu understanding of existence.

For example, in this instance, although using fossil fuels at the levels of consumption we currently do is undeniably causing harm and suffering (through air pollution, water pollution, and climate change), there is nothing inherently hellish about them. In other circumstances of time and place, used to a lesser degree, fossil fuels have provided

many good things to humanity, have in fact alleviated suffering. Conversely, while solar power can be said to be from the heavens, there is nothing inherently heavenly about it. Producing solar panels, while certainly preferable to extracting fossil fuels, is not entirely benign; large-scale solar power plants still disturb habitat for other creatures. Even more importantly, simply replacing electricity produced by coal with electricity produced from the sun will not in itself transform us into more environmentally enlightened individuals or communities.

Undoubtedly, all of that is more difficult to fit on a protest banner than the duality of heaven and hell. But while most Hindus understand the practicality of that, the messaging still fails to grasp the totality of the situation, and does not reflect the more nuanced way that Hindu environmental teachings portray our situation.

Another regular area of tension for Hindu environmentalists is that of animal rights, and more specifically, the environmental impact of the livestock industry. For those Hindus who practice vegetarianism, the killing of animals for food is seen as inflicting needless suffering on innocent beings, in total opposition to the principle of *ahimsa*. Eradicating fossil fuels and switching to renewable energy sources is often promoted by Western environmental groups as the overarching solution to our environmental challenges. From a Hindu perspective, however, meat-eating and using polluting forms of energy can be seen as two sides of the same coin: They arise out of placing human and individual needs above the welfare and happiness of other humans and living beings.

Hindu teachings state that there cannot be peace if humans are engaged in needless violent acts. From this perspective, it may be hard for Hindus to accept that the elimination of fossil fuels alone will end environmental destruction, when 56 billion innocent farm animals are killed each year for food. In our experience, we have found Hindus reluctant to raise this topic in interfaith settings, feeling that their views would not be taken seriously.

Hinduism talks of three energies present in the world: *sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion), and *tamas* (delusion, ignorance). These three energies are present in everyone and significantly shape our thoughts and behavior. The food we eat, the music we hear, the company we keep, and the thoughts we harbor all contribute towards the energy by which we are being controlled. Of the three, goodness is the energy that brings the highest personal contentment and a peaceful, sustainable society. Hindus are therefore encouraged to lead lives of goodness, and help others to do so the same. This help often takes the form of education, while being tolerant, respectful, and compassionate to the individual and the situation.

Within the multi-faith environmental movement, we often find a tendency to blame, judge, and shame others. Such styles of campaigning can make Hindus feel uncomfortable. It again brings in the polarities of “good” and “bad,” and implies an “us” and “them” mentality--that we are right, and they are wrong. For Hindus, everyone is on their own personal journey--a journey of understanding, self-development, or self-realization. For this reason, to point fingers at others can be seen as arrogant and lacking compassion.

For many Hindus, therefore, the tone and messaging of a campaign is very important. Blaming and judging should be avoided, as should connotations of condemnation, overthrowing, destroying, taking-over, etc. Such messaging does not speak of goodness, but of passion and ignorance. For Hindus, goodness can only be created in the world by activities and action that are also in goodness. Using the energies of passion and ignorance will not bring about the sustainable and peaceful world for which we all aspire.

A common path forward

These examples highlight some of the challenges that Hindus encounter when working in multi-faith settings. Often we've found that when discussing in multi-faith settings today's environmental challenges, and the social challenges that both cause and are caused by them, Hindus have many "yes, but..." thoughts that are not articulated. Or, we have to do some silent translation of the Abrahamic phrasing of the discussion, internally acknowledging our differences in worldview but choosing to not speak up out of recognition of a shared desire to see similar solutions implemented. Nevertheless, there is a great need for Hindus to articulate their worldview in a way that is simultaneously true to their shared traditions and beliefs within the community, as well as clear, decisive, and relevant for non-Hindus.

As humans start to come to terms with how our contemporary lives overburden our shared planet, Hinduism (standing alongside Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism) offers ways of understanding the interrelationship of all life, comprehending our place in the cosmos in a way that is uniquely suited to our current predicament, as well as guidance on how we each might live with more compassion for our fellow creatures. Though profoundly ancient in origin—Hinduism today is the evolutionary result of more than 5000 years of spiritual exploration, inquiry, and practice, incorporating multiple diverse lineages and schools of thought—Hinduism is thoroughly modern in its outlook. Its emphasis on the interrelationship of all beings operating within a natural order, individualized paths combined with a focus on community and the common good, the pluralism of practice, and the ideal of minimizing the harm of one's actions are exactly the messages the world needs to hear if we are to rise to the task of transforming our global society into one living within the ecological limits of Earth.

For the Hindu community, this means their worldview needs to be articulated in ways that are understandable for non-Hindus. This requires a level of maturity and understanding of the core tenets of Hindu thought, some of which have been outlined in this paper. It also requires Hindus to be open to acknowledging points of commonality with other faiths, embracing common desires to live on a beautiful and bountiful planet. Indeed, over the past century or so in particular, Hindus have been at the forefront of proclaiming--paraphrasing our own sacred texts--that the divine is one but paths toward that divinity are many. Hindus must, however, also be willing to accept and articulate, in a spirit of mutual respect, that there are deep points of theological difference on the nature of manifest existence--the relationship of humans to non-humans, to nature as a whole, and to the divine--between the Abrahamic traditions and the Dharmic paths—even though these differences ought not to get in the way of mutual cooperation and shared ecological action.

Those from Abrahamic traditions need to make room for Hindus to articulate their views. It cannot be assumed that second and third generation Hindus living in the Western world think similarly to those from Abrahamic backgrounds, simply because they live in places where Abrahamic traditions are in the majority. Hindus living in the West straddle two worlds, and there is much to be gained from understanding their worldviews and approaches to environmental care.

There are very few Hindu-based sustainable development organizations, and even fewer Hindu groups working on environmental issues in the Western world. It is therefore especially important for interfaith groups to identify and connect with Hindus who can be active in this space. As the Hindu community continues to grow and find a home outside of India, Hindus will be important participants in worldwide multi-faith efforts to address the ecological problems of our time.

Gopal Patel is the Director of the Bhumi Project, a joint project of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies and GreenFaith. **Mat McDermott** is the US-based Advisor for the Bhumi Project, and Director of Communications for the Hindu American Foundation.