

## **Developing an Ecofeminist Ethic Within the Hindu Tradition**

**Corey Wallace**

The modern world is marred by a variety of environmental problems such as pollution, deforestation, and the depletion of natural resources. They have affected every corner of the world, and India is no exception. This country has long suffered from overpopulation, and with increased industrialization India's environmental problems have only multiplied. In desperate times it is only natural to seek a solution wherever one might exist, and particularly in the last few decades the search has turned to the world's religious traditions in an effort to develop religiously based environmental ethics. The hope seems to be that if environmental concerns can be integrated into these already firmly established worldviews, then the environmental cause as a whole might gain greater support. This appears to be an ideal strategy given that environmental activism is a fairly recent development, and the best way to ensure that the masses become involved is to give the cause the authority of one or more religious traditions that are based in antiquity. As a result, many have sought to encourage the development of an environmental ethic within the Hindu tradition. Of course, opinions vary, but many believe it to be a realistic and worthwhile ambition, and thus they meticulously examine the religion's sacred texts as well as the behavior and beliefs of practitioners in order to establish a foundation for this environmental ethic.

Of course, religious interests are not the only ones that individuals are attempting to harmonize with environmental concerns. Many have turned to the feminist cause, believing that its principles have much in common with those of environmentalism. It is supposed that if the

*Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, School of Languages, Cultures, and World Affairs, College of Charleston*  
Volume 5, 2006: pp. 247-258

© 2006 by the College of Charleston, Charleston SC 29424, USA.

All rights to be retained by the author.

two causes collaborate they might bolster one another's efforts and more effectively create positive change. The result has been a movement labeled ecofeminism. This movement, however, is not completely isolated from the religious context, and, in fact, some consider ecofeminism to have a significant place within Hinduism. That is, they hope that an ecofeminist ethic might be developed within the tradition rather than one that focuses solely on ecological issues while neglecting those of a feminist nature. This seems particularly important given that Hinduism has a prominent goddess tradition and that often times the earth itself is perceived as a mother goddess, nurturing and providing for her children.

However, while developing an ecofeminist ethic in Hinduism seems like a positive and plausible ambition, the task is not without obstacles. There are some elements of Hinduism that oppose these efforts to stimulate environmental awareness. As Rita DasGupta Sherma posits:

Too often, those concerned with India's environmental devastation focus narrowly on the legacy of colonialism, modernization, Westernization, and so forth, ignoring pre-colonial aspects of the problem and issues which have entirely indigenous roots, such as the population problem. (94)

That is, we cannot ignore the fact that certain aspects of Hinduism have contributed to the environmental problems that India faces today. Though Western influence has almost certainly participated in the formation of some of these problems, it must be recognized that the Hindu worldview has played an active hand as well, allowing for these changes and sometimes even encouraging them.

This paper will seek to examine the potential for the development of an ecofeminist ethic within the Hindu tradition. Is such a concept possible or probable? What Hindu concepts might prevent successful implementation of such an ethic into the tradition? What benefits might result from the adoption of an ecofeminist ethic by Hindus? In seeking to answer these questions, I will turn to a variety of texts on ecofeminism, in order to convey the essence of ecofeminist thought and philosophy, as well as discussions of Hindu sacred texts and Hindu practice, in order to identify those branches of Hinduism which are

most likely to support an ecofeminist ethic. I will argue that such a development is possible and will be, for the most part, beneficial to the lives of Hindu practitioners.

### **Principles of Ecofeminism**

The ecofeminist movement traces its origin to the 1970s when feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne invented the expression "ecological feminism." There is certainly a variety of opinion within the movement, but there are some basic ideas in ecofeminist ideology that are generally agreed upon (Warren 21). One of the most essential of these principles is the idea that the ways in which both women and nature are abused are justified by the "same theoretical structure and often supported by the same religious constructs" (Sherma 91). The belief is that if we can abolish or reform these ideological structures, we can halt the detrimental treatment of both women and the earth.

For example, hierarchy and authoritarianism are often identified as concepts that should be disposed of in the effort to construct a just society, one that is both truly dedicated to fair consideration for each individual as well as to preserving the earth for future generations (Foltz 456). Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, who have been active in the feminist and environmental movements respectively, co-authored a book entitled *Ecofeminism* in which they express this concern:

In analyzing the causes which have led to the destructive tendencies that threaten life on earth we became aware — quite independently — of what we call the capitalist patriarchal world system. This system emerged, is built upon and maintains itself through the colonization of women, of 'foreign' peoples and their lands; and of nature, which it is gradually destroying. (Mies 2)

In this passage, patriarchy, authoritarianism, and hierarchy are pinpointed as sources of domination or subordination in general. These theoretical structures justify the oppression of women and other vulnerable groups, as well as domination over the natural world. As Richard Foltz notes, "*patriarchy* is a male-oriented set of values that seeks to dominate, control, and manipulate for its own ends" (456). Thus, these systems put a

select group in positions of power while subjugating everyone and everything else in an effort to maintain that power.

Of course, describing these general structures gives only a vague idea of what ecofeminists view as the problem. It is perhaps more helpful to identify some of the more specific issues that are thought to result from the pervasiveness of patriarchy in the modern world. For example, Ynestra King suggests that patriarchal thought has led people to believe that there is an inherent opposition between nature and culture, between women and men, and between matter and spirit. King, like many others, claims that such dualisms are constructs of human culture rather than intrinsic aspects of existence. She posits that this misconception prevents people from realizing the true nature of reality, which, as she claims, is that “[l]ife on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy” (458). King goes on to explain that only when we eliminate the idea of the “other” from our conversations and recognize that everything is connected and interdependent will we be able to achieve a more harmonious coexistence on and with the earth. King is pointing out yet another key argument of many ecofeminists, which is that dualistic thought is harmful and misleading. Such thought necessitates opposition between humans and nature as well as within the human race itself, ultimately creating an unhealthy atmosphere in which it becomes acceptable (and perhaps even appears necessary) to manipulate and dominate others.

Ecofeminists have also identified similar issues within religious thought that are believed to be the result of patriarchy. For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether discusses a range of creation stories from the Babylonian tale of Marduk’s slaying of the earth mother figure Tiamat to the account of humankind’s fall in Genesis. She describes how such stories reflect the social order of the time while simultaneously validating those very same patriarchal systems (464-5). However, not only do these texts justify and reinforce such hierarchies, but they also are quite telling about the religious standpoints on the position and nature of women and the earth. Such texts identify the male with the spirit, the female with matter or nature, and ultimately place the male in much higher regard. In many religions which are founded upon patriarchal beliefs, the spirit is something that is completely separate from the body and the material world. Consequently, these become

obstacles to a pure, spiritual life. One must transcend the material in order to attain the divine. Since women are identified as being closer to the material world, they are often perceived as spiritually inferior or devoid of any real value. They become mere distractions on the path to divinity:

For Augustine, femaleness itself represents the inferior bodily nature, while the male represents the intellect which is to rule over both his body and hers. He is the collective Adam made in God's image, while woman as woman does not possess the image of God in herself but images the subordinate body. She is "in the image of God" only when taken together with the male, "who is her head." (Ruether 466)

There have been numerous other arguments and theories advanced by ecofeminists, but this small should be sufficient to convey a general idea of what the movement has sought to accomplish. Ecofeminists seek to undermine those structures which perpetuate the domination of women and nature. However, it should also be noted that in resisting domination or subordination in general, ecofeminism is also trying to address the inferior status of other minorities and oppressed people. Ecofeminism is thus not just a woman's or environmental concern but one that is ultimately relevant to everyone.

### **Ecology and Hinduism**

At first glance it might appear that there is little standing in the way of the implementation of any type of environmental ethic in the Hindu tradition. After all, sacred Hindu texts such as the Vedas and the Upanishads are not without positive references to nature, and many Hindu rituals involve the praising of nature's beauty and value. However, there are some major themes within Hinduism that do indeed prevent its followers from fully embracing the environmental cause. Sherma identifies three aspects of Hinduism that fall into this category: (a) the identification of the feminine maternal with materiality; (b) the purity/impurity dichotomy; and (c) the devaluation of the feminine principle (*my* and *prakrti*) and of the phenomenal world that it represents, by philosophies of transcendence (95).

The first of these categories deals especially with the fact that associating the earth and nature with the feminine often results in an identification of nature as maternal. Once this association is in place, there is a strong tendency to exhibit behaviors toward or develop expectations of the natural world that parallel the customs already at work in Indian households. The traditional conception of the mother elicits images of a generous and devoted yet self-sacrificing woman, one who puts the needs and desires of her family (especially her children) before her own. While comparing the relationship of a mother and her children to that between the earth and humankind at least denotes close ties between the Hindus and nature, it also suggests the idea that the natural world is there solely to cater to the needs of the human race. This depiction risks the assumption that the earth will continue to provide nourishment and protection regardless of how it is treated, just as a mother is likely to love and nurture her children even if she does not always receive equal consideration (Sherma 96-7).

The second category concerns purity and impurity, a complex topic that pervades Hindu life. There is a constant struggle to label and separate that which is considered pure and sacred from that which is considered impure and profane. This is an issue relevant to people, objects, and physical spaces. Hindus can be rendered ritually impure due to everything from a death in the family to a woman's monthly menstruation. The result of this classificatory system is a series of divisions not only between people, but also between people and their environment. These divisions are detrimental to the philosophical ideas upon which an environmental ethic would be founded such as the concept of interconnectedness (Sherma 98).

The final category deals with the fact that whenever the transcendental aspects of a religious tradition are emphasized, there is bound to be less interest in conserving resources and protecting the earth, since the focus of practitioners will be on goals beyond this world and this lifetime. This point is also connected with the devaluation of the feminine principle: if the natural world is perceived as being feminine in nature, and the natural world is a mere illusion that must be overcome, then notions of the feminine become associated with meaninglessness and a lack of true value (Sherma 101-2).

It seems quite apparent that many of the aspects of Hinduism that

Sherma identifies as being problems for adopting an environmental ethic match the general ideas criticized by the ecofeminists. Sherma especially stresses the prevalence of dualistic thought, which theorists such as King have identified as particularly opposed to an ecofeminist ethic. It is this point along with Sherma's concern over the devaluation of the feminine principle that will be given special attention as we examine the possibility of effectively establishing an ecofeminist ethic within the Hindu tradition. In the coming section we shall explore how well certain sacred texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads, as well as certain traditions such as Shaktism and Tantra, might support just such an ethic.

### **Hindu Sacred Texts and Ecofeminism**

Within the Hindu tradition there are a number of sacred texts which may be consulted by practitioners. The earliest texts were derived from what was originally an oral tradition and were recorded in Sanskrit, an Indo-European language. Of these texts the *Vedas* are the oldest and are a central part of the Hindu religion, as they form the basis of Orthodox Hinduism (Rinehart 5). The Vedas are composed of four *sambitas* or collections, each containing hymns which are utilized in ritual practice. The four collections are known as the *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Atbarva Veda*. Hindus generally attribute the Vedas to a nonhuman source, though interpretations vary to some extent. "Some Hindu sources describe them as the linguistic representation of the sounds that create and sustain the cosmos; other Hindu sources describe them as the creation of a god" (Rinehart 12).

According to Klaus Klostermaier, during early Vedic times women received equal treatment, as some of the Vedic hymns describe events attributed to women. However, as in so many other parts of the world, patriarchy eventually dominated and ultimately excluded women from even studying the Veda, as well as from participating in Vedic rituals. Women were always under the authority of some male figure, whether a father or a husband, and their primary duties were those involving the family and the household (66). Certainly the way in which the role of women has evolved in orthodox Hinduism does not exhibit a deep sense of value for the female principle, at least not outside of the domestic sphere.

However, while the Vedas may not seem to take a keen interest in

the status of women, they do appear to promote environmentally friendly attitudes. The Vedas contain numerous references to the beauty and mysteriousness of the world. They include explanations of the creation of the cosmos and describe countless gods and goddesses who are personifications of the wondrous parts of creation, such as the river goddess Sarasvati and the earth goddess Prithivi (Keith 77, 172-4). Klostermaier even claims that “Vedic Hinduism was very environmentally conscious: pollution of land and water was forbidden and care was taken to preserve the natural fertility of the environment” (66).

Another highly significant group of texts known as the *Upanishads* were later added to the Vedas. The Upanishads represent a transition from the Vedic emphasis on ritualized external sacrifices to a new emphasis on “internal sacrifice performed through control of various bodily functions” (Rinehart 17-8). The Upanishads are in and of themselves a sort of reinterpretation of the Vedas which serve to elaborate on and interpret the symbols found within the Vedas. The teachings found within the Upanishads, in part, formulate the ideas of what is known as Vedanta, which is composed of three schools known as the Dualist, Qualified Non-dualist, and Non-dualist (Nikhilananda 25).

The Upanishads are a body of very complex texts which often appear to be contradictory, and thus there have been a number of different interpretations of the essential underlying truths which they are thought to reveal. One key concept is that of *my*, or illusion: “the Upanishads declared that the world is only *my* and that empirical knowledge does not give true Knowledge, or *Vidy*, but belongs to the realm of ignorance, or *avidy*” (Nikhilananda 40). One might assume that this necessitates a rejection of earthly life entirely, and thus that Hindus would be likely to ignore any pleas to save the environment, since it is all an illusion anyway. However, there is an alternative interpretation available. Nikhilananda explains that one can approach Truth from two standpoints: that of the Relative and that of the Absolute. From the first perspective, one understands earthly experiences as real, relevant, and meaningful; from the second, one realizes that all of these experiences are merely relative, but also that the duality between appearance and reality is in actuality an aspect of the divine Absolute (41). Thus, one can appreciate and enjoy this life without overlooking the true, non-dualistic nature of

reality. From this perspective, it seems feasible that some sort of environmental ethic could emerge within Hinduism. Earthly existence, though perhaps illusory in some senses, is not something to be taken for granted or rejected. One could perhaps promote protection of the environment by rationalizing it as protection of the seemingly diverse yet ultimately connected aspects of Brahman.

### **Shaktism, Tantra, and Ecofeminism**

Though it seems that there is a possibility of formulating an environmental ethic based on Hindu texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads, a key element that appears to be missing: a substantial presence of the feminine. After all, our question is whether or not it is plausible that an *ecofeminist* ethic might be developed within the Hindu tradition. One could settle for textual evidence that might inspire greater environmental awareness among Hindus, but that does not seem to be a great enough step. As described earlier in the section on ecofeminist principles, the most effective way to change the abusive treatment of women and nature is to go to the source, which means deconstructing the destructive principles that have allowed such treatment to persist. Shaktism, especially in its Tantric aspects, appears to do just that. Not only does the Shakta tradition provide a prominent place for the feminine principle, but Shakta Tantra reinterprets the traditional hierarchical system which exists in Hinduism in favor of non-dualist concepts.

Shaktism is an important branch within the Hindu tradition that involves a primary emphasis on goddess worship and the concept of shakti. Shakti may simply be translated as power or more specifically interpreted, according to Sara Mitter's citation of Heinrich Zimmer's definition, as "ability, capacity, faculty, strength, energy, prowess; regal power; the power of composition, poetic power, genius" (Mitter 74). Within the Shakta tradition the goddess is worshipped in a variety of forms and is appreciated for her multiplicity. In Shakta Tantra women are perceived as being the goddess in human form and are welcome, even necessary parts of religious ritual. They embody the goddess's power and wisdom and are even considered to be the ideal gurus (Feuerstein 227). Clearly Shaktism offers an alternative to the orthodox side of Hinduism which, as Sherma claims, often neglects and devalues the feminine principle.

However, Shaktism in its tantric aspects also makes giant leaps in deconstructing traditional hierarchies and dichotomies. First of all, tantric rituals are not exclusive with respect to caste and gender. Women and men, shudras and brahmins, all find themselves on equal footing in these rituals and in tantric practice in general (Bhattacharyya 18). Followers of tantra also reject the notion of traditional dualistic concepts such as purity and impurity. These distinctions, which serve to categorize individuals and ultimately seem to assess their value and worth, become unnecessary and inconsequential according to tantric beliefs. Such oppositions do not belong to the true nature of reality. The tantric goal is to rise above such deceptive dualistic thinking so that one might see the all-important reality, the underlying essence of the divine in all things.

### **Conclusion**

This project sought to determine whether an ecofeminist ethic could be established within the Hindu tradition. While a survey of basic ecofeminist philosophy and theories produced a wealth of different ideas and thoughts, I ultimately chose to assess the feasibility of establishing such an ethic within Hinduism according to two main criteria — ones Sherma suggested as being potential obstacles. These criteria were first, whether or not the selected sacred Hindu texts and traditions promoted a sense of value for the female principle; and second, whether or not these same texts and traditions maintained potentially destructive elements of patriarchal thought, such as hierarchies and dualism. I believed that these are two of the main hurdles to be overcome to effectively implement an ecofeminist ethic within the Hindu tradition.

We saw that Hindu texts such as the Vedas and the Upanishads contain valuable information concerning Hindu ideas of the essential nature of reality and the role of earthly life within that reality. The Vedas appear to support some sort of environmental awareness at the very least, and the Upanishads, according to some interpretations, support a deconstruction of dualistic thought. Both texts maintain that there is value in earthly life, thus opening an important gateway for an environmental ethic. However, support for an ecofeminist ethic is still lacking in these texts: they do not seem to value the female principle. What is lacking in these sacred texts can be found in the Hindu tradition

of Shaktism, particularly in its tantric aspects. Shakta Tantra not only rejects the traditional oppositions supported by Orthodox Hindu thought (between pure and impure, spirit and matter, etc.), but it also provides a strong position for the female principle. Therefore, Shakta Tantra might be more open to an ecofeminist ethic than more traditional branches of Hinduism.

This, of course, is not to say that only those practicing Shakta Tantra would be successful in establishing an ecofeminist ethic within the Hindu tradition, but only that the tradition and the ideals which it embodies seem to be most readily equipped to handle such an ethic. As long as there is some sort of basis from which to begin reforming environmental attitudes within the tradition, it seems that there is definite hope for improvement.

### Works Cited

- Bhattacharyya, Bhaskar. *The Path of the Mystic Lover: Baul Songs of Passion and Ecstasy*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1993.
- Feuerstein, Georg. *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998.
- Foltz, Richard C., ed. *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: A Global Anthology*. Toronto: Thomson Learning, 2003.
- Keith, Arthur Berriedale. *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971.
- King, Ynestra. "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology." *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: A Global Anthology*. Ed. Richard C. Foltz. Toronto: Thomson Learning, 2003.
- Klostermaier, Klaus K. "Equality of Women." *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. Boston: Oneworld, 1998.
- Mies, Maria and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1993.
- Mitter, Sara S. *Dharma's Daughters: Contemporary Indian Women and Hindu Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1991.
- Nikhilananda, Swami. *The Upanishads*. New York: Harper and Row, 1964.
- Rinehart, Robin. "Introduction: the Historical Background." *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice*. Ed. Robin

- Rinehart. Santa Barbara CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology." *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: A Global Anthology*. Ed. Richard C. Foltz. Toronto: Thomson Learning, 2003.
- Sherma, Rita DasGupta. "Sacred Immanence: Reflections of Ecofeminism in Hindu Tantra." *Purifying the Earthly Body of God*. Ed. Lance E. Nelson. Albany: SUNY Press, 1998.
- Warren, Karen J. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.