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# Hindu Apocalyptic Notions, Cultural Discourses, and Climate Change

## 1 Introduction

The present-day urgent issues of environmental deterioration have occupied Hindus and scholars of Hinduism for several decades now. The *Vedas*, the *Upaniṣads*, the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* epics, the *Purāṇas* as well as later yoga manuals, and popular religious movements reveal the richness and complexity of the ways in which Hindu traditions have reflected on the natural world.[1] Similar to other world religions, traditional ancient Hindu texts and practices reveal an intrinsic eco-religious and eco-cultural thinking as a way of life. Hindus referred to Earth as Mother Earth and Mother-Goddess and worshipped her accordingly. Thus, it is not surprising that Hindu texts and practices do not express any modern environmental concerns. Rather, these questions are the result of modern-day preoccupations and modern-day problems, resulting from the desire to "catch up" with developed industrialized nations, oftentimes abandoning eco-religious traditional ways of living and adopting "modern", but unsustainable practices. Nonetheless, by exploring and reflecting on Hindu texts and practices, scholars of Hinduism contribute to the formation of an environmental ethic that gives rise to multiple religiously colored environmental discourses.

Hindu imagination sees time as cyclic, and not linear, and understands the cyclic creation and dissolution of the universe as a repetitive and normal process that is good, desired and necessary. In the Vaiṣṇava tradition, Vishnu and his *avatāras*, or bodily descents, in which he incarnates in various anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic forms, comes down to earth in order to save humankind from natural calamities and disasters, such as floods, draughts, etc.

**1** The system of transliteration in this work follows a standard system for Sanskrit and Hindi, in which long vowels are marked with a macron, for instance *ā*, and retroflex consonants with a dot beneath the letter, for example *ḍ*. Nasalization is indicated by the sign *ṃ*, which follows the nasalized vocal. No special symbol is used for *anusvāra* (superscript dot denoting homorganic or other nasal consonant) in the transliteration, the appropriate nasal consonant being written to avoid confusion in the pronunciation. All Hindi words and titles of works are spelled according to the transliteration system for Hindi. The names of authors, thinkers, philosophers, gods, rivers, plants, trees and cities have not been marked with diacritics.

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In Śaiva and Śākta traditions, Shiva and Devī[2] are the savior gods. All Hindu traditions see Earth als the body of the Goddess, and thus deify rivers and mountains and revere them as goddesses. Similarly, the proliferation of contemporary discourses on climate change, are often immersed in Hindu mythology and religious culture, and cannot be ignored when discussing the issues of apocalyptic imagination and climate change in Hindu traditions.

Thus, my chapter seeks to explore the complex links between Hindu eco-religious and eco-cultural traditions, the mythologizing of nature, and the mythologizing of contemporary cultural and religious discourses on climate change. In the following, I will discuss Hindu apocalyptic notions in the *Vedas*, the *Upaniṣads*, in the epics and in the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva-Śākta Paurāṇic traditions. At the end of my chapter, I will reflect on modern environmental discourses and activist movements.

## 2 Hindu Apocalyptic Notions in the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads*

As Hilary Rodrigues and Lance Nelson have pointed out, Vedic literature abounds in references to earth and nature's phenomena. Indeed, Vedic deities are called *devas* and they embody natural phenomena. Thus, Pṛthvī, is the goddess of Earth, Agni the deity of fire, Uṣas, the goddess of dawn, Indra the god of thunder, Varuṇa the god of water, Vāyu the god of wind, etc. Furthermore, the entire cosmos is envisioned in organic terms, *hiraṇyagarbha*, the golden egg, or as a cosmic person *Puruṣa* (Rodriques 2010: 329).

Additionally, the central myth of the *Ṛgveda*, which depicts the cosmic battle between Indra, highest god in the Vedic pantheon representing thunder, and Vṛtra – the demon who had drunk all the water and who had caused profound suffering, could be considered as one of the first examples of apocalyptic imagination. Similarly, the myth of Daksha's sacrifice to which the god Shiva had not been invited, makes Daksha's daughter Sati sacrifice herself. As devastated Shiva

**2** Throughout this chapter, I use the Sanskrit word Devī, and mean by it the Great Goddess (singular), as opposed to Devī (plural), goddesses of India (Spouse Goddess, i.e., female consorts of male Hindu gods, and village goddesses). Tracy Pintchman argues that the concept of "the Great Goddess develops over time as a result of the blending of Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical religious tendencies and divinities. Yet the essential identity of the Great Goddess as 'Great' appears to be constructed at least initially largely in and by the Brahmanical tradition." See Pintchman (1994: 2–16).

carries her dead body, parts of it fall all over earth, creating sacred sites, or *Śākta-pīṭhas*. This Vedic myth conveys a clear message that the entire world is the body of the Goddess and that it should be treated with love and respect.

In the *Upaniṣads*, specifically in the texts, which expound monistic ideas, *ātman* (pure consciousness, inner breadth within, the self) is identical with brahman, with the Absolute, with the ultimate reality. Their union is *mokṣa*, liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth and the highest goal for every Hindu, which one could achieve by studying with a guru for many years and by mastering techniques of breath control, meditation and concentration, in lines with the philosophy of Yoga, as revealed in Patanjali's *Yogasūtras*.

## 3 Hindu Apocalyptic Notions in the Epics and in the *Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas*

In the period of classical and epical Hinduism, and with the emergence of theistic thought, the *Upaniṣad*'s view of the union of *ātman* and *brahman* is represented in the union of the devotee with the theistic concept of the divine, *iśvara*, be it Vishnu, Shiva or Devi, the Goddess. There are many instances of panentheism in the epic of *Mahābhārata* and the philosophical poem of *Bhagavadgītā*, in which Krishna (Vishnu-Krishna) is depicted to contain the entire universe in his body. The texts stipulate that meditation on Vishnu-Krishna, and love and devotion to him are the supreme ways to be saved through Vishnu's love and grace.

The *Purāṇas* represent a genre of devotional religious texts, which deal with topics such as the creation and dissolution of the world, the genealogy of the gods, and all the episodes related to the "lives" of the deities. They can be dedicated to Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva or Devī (The Goddess). In the *Viṣṇu Purāṇas*, Vishnu comes down to earth in one of his *avatāras*, or bodily descents, in which he incarnates in various anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic forms in order to save humankind from natural calamities and disasters, such as floods, draughts, etc.

Thus, as revealed in the *Purāṇas*, Hindu imagination sees time as cyclic, and not linear, and understands the cyclic creation and dissolution of the universe as a repetitive and normal process that is good, desired and necessary. Hindus believe that the deity Brahma is the creator of the world, the deity Vishnu is the one who maintains and preserves it, and the deity Shiva destroys it. This destruction is necessary and important, as without it the world could not be re-created. It is said that the cycle of the universe would last for one *mahāyuga*, or great *yuga* – the equivalent of 4 320 000 solar years, which would be divided into four *yugas*, or cosmic eras, each of a slightly different duration of

thousands and millions of solar years. After the dissolution of one *mahāyuga*, another *mahāyuga* would start and so on.

While it seems that Hindu mythological discourses on the cyclic notion of time would be well at ease with any possible aspect of the apocalyptic imagination, in the *Purāṇas*, climate change and natural disaster remain a concern within the scope of concrete human lives, situated in one specific *yuga*, or cosmic era. This is particularly true for the current cosmic era, Kali *yuga,* which is marked by the prevailing of *adharma* (non-righteousness, evil) over *dharma* (moral/religious duty/righteousness/good). This is why the notion of *bhakti*, or, loving devotion and service to Vishnu and his *avatāras,* remains central to the apocalyptic imagination. Through his power, Vishnu can prevent natural disasters and he can save humans and the earth from calamities. *Bhakti* or loving devotion toward Vishnu, who can assume panentheistic dimensions in some texts, needs to be situated in the context of the limitations of human agency, as well as in the context of the impact of *karma* on free will and predestination in Hindu traditions. Thus, the mythologizing of the divine is a potent trend in Hindu apocalyptic imagination. As discussed earlier, both the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Mahābhārata* provide abundant textual material on this issue.

## 4 Hindu Apocalyptic Notions and Goddess-Traditions

Hindu traditions entail the notion of sacred geography where the earth, the mountains and the rivers embody different goddesses. As discussed earlier in my chapter, the myth of Daksha's sacrifice in the *Vedas* and the dismemberment of Sati point to the identification of Earth with the Goddess through her body. To Hindus, Earth is Mother-Earth, Earth is the embodiment of the Goddess. In this way, many Hindus perceive the pollution of rivers, the creation of dams or the construction of mines as the violation of river or mountain goddesses. Thus, it would be unthinkable to discuss the aspect of ecology and the sacred geography of Hinduism without dealing with the Shaktism and the notion of the Goddess, Devī, Śakti[3] in Hinduism whose figure is associated with Mother-Earth, river and mountain Goddesses. It is therefore important to state the importance

**3** The concept of Śakti is complex and deserves further clarification. It is understood as the creative energy that generates and continues to activate the universe. It is conceived as female and often personified as the consort of a male deity (the Spouse Goddess) or as the independent Goddess (Devī).

of Goddesses traditions for environmental discourses. Goddesses-traditions provide multiple resources for thinking about the earth, particularly through Bhū Devī, the Goddess-Earth, and to study areas of environmental concern, such as forests, trees, plants, sacred rivers and places; animals, especially sacred animals and vegetarianism, and how they inscribe in modern-day environmental imagination and discourses.

Similarly, Sita in the *Rāmāyaṇa,* whose name literally means furrow and who is the daughter of Mother Earth herself is goddess on earth and Rama's spouse. Thus, they incarnate the Hindu god Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi on earth. The kidnapping of Sita by the demon Ravana represents the violation of Hindu dharma. Rama embarks on a journey across the Indian subcontinent to save Sita and restore Hindu *dharma.* This culminates symbolically with the defeat of evil and the killing of Ravana and the establishment of Ram's ideal perfect rule and kingdom – his *rāmrājya* in Ayodhya. Sadly, the image of Ram's ideal kingdom has been misappropriated and exploited by Hindu nationalists for their own chauvinistic nationalistic *hindutva* (Hinduness) agenda for a Hindu India, in which there is no place for other religious minorities – that is unless they embrace Hindu ideals.

Although the scope of my chapter does not allow me to deal with it here, I would like to mention here that *hindutva* is a very complex notion. It is an invented, imagined, and constructed notion of a collective Hindu-Indian identity. It is supposed to be a unifying notion of "Hinduism" as a cultural, not religious reality. However, it has not remained immune to the conservative and nationalistic agenda of dominant political parties, and it has become increasingly linked to Hindu nationalism. (Dimitrova 2017: 1–11)

While the multiplicity of texts and topics reveal the richness of apocalyptic imagination and environmental discourses, this also points to the limitations of an attempt to study Hindu apocalyptic notions and climate change only within the realm of one single tradition, for instance the Vaiṣṇava tradition. A comprehensive study of the topic would inevitably involve an in-depth discussion of Shaiva and Shakta interpretations. Let's not forget that it is the God Shiva who performs the necessary and good cyclic destruction dissolution of the universe, and it is the Goddess who is worshipped and deified in the sacred geography of India.

## 5 Hindu Apocalyptic Imagination, Cultural and Environmental Discourses

My chapter has sought to present the complex links between apocalyptic imagination, the mythologizing of the divine, and cultural and religious discourses evoked

by human religious feelings towards the violation of Mother Nature. It is important to note that the proliferation of new discourses on climate change, immersed in Hindu mythology and religious culture, are imbued with the religious feelings of pain, devastation and anger, associated with the violation of goddesses and cannot be ignored when discussing current discourses on climate change. Thus, we can talk about religiously motivated and inspired environmentalism.

A prevailing theme among modern environmental and cultural discourses is the view of Hinduism as an eco-environmental and eco-cultural tradition. Scholars, such as Kiran Prasad point to the existence of the figure of Mother Earth, also perceived as Goddess Earth, and a sophisticated differentiation between three kinds of forests, depending on the degree of cultivation and the purpose of habitation. One such example of Hindu eco-religion as a way of life are the Bishnois of Rajasthan, fifteenth century, who follow the 29 tenets or principles of guru Jambeshwar (Prasad 2018: 10–11).

Additionally, Prasad points to a threefold concept of *vana* (forest) in Hinduism: *mahāvana* (forest with natural growth with no human habitation), *tapovana* (penetrable forest with abundant natural flora and fauna and forest, where monks and sages perform *tapas*, or ascetic practice), and *śrīvana* (groves and gardens surrounding a village). Significantly, another term for forest, *araṇy*a, refers to a place of no war, thus probably implying harmony between humans and the natural world. Furthermore, traditionally, the ground on which a new building was built was always worshipped by performing *bhūmi pūjā*, the Hindu religious service of worshipping and honoring the ground as a deity. The author also talks about the worship of trees and the sacredness of five groves – banyan tree, peepal tree, ashoka tree, bela and the halada tree, as well as the tulsi plant, which is venerated by all Hindus. Prasad also states that buildings were built in a sustainable way, according to the laws of *vāstuśāstra* (architecture). (Prasad 2018: 4–10)

Even though the author does not make this argument, it is important to clarify here that the ancient Indian discipline of architecture, as well as of many other sciences, have always been seen as part of Hinduism and as part of Hindu auxiliary literature. Thus, we may state that not only religion, but also science has had an eco-environmental and eco-cultural orientation in ancient India. Prasad reflects on the importance of the five *pañcabhūtas* (elements), air, water, fire, earth, and ether as the basis of all human creation, as well as on the importance of *prakṛti* (nature) in Hindu philosophy. (Prasad 2018: 4–10) The author does not elaborate on this point, as his major concern is sustainable development. However, it is important to state here that in the philosophical system of *Sāṃkya-yoga*, matter is not simply "nature," but rather the force or principle according to which the material world is evolving, through the interactions of *prakṛti* (nature, matter, conceived of as a female principle) and *puruṣa* (consciousness, perceived as a male principle). Once again, we see

the interconnectedness between environmental, religious and philosophical discourses in Hindu traditions.

However, I must disagree with Prasad's simplistic and idealistic presentation of the *varṇāśrama* system. As I have argued elsewhere, a discussion of *dharma* ("moral, religious duty") *varṇa* ("class," "caste"), *jāti* ("subcaste") and the issues of purity and pollution would show a picture that is far from idealistic and harmonious. The levels of "otherness" are multiple: one can be outside one specific *varṇa* (if one belongs to a different *varṇa,* ouside one *jāti* (if one belongs to a different *jāti*), or completely outside the *varṇa* system, for instance as an untouchable or a non-Hindu.[4] The exclusion can also be gender–specific. Thus, *strīdharma*, the *dharma* ("moral, religious duty") of women is different from that of men. Traditionally women had been excluded from many ritual activities, had not been allowed initiation (*upanayaṇa*) and had been considered impure at numerous occasions. However, it is important to note that Hindu traditions are not uniform, and that the notions of *varṇa*, purity and pollution, can be quite different in *bhakti* (devotional) Hinduism, in the Sikh tradition and in many reform Hindu movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These traditions reject or reinterpret the caste system and the notions of purity and pollution, inherent in what we may call "mainstream" or traditional Hinduism (Dimitrova 2014b: 3–4).

Importantly, it would be impossible to deal with present-day environmental concerns and discourses in modern India without mentioning Gandhi's legacy. Gandhi has revisited the Hindu notion of *ahiṃsa* or non-violence and has emphasized the problem of pollution, thus inspiring many contemporary environmentalists in India. Partly because of his emphasis on simple living and his critique of global economies and consumerism, his writings and example have helped define the global development of ecological values. Similarly, several modern activist movements, such as the Chipko movement in the 1970s, which had its precedent in the eighteenth-century Bishnoi movement in Rajasthan, and the anti-Tehri Dam movement should be mentioned here.

In the 1970s, Chandni Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahaguna led the "Chipko *āndolan*" ("hugging") movement in which local villagers began to hug trees in the Himalayan forest to prevent commercial deforestation. Chipko has succeeded in changing government policies and has influenced similar non-violent environmental movements across the globe. More recently, the Chipko movement has been involved in protests against the construction of the Tehri dam on the Bhagirathi river. (Nelson 2008: 108) Indiscriminating hydro-electric projects, which had threatened

**4** On the concepts of varṇa, jāti, dharma and on purity and pollution, see Klostermaier (1994) and Flood (1996).

to displace and destroy the livelihood of the Adivasi (indigenous tribal population of North-East India) has prompted Adivasi activists to stage neo-Gandhian *satyāgraha* (insistence on truth) fasts in order to protest the construction of Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river. (Rodrigues 2010: 332) These activist movements should be seen in the context of the same intellectual discourse, which has also motivated thinker and activist Vandan Shiva to propagate a new, eco-friendly version of Gandhianism.

Gandhi's insistence on non-violence and vegetarianism, and his attention to meditation and the practice of yoga resonates with Vivekananda's contribution to introducing yoga on the global stage and to reviving yoga in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is especially important to mention here the philosophy and practice of yogic traditions, which include physical, metaphysical, and ethical speculations and practices for purifying body and mind, and for bringing the microcosm of human being in harmony with the macrocosm of the universe, in pursuit of *mokṣa*, or liberation from *saṃsāra*.

This exploration of environmental and cultural discourses, climate change and Hindu traditions would not be complete without considering the broader humanistic discussions on the Anthropocene, the "Orbis Hypothesis" and the Columbian Exchange (Lee and Beckelheimer 2020: 110–129), or the reflections on "the climate of history" (Chakrabarty 2009: 197–222). We need to emphasize that they all invite us to rethink global life and the present human condition.

Has global life happened by coincidence in what many scientists and scholars believe to be the new geological era of the Anthropocene, in which human beings are not just historical and social agents, but also geological agents? Or, is it rather the result of the colonial project of the empire, which was motivated by power and the desire to dominate people, animals, plants and resources globally? In this sense, the call to decolonize the Anthropocene, and to honor and include the voices of the marginalized, such as of former colonized countries, like India, of indigenous people, of women, of low-castes, of untouchables and, as Greta Thunberg has recently taught us, of children, and of other disadvantaged groups becomes one of the most important humanistic projects of our time.

## 6 Conclusion

We reflected on some important eco-religious and eco-cultural aspects of Hindu traditions and reviewed several important Hindu texts, which are abundant in apocalyptic images, calamities and salvific notions of deities. While the textual material depicts the victory of good over evil and the Hindu savior gods saving humanity from a calamity, the texts do not offer any critical self-reflection on climate change and humans'

actions in this respect. Thus, environmental sensibilities, ethic and discourses are the product of modernity.

Nowadays, modern thinkers and scholars have turned anew to Hindu texts in order to alert to problems of climate change and the catastrophic consequences of irresponsible and destructive profit-oriented consumerism. By revisiting concepts such as non-violence, vegetarianism, by evoking religious feelings of discontent at the violation of Mother Earth, river and mountain goddesses, and by propagating the holistic, wholesome and sustainable body-mind practices of ancient yoga, they engage their contemporaries in religiously inspired environmental discourses and urge awareness about climate change.

We discussed the questions of climate, power and the Anthropocene in relation to Hindu traditions and indigenous ecological consciousness. While this chapter does not want to present an idealized and romanticized picture of Hinduism, turning a blind eye on socio-cultural problems, such as caste and gender inequality, nationalism, pollution and other environmental problems, we would like to point to the complexity of all questions discussed, and to suggest Hindu eco-religious and eco-cultural thought as an inspiration for universal progress.

It seems befitting to conclude this chapter on Hindu apocalyptic imagination and climate change with the ancient Vedic Gāyatrī mantra, which has become nowadays the beloved mantra of yoga universalism and yoga-inspired environmental consciousness throughout the globe. The Vedic Gāyatrī mantra is dedicated to the vivifying Sun deity Savitṛ. Traditionally, only twice-born Hindu men of the upper castes could recite it. Modern Hindu reform movements have spread the practice of making the Gāyatrī mantra accessible also to women and to people of all castes and creeds, and it is in this sense, that I would like to conclude my chapter by "reciting" the Gāyatrī mantra first in Sanskrit, and then in English. There are several possible translations and interpretations of the Gāyatrī Mantra. I have chosen a translation, which conveys a message of faith in the wisdom of humankind to look up to Nature for guidance and answer to the pressing questions of climate change.

ॐ भूर्भुवः स्वः ।

तत् सवितुर्वरेण्यं ।

भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि ।

धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात्

Let us meditate on that excellent glory of Savitṛ, the divine vivifying Sun, May he enlighten our minds. – *Ṛgveda* 3.62.10

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