



DHARMA OF SUSTAINABILITY, SUSTAINABILITY OF DHARMA:

A Hindu Energy Ethics

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In addition to releasing the Greenhouse Gases that are causing the Climate Change that in turn is wreaking havoc in dozens and dozens of countries across the world now, fossil fuel companies are also destroying the trees in the concrete jungles of America. In July 2015, my neighbors and I, in Coppell, one of the suburbs of Dallas, Texas, were shocked to wake up one day to see that several dozens of large trees were destroyed by a large local fossil fuel companies called Atmos Energy and Oncor to protect its high-pressure gas pipeline and transmission line respectively.¹ We soon discovered that such destructions are a routine in several other North Texan cities such as Flower Mound, Waco and Denton. Most American cities have quite thin green belts that are further damaged by fossil fuel companies in this way leading to more air and noise pollutions just as in major Indian cities.² Thirteen of the world's most polluted cities are in India, where indoor smoke is associated with 500,000 premature deaths yearly. Yet projections for India's economic growth based on fossil fuels promise only increased emissions and pollution.³ Globally, energy poverty is a stark reality for the 1.3 billion persons without access to electricity and the three billion with minimal access to modern forms of energy, who depend on solid biomass or solid coal for their basic energy needs of lighting, cooking and home heating. This is a deadly form of energy: globally, exposure to the toxic particles and gases inside the smoke filled kitchens are responsible for about 4 million premature deaths annually, mainly among women and children. And according to the World Health Organization, pollution is underrecorded in many of the worst-affected cities due to the nation's lack of resources or

- 1 Michael Albanese, "ATMOS Energy to Remove Trees During Project in Coppell. Coppell Gazette, May 15, 2015 http://starlocalmedia.com/coppellgazette/atmos-energy-to-remove-trees-during-project-in-coppell/article_b5fdcfac-fb2a-11e4-b2ed-037fdd0e721c.html; Nancy Matocha, "Flower Mound could lose hundreds of trees along pipeline right of way," *Dallas News*, February 2013 <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/flower-mound/2013/02/23/flower-mound-could-lose-hundreds-of-trees-along-pipeline-right-of-way>; Bill Teeter, "Atmos, Waco resident square off over tree cutting," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, April 30, 2010 http://www.wacotrib.com/news/atmos-waco-resident-square-off-over-tree-cutting/article_4e8a250d-aa84-58aa-b0c7-e94b73373a46.html
- 2 Suryatp Bhattacharya, "Indian Cities Rank High Among Places Where Clean Air Can Be Rare," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 12, 2016 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/indian-cities-rank-high-among-places-where-clean-air-can-be-rare-1463055940>
- 3 "India and the Environment: Catching up with China," *The Economist*, October 10, 2015. <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21672359-prime-minister-wants-india-grow-fast-over-next-20-years-china-has-over-past-20>

situations of conflict. The smoke and soot from burning biomass also destroys crops, accelerates Himalayan glacier melt, and accelerates the deforestation that also depletes water sources and takes girls out of school to collect firewood and water.⁴

While suburbanites in advanced nations and the millions lacking even basic energy seem worlds apart, the dangerous collision of expanding fossil fuel use, deforestation, and unhealthy air represents a tragic link between them.

While suburbanites in advanced nations and the millions of persons lacking even basic energy access can seem worlds apart, the dangerous collision of expanding fossil fuel use, deforestation, and unhealthy air represents a tragic link between them, a link that is intensifying the impacts of climate change for all residents of this one planet. Energy is an essential link in the chain of development and prosperity, but how can energy poverty be addressed in a way that is truly healthy and sustainable? With significant number of Hindus in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, United States, Myanmar, United Kingdom, Canada, South Africa, Mauritius, the Caribbean (West Indies), and Fiji, Hindu values can help shape a unique energy ethics. Hinduism contains numerous references to the worship of the divine in nature in its Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Sutras, and its other sacred texts. Millions of Hindus recite Sanskrit mantras daily to revere their rivers, mountains, trees, animals, and the earth. Although the Chipko (tree-hugging) Movement is the most widely known example of Hindu environmental leadership, there are examples of Hindu action for the environment that are centuries old.

4 Veerabhandran Ramanathan, “The Two Worlds Approach for Mitigating Air Pollution and Climate Change,” in *Pontifical Academies Workshop: Sustainable Humanity, Sustainable Nature, Our Responsibility* (Vatican City 2014), 2, 9.

Hinduism is a remarkably diverse religious and cultural phenomenon, with many local and regional manifestations. Within this universe of beliefs, several important themes related to energy emerge.⁵ The diverse theologies of Hinduism suggest that:

- The earth can be seen as a manifestation of the goddess, and must be treated with respect. Therefore, all energy sources are divine gifts from the mother earth.
- The five elements – space, air, fire, water, and earth – are the foundation of an interconnected web of life. Many of these elements provide us with renewable energy sources that can continue to support web of life on the planet.
- Dharma – often translated as “duty” – can be reinterpreted to include our responsibility to care for the earth. Human dharma should be in harmony with the earth dharma, i.e., humans should practice their dharma to protect and conserve earth’s energy resources rather than destroy or exploit them.
- Simple living is a model for the development of sustainable economies so energy must be consumed sustainably and responsibly by humankind.
- Our treatment of nature and our usage of energy directly affect our karma.

Gandhi exemplified many of these principles, and his example continues to inspire contemporary social, religious, and environmental leaders in their efforts to promote ecofriendly energy choices.

Ishavasyam idam sarvam Divinity is omnipresent and takes infinite forms. Hindu texts such as the Bhagavad Gita (7.19, 13.13) and the Bhagavad Purana (2.2.41, 2.2.45), contain many references to the omnipresence of the Supreme divinity—including its presence throughout and within nature.

5 Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker. 2000. *Hinduism and Ecology: the Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Nelson, Lance E. 1998. *Purifying the earthly body of God: religion and ecology in Hindu India*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press. Jain, Pankaj. 2016 [2011]. *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability*. London, England: Routledge.

Hindus worship and accept the presence of God in nature. For example, many Hindus think of India's mighty rivers—such as the Ganges – as goddesses. In the Mahabharata, it is noted that the universe and every object in it has been created as an abode of the Supreme God meant for the benefit of all, implying that individual species should enjoy their role within a larger system, in relationship with other species. All the earth's resources are therefore to be shared by other species and humans have no monopoly over them. Humans that still have no access to any energy source should be quickly connected with a solar-powered energy grid.⁶

Our treatment of nature and our usage of energy directly affect our karma.

Pancha mahabhutas (The five great elements) create a web of life that is shown forth in the structure and interconnectedness of the cosmos and the human body. Hinduism teaches that the five great elements (space, air, fire, water, and earth) that constitute the different kinds of energy resources are all derived from prakriti, the primal energy. Each of these elements has its own life and form; together the elements are interconnected and interdependent. The Upanishads explain the interdependence of these elements in relation to Brahman, the supreme reality, from which they arise: “From Brahman arises space, from space arises air, from air arises fire, from fire arises water, and from water arises earth.” Hinduism recognizes that the human body is composed of and related to these five elements, and connects each of the elements to one of the five senses. The human nose is related to earth, tongue to water, eyes to fire, skin to air, and ears to space. This bond between our senses and the elements is the foundation of our human relationship with the different kinds of energies in the natural world. For Hinduism, nature and its energy resources are not outside us, not alien or hostile to us. They are an inseparable part of our existence, and they constitute our very beings. One way, Hindu political and business leaders

6 Kundan Pandey, “The extent of India's energy poverty.” DownToEarth, March 12, 2015 <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/the-extent-of-india-s-energy-poverty-48966>

are responding to the energy crisis of India is by moving away from fossil fuels to solar energy.⁷

Dharma is defined in a major Hindu text Mahabharata as a phenomenon that sustains both this-worldly and other-worldly resources, *Dhāraṇād dharma ity āhur dharmeṇa vidhṛtāḥ prajāḥ, Yat syād dhāraṇasamyuktaṃ sa dharma iti niśchayaḥ* (Mahabharata 12.110.11). In fact, the very root of the word dharma comes from *dhri* that means to sustain. Thus, dharma in its foundational meaning promotes sustainability. Protecting the energy resources is part of Dharma. Dharma, one of the most important Hindu concepts, has been translated into English as duty, virtue, cosmic order, and religion. In Hinduism, protecting the energy resources is an important expression of dharma. In past centuries, Indian communities—like other traditional communities—did not have an understanding of “the environment” as separate from the other spheres of activity in their lives. A number of rural Hindu communities such as the Bishnois, Bhils, and Swadhyaya (Jain 2016) have maintained strong communal practices to protect local ecosystems such as forests and water sources. These communities carry out these conservation-oriented practices not as “environmental” acts but rather as expressions of dharma. When Bishnois are protecting animals and trees, when Swadhyais are building *Vrikshamandiras* (tree temples) and *Nirmal Nirs* (water harvesting sites), and when Bhils are practicing their rituals in sacred groves, they are simply expressing their reverence for creation according to Hindu teachings, not “restoring the environment.” These traditional Indian groups do not see religion, ecology, and ethics as separate arenas of life. Instead, they understand it to be part of their dharma to treat creation with respect.

The earth—Devi—is a goddess and our mother and deserves our devotion and protection. Many Hindu rituals recognize that human beings benefit from the earth's energy resources, and offer gratitude and protection in response. Many Hindus touch the floor before getting out of bed every morning and ask Devi to forgive them for trampling on her body and for causing her pain for extracting many resources (including energy sources)

7 Anindya Upadhyay, “Modi Lures India's Top Fossil Fuel Companies to Back Solar Boom,” Bloomberg, July 21, 2016 <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-07-21/modi-lures-india-s-top-fossil-fuel-companies-to-back-solar-boom>

from her, by reciting: *Samudra vasane devi, parvata stana mandale. Vishnupatni namastubhyam, paada sparsham kshamasva me.* (O! Mother Earth, the wife of Lord Vishnu, with the ocean as clothes and mountains as your body, I bow to you, please forgive me for touching you with my feet). Millions of Hindus create kolams daily—artwork consisting of bits of rice or other food placed at their doorways in the morning. These *kolams* express Hindus' desire to offer sustenance to the earth, just as the earth sustains themselves. The Chipko movement—made famous by Chipko women's commitment to “hugging” trees in their community to protect them from clear-cutting by outside interests, represents a similar devotion to the earth.

Hinduism's tantric and yogic traditions affirm the sacredness of material reality and contain teachings and practices to unite people with divine energy. Hinduism's Tantric tradition teaches that the entire universe is the manifestation of divine energy. Yoga—derived from the Sanskrit word meaning “to yoke” or “to unite” - refers to a series of mental and physical practices designed to connect the individual with this divine energy. Both these traditions affirm that all phenomena, objects, and individuals are expressions of the divine. And because these traditions both envision the earth as a Goddess, contemporary Hindu teachers have used these teachings to demonstrate the wrongness of the exploitation of the environment, women, and indigenous peoples, including for extracting the fossil fuels.

Fortunately, global leaders are already collaborating with Hindu political and business leaders to replace India's fossil fuel energy sources with solar based sources.

Belief in reincarnation supports a sense of interconnectedness of all creation. Hindus believe in the cycle of rebirth, wherein every being travels through millions of cycles of birth and rebirth in different forms, depending on their karma from previous lives. So, a person may be reincarnated as a

person, animal, bird, or another part of the wider community of life. Because of this, and because all people are understood to pass through many lives on their pathway to ultimate liberation, reincarnation creates a sense of solidarity between people and all living things. Through belief in reincarnation, Hinduism teaches that all species and all parts of the earth are part of an extended network of relationships connected over the millennia, with each part of this network deserving respect and reverence. So, burning a natural resource for energy is to be less preferred than using a natural resource renewably without destroying that source such as the sun or the wind.

Ahimsa paramo dharma (Non-violence is the greatest Dharma). Ahimsa to the earth improves one's karma. For observant Hindus, hurting or harming another being damages one's karma and obstructs advancement toward moksha - liberation. To prevent the further accrual of bad karma, Hindus are instructed to avoid activities associated with violence and to follow a vegetarian diet. Based on this doctrine of ahimsa, many observant Hindus oppose the institutionalized breeding and killing of animals, birds, and fish for human consumption. Also, because several researches have shown that consuming meat causes more wastage of earth's energy resources which is another form of violence against the mother earth.

Sanyasa (Asceticism) represents a path to liberation and is good for the earth. Hinduism teaches that asceticism—restraint in consumption and simplicity in living—represents a pathway towards moksha (liberation) which treats the earth with reverence. A well-known Hindu teaching - *Ten tyakten bhunjitha*—has been translated, “Take what you need for your sustenance without a sense of entitlement or ownership.” One of the most prominent Hindu environmental leaders - Sunderlal Bahuguna - inspired many Hindus by his ascetic lifestyle. His repeated fasts and strenuous foot marches, undertaken to support and spread the message of the Chipko, distinguished him as a notable ascetic in our own time. In his capacity for suffering and his spirit of self-sacrifice, Hindus saw a living example of the renunciation of worldly ambition exhorted by Hindu scriptures. Similarly, Gandhi is a role model for simple living. Gandhi's entire life can be seen as an ecological treatise. This is one life in which every minute act, emotion, or thought functioned much like an ecosystem: his small meals of nuts and

fruits, his morning ablutions and everyday bodily practices, his periodic observances of silence, his morning walks, his cultivation of the small as much as of the big, his spinning wheel, his abhorrence of waste, his resorting to basic Hindu and Jain values of truth, nonviolence, celibacy, and fasting. The moralists, nonviolent activists, feminists, journalists, social reformers, trade union leaders, peasants, prohibitionists, nature-cure lovers, renouncers, and environmentalists all take their inspirations from Gandhi's life and writings. This simple living exemplified by Gandhi and Bahuguna, by definition, includes reducing the consumption of earth's energy resources and relying instead on earth's other alternative resources such as wind and sun for human survival.

Perhaps no other Hindu practice encapsulates all the above ideas than the widespread Hindu practice of vegetarianism. Consumption of meat is desecrating the five great elements and the divinity that is also present in animals. It is against dharma since this practice will accumulate negative karma because the idea of reincarnation makes every living being into a cosmic family. The meat consumption is obviously against the ideas of Ahimsa and Sanyasa as well. Although not every Hindu is 100% vegetarian (many are), most of their diet consists of grains, lentils, fruits, and vegetables with some Hindus taking a meat dish once in a while. Because of this major emphasis on vegetarian diet, India continues to have one of the least carbon foot prints compared to other countries, according to the Greendex surveys conducted by National Geographic in 2015, 2012, 2010, 2009, and 2008 even as India's beef export has risen sharply due to heavier demand from other countries.⁸

Karma. Our energy consumption behaviors affect our Karma. Karma - a central Hindu teaching - holds that each of our actions creates consequences—good and bad—which constitute our karma and determine our future fate, including the place we will assume when we are reincarnated in our next life. Moral behavior creates good karma, and our behavior towards the energy resources has karmic consequences. Because we have free choice, even though we may have misused or abused the energy

⁸ Geographic, N. (2012). Greendex: Consumer Choice and the Environment- A Worldwide Tracking Survey. <http://environment.nationalgeographic.com/environment/greendex/>

resources in the past, we can choose to protect the energy resources in the future, replacing destructive karmic patterns with good ones.

Livestock production accounts for about 15 % of global greenhouse gas emissions. Americans calling for effective climate change policies must advocate for transparent monitoring of this enormously polluting sector.

Fortunately, global leaders are already collaborating with Hindu political and business leaders to replace India's fossil fuel energy sources with solar based sources. The goal of just sustainable development is to enable the bottom three billion to enter the global middle class, attaining the lower income rungs of the top four billion. This requires a solution adapted to both societies with unlimited clean energy access and those marked by energy poverty. As Professor Ramanathan writes, we must "dial down" the greenhouse gas emissions of superdeveloped nations by shifting to renewable energy, and dial down the pollutants from soot and methane, the "livelihood" emissions of developing nations. Because these short-lived climate pollutants disperse rapidly, a large-scale shift to solar stoves and lighting will have a rapid, positive effect within a few decades.⁹ The shift to air conditioning without hydrofluorocarbons also promises enormous climate benefits.¹⁰ Shifting investments to sustainable energy, and enabling clean energy for cooking and lighting for the bottom three billion through currently available advanced cookstoves and solar lighting, thus will dramatically advance the goal of clean, healthy energy access. If divided by each of the 1.1 billion, this

⁹ Ramanathan, 5.

¹⁰ Coral Davenport, "Nations, Fighting Powerful Refrigerant That Warms Planet, Reach Landmark Deal," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/15/world/afrika/kigali-deal-hfc-air-conditioners.html?_r=0

may cost as little as \$22.¹¹ On the national level, support of the Green Climate Fund advances the implementation of these technologies at the necessary scale and immediate time frame.

The Hindus are now spread across the world with large populations in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, United States, Myanmar, United Kingdom, Canada, South Africa, Mauritius, the Caribbean (West Indies), and Fiji. If one environmental message Hinduism can share with the world and especially people in all these countries, it can be to limit or eliminate the meat consumption, both as an individual behavior approach and as a systemic approach to the food issue globally.

In addition to films such as *Cowspiracy*, there are various researches that conclude that the emissions produced by large-scale meat consumption—due to the methane from massive cow production and deforestation caused by expansion in the meat industry is one of the biggest reasons for climate change. Hindus, thankfully, are already at an advantage by being at the lowest level of meat consumption compared to other communities whom they would like to urge to adopt vegetarian diet. The faith-based institutions globally can commit to serving vegetarian food in their facilities and to implement policies, along with divesting from fossil fuel holdings, to divest from the meat industry. Similarly, governments can integrate a reduction in meat consumption into their climate plans and policies and nations can commit to measuring emissions resulting from the meat industry, which currently is exempted from reporting requirements under most emissions reductions schemes despite representing a massive source of emissions.

Livestock production accounts for *about 15 percent* of greenhouse gas emissions around the world.—“more all the world’s exhaust-belching cars, buses, boats and trains combined”—yet in the United States, the government exempts the meat industry from filing the annual emission reports that 41 other industry sectors are required to submit. It is the only major industrial source of greenhouse gases in the country to be excluded.¹² Americans calling for effective climate change policies must advocate for transparent

¹¹ Ramanathan, 10.

¹² Nathan Halverson, “This Huge Loophole Helps the Meat Industry Hide Its Pollution.” *Mother Jones*, January 5, 2016 <http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2016/01/us-meat-emissions-paris-cop21>

and honest monitoring of this enormously polluting sector.

In summary, the diverse theologies of Hinduism suggest that:

- If all energy sources are divine gifts from the mother earth, meant for the use of all: we must act to ensure energy access through renewable energy, by supporting each nation’s payments to the Green Climate Fund. <https://www.greenclimate.fund/home>
- The five elements – space, air, fire, water, and earth –in an interconnected web of life provide us with renewable energy sources that can continue to support the web of life on the planet. We must move away from fossil fuels to renewable energy, and call for an end to fossil fuel subsidies.
- Human dharma that is in harmony with the earth dharma will protect and conserve earth’s energy resources rather than destroy or exploit them. Each local and national community can advocate for an end to exploiting the earth through polluting extractive processes.
- Simple living is a model for the development of sustainable economies. A cap of about 10 tons/year per capita is estimated to achieve the target emissions that will keep warming below 2°C. This cap will only affect the upper 1.1 billion people in the top four billion, as the bottom three billion currently emit only 5% of total fossil CO₂.¹³ Energy must be consumed sustainably and responsibly by humankind, and we strongly endorse the Hindu practice of vegetarianism as a wise guide for all, and insist upon honest emissions accounting in all industries.
- Our treatment of nature and our usage of energy directly affect our karma. We can choose to protect the energy resources in the future, replacing destructive karmic patterns with good ones.

Just as Yoga, also a gift of Hinduism to the world, vegetarianism can be another helpful gift to improve the individual and planetary health of the world. The link of these ancient traditions to the well-being of the world and all its societies and living communities has never been so strong. And the time to embrace is now!

¹³ Ramanathan, 8.



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