



## Bringing Religious Environmental Ethics into Practice : A Case Study of the Save Ganga Movement

### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

The impact of the Current Environmental Crisis can be widely observed on the lives of human beings in various ways. Ecological catastrophes visit the planet at regular intervals and devastate a wide range of it. Recent devastations that took place in Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir killed thousands of people and caused immeasurable damage to the lives and property of the people remind us about our responsibility towards the nature. To respond the current environmental crisis, several environmental movements have been started in different parts of the globe. Economists, Educationists, Social activists, Environmental scientists etc. play their role in a global effort to mitigate the impact of global environmental crisis either individually or collectively. In a similar way, the religious leaders also play their role in mitigating the threats of the global environmental crisis by actively participating in several movements world over. Efforts are made to bring religious environmental ethics into practice and to protect the cultural identity of the people. The Save Ganga Movement of Matri Sadan, Haridwar, Uttarakhand, India is one of such movements where it is claimed that it was started not only to protect the cultural identity of Hindus but also to protect the planet from its destruction. This paper thus, critically analyses the religious aspect of the movement and also its relevance in the global efforts in addressing the threats that emanate from the current ecological crisis.

Ours is a period when the human community is in a search of new and sustaining relationships to the earth amidst an environmental crisis that threatens the very existence of all life-forms on the planet. While the particular causes and solutions of this crisis are being debated by scientists, economists, and policymakers, the facts of widespread destruction are causing alarm in many quarters. Indeed, from some perspectives the future of human life itself appears threatened. As Daniel Maguire has succinctly observed, "If current trends continue, we will not." Thomas Berry, the former director of the Riverdale Center for Religious Research, has also raised the stark question, "Is the human a viable species on an endangered planet?"

From resource depletion and species extinction to pollution overload and toxic surplus, the planet is struggling against unprecedented assaults. This is aggravated by population explosion, industrial growth, technological manipulation, and military proliferation heretofore unknown by the human community. From many accounts the basic elements which sustain life sufficient water, clean air, and arable land are at risk. The challenges are formidable and well documented. The solutions, however, are more elusive and complex. Clearly, this crisis has economic, political, social and religious dimensions which require more detailed analysis than we can provide here. The realization about the gravity of the current ecological crisis led the people from different fields to respond this problem in their own ways. Economists, Scientists, Policymakers, Environmentalists, and the religious leaders are in the search of the best possible strategy to counter the threats emanating from the degradation of the environment. Several movements have been launched in different parts of the globe to save the planet from its destructions and these are led by the people who belong to different fields. Among such movements that has been launched to save the environment, many of them are being led by religious leaders. These movements claim to be based on the religious environmental ethics found in different religions. The Save Ganga Movement that has been launched to save the Ganga from mining in Haridwar, Uttarakhand, India is one among them where it is claimed that it is based on the

principle of Panmahabhutas of Upanishad. It is also claimed by the activists of this movement that it has been launched not only to save the sacred character of the river Ganga but also to respond the global environmental crisis and their movement is founded upon the principle of "think globally, act locally".

### The evidence for rapid climate change

The current environmental crisis has been manifested in the forms of global warming and climate change. Several evidences could be put before us that show the seriousness of the situation. For example, due to the rapid climate change the global sea level rose about 17 centimetres (6.7 inches) in the last century. The rate in the last decade, however, is nearly double that of the last century. All three major global surface temperature reconstructions

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show that Earth has warmed since 1880. Most of this warming has occurred since the 1970s, with the 20 warmest years having occurred since 1981 and with all 10 of the warmest years occurring in the past 12 years. Even though the 2000s witnessed a solar output decline resulting in an unusually deep solar minimum in 2007-2009, surface temperatures continue to increase. The number of record high temperature events has been increasing, while the number of record low temperature events has been decreasing, since 1950. We also witnessed increasing numbers of intense rainfall events. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the acidity of surface ocean waters has increased by about 30 percent. This increase is the result of humans emitting more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and hence more being absorbed into the oceans. The amount of carbon dioxide absorbed by the upper layer of the oceans is increasing by about 2 billion tons per year.

### Importance of the religious environmental ethics

For many people an environmental crisis of this complexity and scope is not only the result of certain economic, political, and social factors. It is also a moral and spiritual crisis which, in order

to be addressed, will require broader philosophical and religious understandings of ourselves as creatures of nature, embedded in life cycles and dependent on ecosystems.

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Religions, thus, need to be re-examined in light of the current environmental crisis. This is because religions help to shape our attitudes toward nature in both conscious and unconscious ways. Religions provide basic interpretive stories of who we are, what nature is, where we have come from, and where we are going. This comprises a worldview of a society. Religions also suggest how we should treat other humans and how we should relate to nature. These values make up the ethical orientation of a society. Religions thus generate worldviews and ethics which underlie fundamental attitudes and values of different cultures and societies. As the historian Lynn White observed, "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion."

#### Matri Sadan and Its Save Ganga Movement

Matri Sadan is a spiritual organization situated at Kankhal, Jagjeetpur, Haridwar. It is struggling against environmental pollution and corruption for last 15 years. Since last 15 years, they have achieved remarkable success against pollution and in exposing the official-mafia nexus. Their means of struggle is non-violence, fast and satyagraha. Matri Sadan was recently in news because of the death of Swami Nigmanand on 13th June, 2011 who was on fast unto death against illegal mining in the River Ganga at Haridwar. Matri Sadan is actively engaged in countering the corruption and preserving the environment.

#### Theoretical aspects of the Movement

According to the Head of Matri Sadan, Swami Shivanand, their movement is based on the principle of Pancha Mahabhutas (The Five Great Element). It creates a web of life that is

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shown forth in the structure and interconnectedness of the cosmos and human body. Hinduism teaches that the five great elements (space, air, fire, water and earth) that constitute the environment 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 explains 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 natural world. For Hinduism, nature and the environment are not outside us, not alien or hostile to us. They are an inseparable part of our existence, and they constitute our very bodies.

Through the Save Ganga Movement, Matri Sadan attempts to bring the principle of Pancha Mahabhutas into the practice. It is an attempt to maintain a balance between these elements because any imbalance will cause environment badly and the present environmental crisis is a suitable example of it. Realizing the threats, the world is facing today; we have launched the Save Ganga Movement to respond this global problem at local

level. In the beginning of the interaction, the Researcher wanted to know the Hinduism's response to the crisis, and how environmental ethics found in Hindu religious text are brought into the practices, especially through the Save Ganga Movement of Matri Sadan? In

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the response of this question, he opined that several provisions can be found in many sacred texts of Hindu religion which are fully devoted to the protection of environment. We are trying to bring all those provisions into practice through various ways and the Save Ganga Movement is one of them. He explained that there are two types of soul. One is "internal" and the other is "external". Both are interlinked. External soul is the reflection of one's internal soul and the purity of both is essentials. Impurities in internal soul have bearing upon external soul. For example, the impurity in internal soul leads a man to problems like corruption, selfishness etc. If a man is internally impure, he wants to fulfil his own needs without considering the needs of others. He wants to acquire more and more and in this process he becomes corrupt and selfish. The problems of environment are a suitable example of this. Cutting of trees, illegal mining in the river like Ganga are the reflection of impure external soul and also the result of impure internal soul. What is happening in the river Ganga in Kumbh Mela areas is a fit example of his explanation where corrupt and selfish motive of mafia, officers are causing harm to the sacredness of Ganga. The harmony/balance between the external and internal soul is essential because environmental crisis of the world is the result of imbalance between internal and external soul of the people and by Save Ganga Movement, we are trying to correct this imbalance between internal and external soul of the people who are involved in the plight of Ganga.

#### Concluding Remarks

Hinduism has been a source of knowledge/philosophy that governs the life of the people. It shapes our attitude towards the nature and regulates every sphere of our life. Certain codes of conduct have been recommended by following which human beings can spend their life

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in a more appropriate and effective way. Each and every constituent of the environment has been given special place. Today, the entire world is facing the heat of the environmental crisis where the intervention of world's religions is sought desperately. Hinduism in particular has a role to play in the Indian sub-continent because of its dominance in the region. While assessing the contribution of Hinduism in an initiative to counter the threats of environmental crisis, the Matri Sadan's Save Ganga Movement was chosen as a case study to develop an understanding on the issue. From various articles published by Matri Sadan, it seems that Matri Sadan is concerned about the current state of the environment. Their relentless campaign against mining in the river Ganga has two aspects. First, they consider river Ganga as sacred and protect its sacred character through the Save Ganga Movement. Second, the Save Ganga Movement is unconsciously playing its role in the initiative taken at global level to address the causes of global environmental crisis at local level. The Save Ganga Movement has been launched primarily to protect the sacred character of mother Ganga because it is regarded as the goddess of Hindus. Mining activities are regarded as interference in the religious activities of Hindus and also considered an attempt to sacrifice the Ganga. Whatever contribution it is making in this global effort, is only a by-product of the movement.

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