Dharmic Environmentalism: Hindu Traditions and Ecological Care

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A Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts, Memorial University, Religious Studies

Memorial University of Newfoundland

August, 2020

St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

Abstract

In the midst of environmental degradation, Religious Studies scholars have begun to assess whether or not religious traditions contain ecological resources which may initiate the restructuring of human-nature relationships. In this thesis, I explore whether it is possible to locate within Hindu religious traditions, especially lived Hindu traditions, an environmental ethic. By exploring the arguments made by scholars in the fields of Religion and Ecology, I examine both the ecological "paradoxes" seen by scholars to be inherent to Hindu ritual practice and the ways in which forms of environmental care exist or are developing within lived religion. I do the latter by examining the efforts that have been made by the Bishnoi, the Chipko Movement, Swadhyay Parivar and Bhils to conserve and protect local ecologies and sacred landscapes.

Acknowledgements

I express my gratitude to the supportive community that I found in the Department of Religious Studies. To Dr. Patricia Dold for her invaluable supervision and continued kindness. This project would not have been realized without her support. To my partner Michael, for his continued care, patience, and support. To my friends and family for their encouragement.

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INTRODUCTION

> "Nature is a friend, revered as a mother, obeyed as a father and nurtured as a beloved child. It is sacred because man [sic] depends on it and because everything is sanctified, including man and the terrifying aspects of nature, such as landslides, earthquakes and storms. Natural phenomena are the manifestations or expressions of the gods. They express the principles that govern the world and the cosmic order, *rita*."[2]

Religion and Ecology

In the midst of environmental degradation, communities worldwide are being called upon to take urgent action towards mitigating the catastrophic effects of climate change. While immediate action in the form of collective and global efforts is needed in order to address the crisis at hand, it has also been suggested that environmental repair can be initiated by returning to the study of religious traditions and reading ecological problems through their lenses. Mary Tucker and John Grim—who are leading scholars in the field of religion and ecology—argue that a reacquaintance with traditional religious teachings, ritual practices, texts and cosmologies may allow for a restructuring of human-nature relations, and that re-examining core religious values may allow for individuals to "conceive of their own roles, missions and identities, for such reflections demand a new sense of the sacred as not divorced from the earth itself."[3]

When considering how religion can be understood in relation to ecology, Ryszard Sadowski, a professor and the chair of Ecophilosophy at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, argues that it is necessary for global environmental initiatives to understand the worldviews of smaller religious communities whose "identit[ies] and history are part of the

[2] Nanditha Krishna, *Hinduism and Nature* (India: Penguin Random House, 2017), 2.
[3] Mary R. Tucker and John Grim, "Series Forward," in *Christianity and Ecology,* Dieter Hessel and Rosemary Ruether, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xxv.

landscape."[4] He also says that "appealing to religious motivations to secure a broader and more engaged participation of the local communities greatly increases the chances of success of many environmental initiatives."[5] At present, religions "are now widely seen as an important ally in the fight against the ecological crisis."[6]

The Paradox of World-Negation: Hindu Metaphysics and Ecology

Despite the potential for environmental repair that scholars like Tucker, Grim and Sadowski see in religion, it is also conceivable that religion has been a driving force in advancing environmental catastrophe. India, for example, has become one of the largest polluters of the world, and thus a major contributor to the environmental crisis that currently faces our planet. Whether or not this damage has been furthered by religious values and practices has been contested, as will be discussed at various points in this thesis. However, given the current state of sacred sites across India, such as the Gangā—which is currently the most polluted river in the world—it would appear as though Hinduism may present a seemingly paradoxical reading of human-nature relations. Similarly, where there are currently an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 sacred groves across India, these sites are frequently destroyed by clear-cutting operations. This "paradox" might be accounted for by the metaphysics of Hinduism, particularly those interpreted as world-negating.

Like Buddhist and Jain traditions, Hindu traditions are often understood to be world-negating religious traditions in the sense that there is a devaluing of the world in the practice of

[4] Ryszard Sadowski, "Religious Motivations for the Protection of Forest Ecosystems," *Folia Oecologica* 39, 2 (2012): 139.
[5] Ibid., 140.
[6] Ibid.

asceticism and the cultivation of insight into one's Self. For example, in Advaita Vedānta, the *ātman* or true self is seen to be one in the same as the all-pervading God, or the Supreme Being (*Brahman*) and utterly other than anything that changes. The cultivation of insight into the Self (*Ātman*) enables one to escape from the bonds of karma and the fate of rebirth in this changing, interdependent world, to be liberated from nature and transcend it as an eternal, unchanging, self-sufficient spirit or reality.[7]

Mary Tucker, Christopher Key Chapple and others working in the fields of religious studies and ecology have suggested that such world-negating tendencies may have an influence on how people perceive the natural world, and how they come to understand the sanctity of the environment. Based on this connection, it would appear as though religious understandings of the environment may have contributed to India's environmental degradation. Given similar examples from other religious traditions, it is possible that "the material world of nature [has] been devalued by religion."[8]

At the same time, a rise in the number of religious environmental movements across India may indicate a promising outlook for the restoration of land and other elements of nature as sacred. However, there is still a question of how religion can, or has, played a role in the formation of these initiatives, and whether Hindu traditions have positively or negatively

[7] Advaita Vedānta (non-dualism) is attributed to the Hindu philosopher Śaṅkara. This philosophy, Hillary Rodrigues says, "proposes that there is only one thing that is absolutely real, and that is Brahman." Śaṅkara "upholds the path of transcendental knowledge (*jñāna marga*), as the ultimate means through which ignorance is removed and liberation attained. Since any quality that one predicates upon Brahman is a distorting limitation on its essential nature, Advaita Vedānta promotes the approach of negation, known as *neti-neti* (not "this," not "that"). This *via negative* plays a part in why the philosophy is called non-dualism (*advaita*) rather than monism. Monism is a philosophical standpoint that makes the positive assertion of 'one-ness.' However, such a positive assertion inevitably triggers the opposing conceptual response of "not-one," which then exists in a dualistic tension with the concept of 'one-ness.' Non-dualism is a standpoint that negates any plurality or duality, especially that generated by any kind of conceptual thought." (143)—For a more in-depth discussion of this philosophical school, see: Hillary P. Rodrigues, *Introducing Hinduism: Second Edition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 141-144.
[8] Tucker and Grim, "Series Forward," xxv.

influenced human-nature relationships. Can the ecological themes that emerge within Hindu traditions such as the valuing of nature for its affiliation with the gods and goddesses, translate into an environmental ethics? If so, what are the efforts being made by smaller communities actually transforming the environment? What local efforts exist that draw upon Hindu religious traditions? What role does religion play in inspiring environmental concern amongst smaller Hindu sects and communities in India?

Two Streams of Ecological Thought

Questions concerning the potential for religious environmentalism in India have led to the emergence of two streams of religio-ecological thought amongst academics and environmental activists. On the one hand, many have argued that there are problematic elements of Hindu beliefs and ritual practices that appear to actively jeopardize local ecologies. At the heart of these arguments is a concern for how the Hindu "sacred" is perceived as being a self-restoring and purifying entity. This notion of preserving purity is seen to be problematic for several reasons, and scholars have noted that Hindu nature-worship does not always translate into a lived environmentalism. [9] Many scholars, such as Emma Tomalin, have also questioned the ecological potential of "Hinduism" as a whole, while suggesting that Hindu religious beliefs prohibit—or at least complicate—the development of an environmental ethics.[10]

[9] For example, it has been argued by Mukul Sharma that Hindu views of purity and pollution in relation to the environment have contributed to a rise in eco-nationalism, or *Hindutva*. See: Mukul Sharma, "Green and Saffron: Hindu Nationalism and Indian Environmental Politics" (India: Permanent Black, 2011).

[10] In the methodology section of this thesis, I discuss why it is important to substitute the term "Hinduism" with "Hindu traditions" when possible. See also: Richard King, "The Modern Myth of 'Hinduism,'" in *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East* (London: Routledge, 1999).

However, while there appears to be a tension between Hindu "religiosity" and environmentalism, scholars have also made counter-arguments against the notion that there is an absence of ecological ethics in Hindu traditions. They support this argument through examining how religiosity can be mobilized towards restoring biodiversity.[11] Christopher Key Chapple, for example, suggests that in re-interpreting Hindu ritual and observing village traditions, teachings on nonviolence, and movements of environmental activism, it becomes evident that a religious environmental ethic exists within Hindu traditions.[12] Moreover, themes of world-negation can be challenged by retracing traditional teachings about the presence of the divine in nature. Thus, in mapping the ecological potential within Hindu traditions, Chapple says, it is useful to begin by looking to certain "tribal insights into ecosystems, [and] Brahmanical models that emphasize an intimacy between the human and the cosmos."[13] Building on this notion, Pankaj Jain argues that local religious communities across India have been active in mobilizing religious teachings to better the environment for decades.[14]

[11] It should be noted that the scholars who have taken this position do not necessarily disagree with the seemingly problematic tenants of Hindu traditions or disavow that lived ritual practices may be harmful to the environment.
[12] See, for example: Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds. *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000).
[13] Ibid., xl.
[14] Pankaj Jain is a scholar of religion with a research focus on Jainism and Hinduism. In *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability*, he discusses the ritual practices and belief systems of the Bishnoi, Swadhyay Parivar and the Bhils and how they have fostered an environmental ethics of care. His study has proven to be integral to this project, and it will thus be discussed extensively in the last chapter. See: Pankaj Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability* (Texas: Ashgate, 2011).

Thesis Question and Statement

The guiding question of my thesis is whether it is possible to locate within Hindu religious traditions, especially lived religion, an environmental ethics.[15] My argument then, is that not only do we see potential environmental practices in texts and rituals of Hindu traditions, but that such practice is clear in contemporary communities in south Asia, who ground their activism in beliefs, principles, and practices of Hindu religious traditions. By exploring the arguments made by scholars in the fields of religion and ecology, I examine the ecological "paradoxes" seen by scholars to be inherent to Hindu ritual practice, and the forms of environmental care that exist within lived religion. I do the latter by examining the efforts that have been made by the Bishnoi, the Chipko Movement, Swadhyay Parivar and Bhils to conserve and protect ecologies and sacred landscapes. I will explore these efforts through the lens of *dharmic ecology*. These acts of environmental care, as part of the day to day religious practice of people in these communities, are examples of lived religion. Lived or vernacular religion are labels commonly used in Religious Studies, Folklore, and Anthropology for this dimension of religious traditions and are often contrasted with the official institutions, ideals, and formal prescriptions and proscriptions of a religion.[16]

[15] Here, I refer to "lived religion." This is a term that denotes the study of how the worldviews of religious communities are informed by their direct experiences with religious customs, ritual and belief systems. Moreover, it is a study of how religion is part of the day-to-day lives of people, and how it fosters community-building and influences culture.

[16] Lived religion, Nancy Ammerman says, has had a substantial impact on how scholars of Religious Studies, Sociology, History, Philosophy and Theology perceive and understand religion as a whole. Through studying the everyday lives of religious communities, rather than solely focussing on the role of institutions and canonical material, this notion of the "lived" has brought to light new perspectives from "previously-excluded voices." She continues to say that "focus on practice has encompassed dimensions of embodiment, discourse and materiality." See: Nancy Ammerman, "Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of Its Contours and Frontiers." Nordic Journal of Religion & Society 29, 2 (2016): 83, doi:10.18261/issn.1890-7008-2016-02-01. See also:

Literature Review and Chapter Breakdown

In the first chapter of this thesis, I discuss "models" of environmentalism which have been effectively (or ineffectively) applied in India. The first chapter offers both a comparison and critique of anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric cosmologies as framed through the work of Lynn White Jr., as well as a critique of radical deep ecological models. It should be noted here that the term "environmentalism" is, in the present context, synonymous with acts of environmental conservation and preservation. As I discuss in the third chapter of this thesis, contemporary understandings of religious environmentalism differ from acts of "nature worship." Religious environmentalism refers to acts of conservation or environmental repair (such as planting trees, reducing pollution or practicing animal stewardship) which have been inspired by a community's religious beliefs. On the other hand, nature worship refers to ritual actions and belief systems which are concerned with the natural world and are performed, for example, for one or more divine being—which in turn have a positive effect on the worshipper, who is, for example, absolved of impurity and is subsequently protected by a deity. Nature worship, as Emma Tomalin explains, does not necessarily lend itself to the conservation of the environment.

The second chapter explores environmental themes that emerge within Hindu texts and traditions. Here, I will discuss how Hindu worldviews and certain ritual practices emphasize the importance of worshipping sacred landscapes, trees and plants. Included is a discussion of three rituals: marrying trees, Somvati Amavasya, and Durgā Pūjā. I will primarily be drawing on the works of Nanditha Krishna, Christopher Key Chapple, Vijaya Nagarajan, David Haberman and

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Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Hillary Rodrigues, while referencing passages from certain texts: such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Vrukshayurveda,* Upaniṣads and *Rg Veda*.

I then proceed with a review of arguments made by scholars who suggest that there is an "embedded" ethics of environmentalism in Hinduism, ethics that can be identified in Brahmanical philosophies and the worldviews of "folk" or "village" communities across India. The presence of nature worship; of a reverence for natural phenomena; of associations of sacrality and divinity within natural phenomena in a number of Hindu texts and traditions; and, in ethics of nonviolence, I suggest, might reflect concrete instantiations of an embedded ecological ethics.

Chapter two concludes with a consideration of a connection between nature-worship and Hindu nationalism. That is, scholars such as Mukul Sharma argue that the themes and philosophical orientations surrounding the worship of sacred landscapes inform an eco-nationalist rhetoric in India (in *Hindutva*). While a detailed interrogation of this subject goes beyond the scope of this thesis, it is necessary for the reader to be aware of how the agenda of "religion and ecology" has been seen (by some) to foster xenophobia within India.

In the third chapter of this thesis, I examine the works of Emma Tomalin, Vijaya Nagarajan, Bruce Sullivan and Kelly Alley. These scholars discuss how certain Hindu ritual practices and belief systems come into conflict with a lived environmentalism. Chapter three therefore examines the tensions between a "religious environmentalism" and nature worship (Tomalin), the "intermittent sacrality" of nature through ritual (Nagarajan), the sacred as a commodity (Sullivan), and the "paradox" of purity and pollution (Alley).

The final chapter of this thesis explores how, despite arguments that have been made against the potential of a Hindu environmental ethic, localized Hindu groups have made ongoing

efforts to restore and protect India's sacred landscapes and the natural environment. Relying on the works of Nancy Auer Falk, Pankaj Jain, Christopher Key Chapple, Ryszard Sadowski, Irene Dankelman and Vasudha Narayanan, I frame this chapter through first exploring the differences between the "Great Tradition" and "Little Tradition," and proceed with a further discussion on the centrality of dharma, or *dharmic ecology* in Hindu traditions. I then proceed to discuss the Bishnoi, the Chipko Movement, the Swadhyay Parivar and the Bhils.

Methodology

There are several key scholars from the fields of religious studies, sociology and environmental studies whose work I will be engaging with extensively in this thesis. Given that the field of religion and ecology is still relatively "new" within the context of academia in general, and Religious Studies in particular, I will primarily be consulting the works of contemporary scholars who study this topic through a socio-cultural approach and who have a strong focus on lived religious practice.

I approach this thesis through a historical, socio-cultural, and secular lens to explore how Hindu traditions and texts demonstrate an overarching concern for the environment. In so doing, I intend to illuminate how Hindu cultural practices and personal attitudes towards the environment have been, and continue to be, influenced by religious duty or "dharma." Through this approach, I hope to adequately introduce the reader to a variety of belief systems and cultures of various Indian communities and how they perceive local ecologies. I also offer critiques of common Western readings of Hindu traditions throughout, while emphasizing the importance of local initiatives and environmental activism. Moreover, I endeavor to

acknowledge the crucial relevance of various factors such as poverty, caste and the land rights of Indian village communities, and how governmental policy further challenges the formation of Indian environmentalism. At the same time, I must also acknowledge that a full exploration of these factors is beyond the scope of this thesis.[17]

It is my goal to examine how Hindu traditions and customs inform localized environmental activism. In so doing, I suggest that these practices and belief systems may be viewed within the larger context of discourse surrounding climate change and environmental politics. I recognize that, given my positionality as a scholar approaching this material as an outsider to Indian traditions and culture, it is necessary to establish my position in relation to the subject matter that is discussed in this thesis.

As the reader will notice throughout this project, and as I am also aware, Western interpretations of Hindu traditions and cultural practices can prove to be problematic given their tendency to either romanticize or disparage components of these multifaceted and diverse traditions and cultural practices. As scholars such as Ramachandra Guha and Emma Tomalin discuss, these romanticized visions of Hindu religiosity often contain neo-colonial undertones; and, it has been argued that, in particular, the radical Western framework of "deep ecology" must be interrogated and, more broadly, that Western scholarship on Hindu traditions must be decolonized. Similarly, as Mallory Nye has said, scholars must also bear in mind how the study of religion in general is often synonymous with the study of race; and, a politics of difference often permeates through the works of religious studies scholars. "The idea of religion," Nye says, "is also the product of European colonialism. The concept of religion and religions has been developed as a means for Europeans (and others within the various colonial spheres) to think

[17] For a fuller discussion of how these factors inform Indian environmentalism, see: Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (London: Earthscan Publications, 1997).

about and implement the governance of difference."[18] Studying Hindu traditions through the lens of religious studies then, carries with it the risk of amplifying differences and using those differences to exert power over other peoples' cultures and communities. Clearly then, a project like mine needs to proceed with awareness of the potential for neo-colonial misrepresentation and harm, and it must only proceed with a decolonized approach.

In "Reframing Understandings of Religion: Lessons from India," Lori Beaman draws attention to the common struggles that Western scholars have had in their attempts to study religious traditions in India: "mistakenly," she says, "they use modes of categorization and study most familiar to them, and with which they have been socialized."[19] These frameworks create further distance between the scholar and their area of study. A scholar who is thus studying from the perspective of an "outsider" to a religious tradition or culture, Beaman explains, needs to reassess their existing research methods. For example, she says, there are several important questions for one to ask while studying Indian traditions as an outsider: "As a Western scholar, what can I learn from the complexity of religion in India, particularly about living with religious diversity? How might I re-equip my research toolkit to draw on the insights from the Indian context?"[20] These questions, I believe, are integral to consider whilst studying religious traditions that one is not part of.

My positionality as a Western environmental activist introduces further complexities about my approach to the work of this thesis. I do not seek here to diminish the lived experiences of Hindu communities, nor do I suggest that there is a "right way" to practice environmental care. Nor do I aim to teach Hindus about the presence or absence of or the potential for an

[18] Mallory Nye, "Race and Religion," Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 31 (2019): 224.
[19] Lori Beaman, "Reframing Understandings of Religion: Lessons from India," *India International Centre Quarterly* 40, 3/4 (2013): 36, www.jstor.org/stable/24394388.
[20] Ibid., 36.

environmental ethic within Hindu texts, traditions and communities. Instead, my aim is to learn from Hindu traditions; and, as I have discovered through this research project, a crucially important source for such learning can be found in the work that is being done within Hindu communities. This project thus seeks to explore the different lenses through which scholars and environmental activists understand environmental ethics in relation to Hindu traditions, texts, and practices. Again, the results of this exploration are not intended to be instructive to Hindus or South Asians. Rather, my conviction is that studying Hindu traditions and ecology together may be helpful for environmental activists everywhere. Moreover, it may be beneficial for Western activists to learn about the work, concepts, and practices in non-Western communities, rather than assume that Western models and environmentalist traditions can be applied globally. To state this more concisely, my aim is to learn from Hindu traditions and communities.[21]

In order to counteract the problems inherent to Western scholarship on Hindu traditions and ecology, I have sought to include the works and perspectives of South Asian scholars when developing my arguments and exploring case studies, and I have examined the practices of localized Hindu (or Indian) communities. Against the tendency to either romanticize or disparage these traditions and practices, to measure their "success" or "failure" (according to a Western framework), I will seek, through the lens of a "dharmic ecology," to surface an immanent religio-environmental ethic. "Dharmic ecology," as I will explain in further detail in the fourth chapter,

[21] Indeed, Thomas B. Coburn adopts a similar stance and approach in his translation and study of the *Devi-Mahatmya* when he acknowledges that this text's goddess-centered religious vision might have insights to offer to Western feminists and to theorizing about gender. And further, that Hindu practice centered on this text might well inform and reshape Religious Studies scholars' theorizing about the nature and functions of sacred texts. See: Thomas B. Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi-Mahatmya and a Study of Its Interpretation* (Delhi: Satguru Publications, 1992). Loriliai Biernacki likewise examines discourses about females and female speech in north-east Indian Tantric texts from the 15th to 18th centuries and then uses their constructions to critique modern Western receptions of female speech. See: Loriliai Biernacki, *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra* (Oxford University Press: 2007). Examples could easily be multiplied of non-Hindu scholars whose studies aim to learn from Hindu texts and traditions.

illuminates the ways through which dharmic duty can be extended into caring for the natural world: the environment, animals, and other non-human lifeforms.

Moreover, it is necessary to note that there is no single definition of "Hinduism," nor is there a founder. K. M. Sen argues that Hinduism "is more like a tree that has *grown* gradually than like a building that has been *erected* by some great architect at some definite point in time."[22] This analogy is expanded upon further by Julius Lipner, who says Hindu traditions are comparable to the Great Banyan of Kolkata:

> Like the tree, Hinduism is an ancient collection of 'roots' and 'branches' representing varied symbols, beliefs and practices that make up individual sub-traditions, which are all interconnected in various ways. […] The whole forms a web or grid, microcosmically 'polycentric', that is, having many centres, but macrocosmically one, with a canopy covering, in temporal terms, a span of millennia. There is no founder-trunk, from which different branches proliferate. There is, rather, an expanding tracery of trunks and branches. But unlike the botanical model, the Hindu banyan is not uniform to look at. Rather, it is a network of variety, one distinctive sub-tradition shading more or less into another, the whole forming a marvelous unity in diversity.[23]

Given this multidimensional nature and complex history of Indian traditions that both Sen and Lipner refer to, I refrain from using the term "Hinduism" whenever possible, and instead use the term "Hindu traditions" in my discussion of the worldviews of different Hindu texts and communities.

Moreover, another important distinction must be made between the use of the terminology of "religion" and "*dharma*" in speaking of Hindu traditions. *Dharma* is not synonymous with religion. Instead, it can be thought of as a path of righteousness: an ethical orientation, which "implies correct action, [and] practice […] rather than a requisite set of beliefs

[22] K. M. Sen, *Hinduism* (England: Penguin Books, 1961), 14.
[23] Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 6.

(although it does not preclude beliefs)."[24] Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger says that the term *dharma* "can be interpreted, then, as that which holds the world together: ethics, ways of living, a "moral coherence."[25] The words "religion" and "dharma" will be used throughout this thesis depending on context. It is, however, necessary to illuminate their different connotations. Also, despite the fact that "there is an Indian language term for universal *dharma—sanatana dharma* (lit., eternal, universal order)" Flueckiger says, "there is not consensus as to what this universal might be. Put another way, it is not clear what the minimal practices or theologies might be that identify a person as a Hindu. In daily life, there is no assumption that there is a single *dharma* appropriate for all to follow. Rather, an individual's *dharma* is determined by region, caste, age, gender, class, and other specific contexts."[26]

Furthermore, it is necessary to establish that belief systems pertaining to the environment vary widely across India. This is due to the fact that "contemporary India is an agglomeration of over 40,000 endogamous groups [...] [and approximately] 37,000 groups are structured in the Hindu caste system. The remaining 3,000 groups constitute different tribes, religious communities and other communities like Parsis and Diddis who immigrated in recent history."[27]

Given the complexity of studying Hindu traditions, if we are to begin exploring the multi-faceted belief systems of Indic communities, Agehananda Bharati's model serves as a good starting point. Bharati broke "Hinduism" down to the following three categories:

a) "Village Hinduism" made up of grassroots, "little tradition" Hindu spirituality including shamanistic traditions of ecstatic experience but with some observance of all-India mainline Hindu practices.

[24] Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *Everyday Hinduism* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 3.
[25] Marriot, quoted in ibid., 3.
[26] Ibid., 6.
[27] Kailash C. Malhotra, "Cultural and Ecological Dimensions of Sacred Groves in India," *Indian National Science Academy* (June 2001): 12—in-text citation removed.

b) Literate or scripture-based "Sanskrit, Vedic Hinduism" of a "great tradition" variety, represented by Brahmin priests, pandits, itinerant ascetics or monastic practitioners and,
c) "Renaissance Hinduism" or Neo-Hinduism of what Bharati calls the urban alienate, a portion of the new urban middle class, [often followers] of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Satya Sai Baba and many others.[28]

In this thesis, I will thus primarily be examining the role that Village Hindu traditions play in creating an environmental ethic through juxtaposing it with the "Great Tradition." Historical readings of Hindu traditions will be brought into conversation with contemporary scholarship to explore the role that Indic religiosity plays in determining the state of the environment in India. Moreover, the efforts being made by local village communities will be explored in depth through a study of the Bishnoi, Chipko Movement, Swadhyay Parivar, and the Bhils.

[28] Chapple, "Introduction," xxxix.

CHAPTER 1

Environmental Models and the Potential for an "Embedded Ecology"

Introduction

This chapter elucidates the differences between Western and South Asian religious environmental models. In so doing, I hope to illustrate where Hindu traditions are situated within the larger context of religio-ecological fields of inquiry. Before proceeding, it is necessary to discuss the historical developments through which religiosity gradually became distanced from an ecological ethic in Western contexts.

I begin here by discussing the work of Lynn White Jr., who famously wrote the essay titled "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" in 1967. White traces the point at which our relationship with the environment began to change back to the seventh century: the time in which new agricultural technologies were being developed alongside the rise of Christianity. While the introduction of these technologies reduced the amount of physical labour that was required to care for the land, it was at this point, he argues, that "[m]an's relation to the soil was profoundly changed. Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature."[29] At the same time, Christianity "established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."[30] This vision of mastery was "reinforced by a strong sense of the transcendence of God above nature."[31] According to White, this concept of mastery over nature has since become embedded in Western religious

[29] Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1205, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1720120.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

worldviews, which have thus created a "dominantly human-focused morality."[32] White therefore argues that "biblical attitudes toward the earth had encouraged overconsumption of natural resources and a callous attitude toward the realm of the nonhuman."[33]

Christian eco-theologians today have argued for the importance of developing a new land-ethic: one that reconsiders how Western religious teachings contain within them an ecological concern. New Western "models are potentially fruitful for giving a theological backing for urgent social agendas such as ecology, feminism, and the liberation of oppressed peoples."[34] However, while new models of religio-environmental care have emerged in the West, it must be kept in mind that these models remain unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and that these may not be effectively applied to all religious or spiritual traditions. Additionally, it is important to recall the long-lasting influence of White's (predominantly negative) reading of religion and ecology on the work of modern scholarship.

Anthropocentrism and Non-Anthropocentrism

Although it has been argued by scholars such as White that the Judeo-Christian tradition is anthropocentric, Asian and Indigenous "religious" teachings are said to encourage world-repair through their non-anthropocentric cosmologies. For many of these traditions, Mary Tucker explains,[35] nature is not an entity to be mastered. Instead, it holds sacred value and thus requires care and protection. It is for their non-anthropocentric worldviews that these traditions are often thought to be exemplary models for environmental change. Within the West, scholarship on

[32] Tucker and Grim, "Series Forward," xxv.
[33] Chapple, "Introduction," xxxvii.
[34] Patricia Mumme, "Models and Images for a Vaiṣṇava Environmental Theology: The Potential Contribution of Śrīvaiṣṇavism," in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance E. Nelson (New York: SUNY, 1998), 134.
[35] See: Tucker and Grim, "Series Forward."

these religious traditions, including Hindu traditions, often emphasizes that the unity shared between humans and the land is embedded in the fabric of spiritual or religious cosmologies.

Although it seems evident that Indigenous and Asian religious traditions share a different view of the environment than those of Christian traditions, to suggest that these religious traditions, such as Hindu or Buddhist, possess the tools to correct environmental catastrophe illuminates a problem in both Western society and scholarship on religion and ecology: the tendency to romanticize Asian religious traditions, while ignoring the fact that "the countries in which these religions have been practiced have had a lamentable record in ecological disasters and rampant industrialization."[36]

On Environmental Models in India

While it is necessary to consider the origins of environmental catastrophe and to examine the impacts that socio-economic changes have had on religiosity as a whole, it is equally as important for us to understand the differences between Western and Indian "models" of environmentalism. It is imperative to compare Western and Indian environmentalism in order to comprehend how Hindu religiosity can become situated within its own model of environmentalism. In this way, we can distinguish extrinsic and impositional Western models (such as deep ecology) from the models of environmentalism that are immanent to, and emerge from, Hindu traditions. Although the efforts of conservation movements in the West have largely been centred around the introduction of wilderness reserves, ecologically sustainable resources and the reduction of pollutants and toxins, Ramachandra Guha, for example, argues that another

[36] Vasudha Narayanan, "'One Tree Is Equal to Ten Sons': Hindu Responses to the Problems of Ecology, Population, and Consumption," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, 2 (1997): 294, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1465767.

model of conservation is necessary for India given "the immediate, pressing needs of local populations."[37]

The Problem with American Models: A Critique of Deep Ecology

While climate catastrophe is often interpreted and "remedied" through scientific or political measures, many conservation models have also drawn inspiration from philosophical traditions. One form of "radical environmentalism" which has been observed in the West (and imposed on India) is the model of "deep ecology." This field of inquiry was introduced by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1973. Although the characteristics of deep ecology vary widely, scholars who apply this methodology to environmental discourse are concerned with philosophies of nature, or "eco-sophies," and stipulate that "there is no 'ontological gap' between humans and the natural world."[38] A distinction is also made between shallow ecology and a deep ecology, where the former examines the "anthropocentric […] which ascribes to *Homo sapiens* a position of dominance and superiority *over nature,*"[39] and the latter concerns "deep questioning, right down to [the] fundamental root causes"[40] of our estrangement from nature. Rather than attempting to remedy environmental collapse with temporary solutions, a deep ecological approach seeks to re-illuminate "whole systems based on values and methods that truly preserve the ecological and cultural diversity of natural systems."[41] Studying religion through a deep-ecological lens, then, is to have "a general *spiritual orientation* of intimacy with and reverence

[37] Ibid.
[38] David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, eds., *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 6.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Alan Drengson, "Some Thoughts on the Deep Ecology Movement," *Foundation for Deep Ecology*, accessed February 26, 2019, http://www.deepecology.org/deepecology.htm.
[41] Ibid.

for the earth."[42] This religious (or "spiritual") deep ecological orientation sees nature as possessing divine properties, and that all beings, animals, animate and non-animate organisms are somehow interconnected through an overarching unity.[43]

While many academics and environmentalists have advocated for deep-ecological readings of nature, this approach to environmentalism has not been readily embraced by Indian scholars. According to Chapple, this rejection is largely due to the fact that such environmentalism "moves into the realm of affectivity and a ritualization of life. Its near-religiosity would render deep ecology suspect for many contemporary Indian thinkers, for whom religion connotes fundamentalism, nationalism, and a return to a caste-bound past."[44]

Ramachandra Guha critiques Western radical frameworks and argues that such models cannot be applied to the environmental situation in Third World countries. He argues "that the deep ecologist's interpretation of Eastern traditions is highly selective, and that in other cultural contexts (e.g., West Germany and India), radical environmentalism manifests itself quite differently, with a far greater emphasis on equity and the integration of ecological concerns with livelihood and world."[45] Guha launches a myriad of critiques against this model and emphasizes that its universalist philosophy has been defined by the need "to preserve biotic integrity rather than by the needs of humans."[46] While this deep ecological approach seeks to recover traditions and advocates for universalism, its philosophies do not provide solutions to the greater crisis at

[42] Barnhill and Gottlieb eds., *Deep Ecology and World Religions,* 6.
[43] Christopher Key Chapple notes that "on the extreme end of the [radical environmentalist] spectrum in the West, we find groups such as Earthfirst! and the Animal Liberation Front." Christopher Key Chapple, "Toward an Indigenous Indian Environmentalism," in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance E. Nelson (New York: SUNY, 1998), 17.
[44] Christopher Key Chapple, "Hinduism and Deep Ecology," in *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground,* David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb eds., 59-76 (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 59-60.
[45] Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics* 11, 1 (1989): 71.
[46] Ibid.

hand: "the dialectic of economic and political structures, and at a micro-level, the lifestyle choices of individuals. These causes [of environmental degradation] cannot be reduced, whatever the level of analysis, to a deeper anthropocentric attitude towards nature."[47]

Moreover, Western models of environmentalism, which emphasize the preservation of natural sites and the protection of wilderness populations, have proven to be harmful to the smaller communities of India. Unlike in North America, which contains thousands of kilometers of unoccupied lands, India "is a long settled and densely populated country in which agrarian populations have a finely balanced relationship with nature, the setting aside of wilderness areas has resulted in a direct transfer of resources from the poor to the rich."[48] With the already existing 29 national parks and 205 wilderness reserves, incorporating new land conservation plans often comes with the threat of displacement for smaller and less financially stable communities. For example, the implementation of tiger reserves (Project Tiger) has displaced the Chenchus (a hunter-gatherer community from the Krishna basin) and has limited their access to food and resources. The Chenchus, Guha notes, "have to pay for the protection of tigers while no one pays for the conservation of their communities."[49] Where the state and wealthy class are the driving forces behind Project Tiger, it is evident that prioritizing land and resource conservation ignores how "environmental problems […] impinge far more directly on the lives of the poor."[50]

Guha thus argues that the larger environmental catastrophe at hand requires more than a returning to, or privileging of, natural systems and philosophies. Attempting to remedy environmental degradation in India requires an environmental model that also considers the

[47] Ibid., 74.
[48] Ibid., 76.
[49] Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (London: Earthscan Publications, 1997), xvi.
[50] Ibid., 76.

needs of local communities and the larger impact that ecological catastrophe has had on the population. Similarly, in Pankaj Jain's study of environmental religious sects in India, he argues that Western conservation frameworks are inherently reductionist, and that they advance a colonial agenda which undermines the ecological potential of Hindu traditions as a whole. Scholars such as Naess, he argues, "reduced 'Hinduism' merely to a philosophical tradition of advaita and self-realization, ignoring several diverse traditions with theistic and ritualistic elements."[51] He further argues that deep ecology "tries to link itself with Eastern and other native religious traditions to portray its universal appeal. However, it ignores that Eastern traditions themselves have also remained anthropocentric rather than biocentric. Humans are accorded a special status in all Indic traditions, rather than rendered just a creature as done by deep ecologists."[52]

Where there is a greater sense of urgency to restore biodiversity in India, environmental groups have sought to combine a concern for the protection of local communities *with* "bioregionalism and respect for traditional ways of knowing."[53] "Whereas in the American context, the early rallying cry for environmental action came from scientists and social activists with theologians only taking interest in this issue of late, in India, from the outset, there has been an appeal to traditional religious sensibilities in support of environmental issues."[54] Many local initiatives have thus taken into consideration the importance of incorporating folk knowledge and religious teachings into formulating Indian climate action plans.

[51] Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities,* 11.
[52] Ibid., 76
[53] Ibid.
[54] Christopher Key Chapple, "Toward an Indigenous Indian Environmentalism," 20.

Conclusion

As chapter two will explore, there exists an abundance of nature-oriented themes and traditional sources of knowledge in Hindu traditions, and, it is necessary to become familiarized with these orientations before considering how they may inspire an ecological ethic. However, as Guha has noted, Hindu environmental action is predicated upon more than the privileging of natural systems and sources of traditional knowledge, and it is thus necessary to consider the lived experiences of individuals within their communities and how socio-cultural and economic factors may affect their environmental practices. Guha's critique of Western environmentalism further sheds light on the importance of carefully examining the worldviews of smaller, and often localized groups, such as those that will be discussed in chapter four and are studied in great depth by scholars like Pankaj Jain.

Many conservationists and scholars in Religious Studies are now concerned with the potential of mobilizing these "traditional ways of knowing" by incorporating them into climate action plans. In doing so, the value of Hindu nature-worship and the importance of practices—such as *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence)—are being reconsidered. However, although there appears to be many themes pertaining to an environmental ethic in these Hindu orientations, it should be noted that there are—as we will see in the third chapter—still many problematic tenants to these models which may prevent some form of religious environmentalism from being actualized. Additionally, the identifiable "nature imagery" in these sources is "not likely to capture the imagination of precisely the sorts of people who stand to commit the greatest infractions against the ecological order."[55]

[55] Chapple, "Toward an Indigenous Indian Environmentalism," 32.

Chapple explains that there are many larger social influences at play which may contradict these environmental teachings: including a desire for wealth, comfort, and consumerism. It is for this reason that he suggests that "the environmental movement in India, as elsewhere, will depend upon the extent to which ecological ravage impinges on human pleasure."[56] Given these contradicting forces, the following question remains: can religious orientations in Hindu traditions be successfully situated into an ecological model?

As we proceed with this thesis question, the tension that exists between environmental models and the general lack of consensus amongst scholars studying Hindu traditions and the environment will become increasingly apparent. However, as Rita DasGupta Sherma suggests, uncovering an environmental ethic within Hindu traditions requires us to interpret and analyze "the religious basis of commonly-held values. [...] An attempt to ameliorate the ecological situation in India must simultaneously involve an analysis of the implications of indigenous notions of nature and materiality for the environment."[57] In other words, the religious perspectives—especially lived religious perspectives—cannot be ignored if India is to develop an effective environmental ethic for the contemporary context. By examining environmental degradation in India through these lenses, scholars have formulated new frameworks that encourage us to re-consider the role that Hindu traditions play in relation to the environment. I now turn to an overview of nature worship in Hindu traditions. Then in chapters four and five, I provide a more focused discussion: first of scholarly critiques of ecological elements in ritual observances, and then of specific localized Hindu ecological movements.

[56] Ibid., 33.
[57] Sherma, "Sacred Immanence: Reflections of Ecofeminism in Hindu Tantra," 94.

CHAPTER II

On Sacred Landscapes and Divinities in Nature

On the basis of the previous chapter's discussion and critique of extrinsic models of environmentalism and of scholars' recommendations for locating within Hindu traditions an embedded religious ecological ethics, I now move on to explore how instantiations of embedded religious ethics have been identified by scholars within Hindu texts and in Hindu "nature worship," i.e., practices centered on nature or natural phenomena. This chapter will thus serve as an overview of the environmental themes that scholars have identified in Hindu texts and practices, with attention drawn to how sacred landscapes, trees, plants and animals are worshipped through ritual. Where an abundance of environmental motifs can be found within Hindu traditions, the underlying question here remains: do these themes form the basis of an embedded environmental ethics?[58] Nearing the end of this chapter, I will take up a brief discussion of Hindutva, or eco-nationalism, and will be discussing how some scholars have argued that the environmental themes discussed here may encourage a politics of exclusion.

[58] For a further discussion of environmental ethics within Hindu traditions, see: Christopher Framarin, "Hinduism and Environmental Ethics: An Analysis and Defense of a Basic Assumption," *Asian Philosophy* 22, 1 (2012): 75-91. Given the philosophical orientation of Framarin's work, I felt that his approach to these topics differs significantly to my own, and it is for this reason that I have not incorporated his scholarship into this thesis. However, his observations concerning how many scholars of Hindu traditions—especially those who point to sacred landscapes, groves, plants and animals as evidence of a Hindu ecological ethic—are worthy of further exploration. He critiques the language that is so often used when discussing these themes and suggests that terms like "nature" are ambiguous—for they are seldom defined. The underlying question in Framarin's work pertains to how elements like plants or animals attain moral standing in scholarship on Hindu traditions, and why scholars of these traditions believe that "a plausible environmental ethic must attribute direct moral standing to individual, living, non-human entities in nature, such as animals and plants." (75) See also: Christopher Framarin *Hinduism and Environmental Ethics: Law, Literature, and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2014).

Sacred Landscapes

There are many religious landscapes, or *sacred geographies*, across the globe, and India contains a remarkably high number of them. Rana P.B Singh goes so far as to say that if one were to examine a map of India to locate religious geographical sites, they would see that "hardly any space would be left vacant."[59] All villages across India have a sacred site which is tethered to a different deity, and "every temple has a sacred garden and sacred tree; rivers and lakes are revered and mountains are the dwelling place of the Gods."[60] These sites are important markers of culture, history, and community identity. They are integral to one's spiritual development, acting as a point of contact and a means through which a worshipper may attain access to the sacred. For example, Rana Singh notes that India's sacred geography "refers to an all-encompassing reality that maintains the *prana* (ethereal breath/life-force) by [an] interactional web of the five gross elements (*mahābhutas*), viz. earth, air, water, fire, and ether/space."[61]

Rivers

Many ancient Indian texts—including the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the hymns of the *Ṛg Veda*—illustrate "a clear appreciation of the natural world and its ecology, the importance of the environment and the management of natural resources."[62] Chapple notes that much of "Hindu religious literature, from the Vedas to contemporary theorists, takes up a discussion of the natural

[59] Rana P. B. Singh, "Sacred Places of Goddesses in India: Spirituality and Symbolism," in *Sacred Geography of Goddesses in South Asia: Essays in Memory of David Kinsley,* ed. Rana P.B. Singh (United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 49.
[60] Krishna, *Hinduism and Nature*, 11.
[61] Rana P. B. Singh, "Visioning Sacred Geography," in *Sacred Geography of Goddesses in South Asia: Essays in Memory of David Kinsley,* ed. Rana P.B. Singh (United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 9.
[62] Ibid., 6.

world through a systematic approach to the five elements. This tradition provides an analysis of material reality in terms of its manifestation through earth (*pṛthivī*), water (*āp*), fire (*agni*), and space (*ākāśā*)."[63] He continues to say that these elements do not only serve as analogies, but that they "compose the reality of the world and one's own body." These themes "also play a prominent role in the later philosophical systems of Sāṃkhya, Vedānta, as well as the non-Hindu systems of Jainism and Buddhism."[64] Mention of natural phenomena is thus especially prevalent in the hymns of the Vedas. For example, the *Ṛg Veda* (10.9) contains the following hymn, which illustrates the sacred properties of water:

> Waters, you are the ones who bring us the life force.
> Help us to find nourishment so that we may look upon great joy.
> Let us share in the most delicious sap that you have,
> as if you were loving mothers.
> Let us go straight to the house of the one for whom
> your waters give us life and give us birth.
> For our well-being let the goddesses be an aid to us,
> the waters be for us to drink. Let them cause well-
> being and health to flow over us.
> Mistresses of all the things that are chosen, rulers over
> all peoples, the waters are the ones I beg for a cure.
> Soma has told me that within the waters are all cures and Agni who is salutary to all.
> Waters, yield your cure as an armour for my body, so
> that I may see the sun for a long time.
> Waters, carry far away all of this that has gone bad in
> me, either what I have done in malicious deceit or
> whatever lie I have sworn to.
> I have sought the waters today; we have joined with their
> sap. O Agni full of moisture, come and flood me with splendour.[65]

[63] Chapple, "Hinduism and Deep Ecology," 61.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, trans., "The Waters of Life (10.9)," in *The Rig Veda: An Anthology: One Hundred and Eight Hymns, Selected* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 231.

Sacred rivers across India are seen to be sources of life and purification. They are often "compared to cows and mares yielding milk and butter."[66] As a physical manifestation of the Goddess, rivers can heal, forgive, and bless worshippers. The holy site of the Ganges, for example, is worshipped as the Goddess Gangā and is seen to be the "vehicle of ascent, from earth to heaven."[67] As death rituals are carried out in the Ganges, the Goddess purifies bodies sent afloat on funeral pyres.

Mountains

Similarly, "[e]very temple or a place, and by extension, every sacred town and royal residence, is assimilated to a "sacred mountain" and thus becomes a "centre."[68] As Singh notes, Mount Meru, in particular, is posited as the centre of the earth in Hindu mythology.[69] Mountains are seen to be sources of fertility; they are bearers of water and sustainers of life. India's mountains "may be associated with individual gods or saints, or they may contain sacred sites such as temples and groves. For example, Mount Govardhana at Vrindavan is revered for its association with Lord Krishna."[70] Similarly, The Himalayas are an incarnation of the god Himavat, and, according to Nanditha Krisha, many other gods reside in these mountains. It is from the Himalayas that the Ganga flows, and "several great shrines are situated here, such as Badrinath, consecrated to Vishnu, and Kedarnath, consecrated to Shiva."[71] Examples could easily be multiplied.

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[66] Ibid., 77.
[67] Ibid., 83.
[68] Singh, "Sacred Places of Goddesses in India: Spirituality and Symbolism," 71.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Krishna, *Hinduism and Nature*, 177.
[71] Ibid., 179.

Sacred Groves

Sacred groves symbolize the symbiotic relationship that is shared between humans, nature, and the divine; and, according to Kailash C. Malhotra, they represent "the integration of the human community in nature."[72] They function as important cultural and religious markers, and illuminate "social taboos and sanctions that reflect [the] spiritual and ecological ethos of [...] [religious] communities."[73] They are also seen to "provide sanctuary for spirits, be a living expression of ancestors, or protect a sanctified place from exploitation."[74] As of 2001, although only 50,000 sacred groves were reported to a survey conducted by the Indian National Science Academy and the Indian Statistical Institute, it is estimated that there is somewhere between 100,000 to 150,000 sacred groves across India. These groves fall into one or more of the following classifications:

1) Traditional Sacred Groves: The place where the village deity resides; where the deity is represented by an elementary symbol
2) Temple Groves: A grove is created around a temple and is conserved
3) Groves found in or around burial or cremation grounds.[75]

In Karnataka, sacred groves are most often worshipped as the Goddess. They are named "Devara Kadu," "Devara Thopu," and "Deva Vana," or "Forest belonging to God."[76] Here, and in other regions of the Western Ghats, "smaller groves are entirely protected [...] [and] no tree felling or other biomass extraction may be allowed."[77]

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[72] Chapple, "Hinduism and Deep Ecology," 66.
[73] Kailash C. Malhotra, "Cultural and Ecological Dimensions of Sacred Groves in India," 1.
[74] M.G. Chandrakanth and Jeff Romm, "Sacred Forests, Secular Forest Policies and People's Actions," *Nat. Resources* 31 (1991): 751, https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol31/iss4/2.751.
[75] Sadowski, "Religious Motivations for the Protection of Forest Ecosystems," 141.
[76] Chandrakanth and Romm, "Sacred Forests, Secular Forest Policies and People's Actions," 751.
[77] Ibid.

In Kerala, the deities of regional forests, known as the serpent groves, are Yekshi and Vanadevata, the goddesses of forests. The *vrinda vana,* or *the forest of vrinda* (tulsi, or sacred basil), is said to be Kṛṣṇa's childhood home. These groves are cherished by the villages and the smaller Hindu communities that often neighbour them, and there continues to be ongoing efforts made towards protecting the trees from clear-cutting operations.

Frederique Apffel-Marglin says that Hindu perspectives on forests illustrate how "culture and society are embedded in nature, and the spiritual is embedded in the material."[78] As important symbols of Indian cultural identity, groves are integral to community-building and function as important political, economic, physiological or psychological symbols. However, despite the importance of sacred landscapes to Hindu religiosity, these sites are often threatened by development projects and "social and economic change, […] including poaching, legal and illegal logging, mining and pollution."[79]

Sacred Trees

Like landscapes, single trees and plants "are worshipped as manifestations of gods, as representatives of particular stars and planets, and as symbols of the natural elements—energy, water, land, air—each of which has its own independent and relational meanings."[80] Trees are seen to possess their own personhood, and they importantly enhance "the spiritual integrity and force"[81] of temples.

[78] Chapple, "Hinduism and Deep Ecology," 66.
[79] Sadowski, "Religious Motivations for the Protection of Forest Ecosystems," 142.
[80] Chandrakanth and Romm, "Sacred Forests, Secular Forest Policies and People's Actions," 745.
[81] Ibid.

In her essay *Rituals of Embedded Ecologies: Drawing Kōlams, Marrying Trees, and Generating Auspiciousness*, Vijaya Nagarajan explains the custom of marrying trees, which is an act that is undertaken by an individual or a family that has undergone great suffering (*dōśam*); whether through "infertility and illness, or in the case of a daughter or son whose suitability as a mate does not fit the suitors who come."[82] The term *dōśam*, she explains, depicts a personal or intrafamilial calamity, or "a diminishing of literal and metaphoric auspiciousness in the family, a kind of temporary or long-term marring of one's destiny, akin to an eclipse of the sun."[83] The act of marrying a tree, she explains, is meant to aid in the reversal of suffering and repair relationships between "the natural and cultural worlds."[84] Nagarajan explains that she first heard of the custom from Saroja, an elderly woman from Tamil. Saroja further explained the circumstances under which one would initiate this marriage:

> We suffer. There are times when suffering comes at us suddenly and we do not know how to handle the enormity of the suffering. And then we marry trees. Usually it is when someone cannot get married; and there are a lot of obstacles in their path. Each man or woman they see, it does not work out for them. So, then, we know that there is something about the life path of the person that is preventing them from marrying a human person. So, we arrange the marriage of that person to a tree, and then we pray that the tree will take on the burdens of that human being and therefore release that person from their suffering. Then, the human person is free to marry someone else.[85]

This marriage, then, is "both a symbolic and literal reminder of our "kinship" with the natural world and is integral to healing an unfulfilled life."[86]

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[82] Vijaya Nagarajan, "Rituals of Embedded Ecologies: Drawing Kōlams, Marrying Trees, and Generating Auspiciousness," in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water*, Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 458.
[83] Ibid., 459.
[84] Ibid., 459.
[85] Ibid., 457.
[86] Ibid.

The most sacred trees in India are the pipal, neem, and banyan. Neem trees are "known to have powerful medicinal qualities that help identify it as a supportive goddess,"[87] and it is for this reason that they are often "adorned with ornate clothing and a metal facemask."[88] The pipal tree is worshipped daily within many Indian communities. During the festival of Somvati Amavasya, which is held when a new moon falls on a Monday, women from Banaras perform a series of intricate rituals to honour the sacred tree. Included in these rituals are the construction of altars and the circumambulation of a tree 108 times. The pipal rituals, David Haberman says, allow worshippers to honour Viṣṇu and to feel closer to the divine.[89]

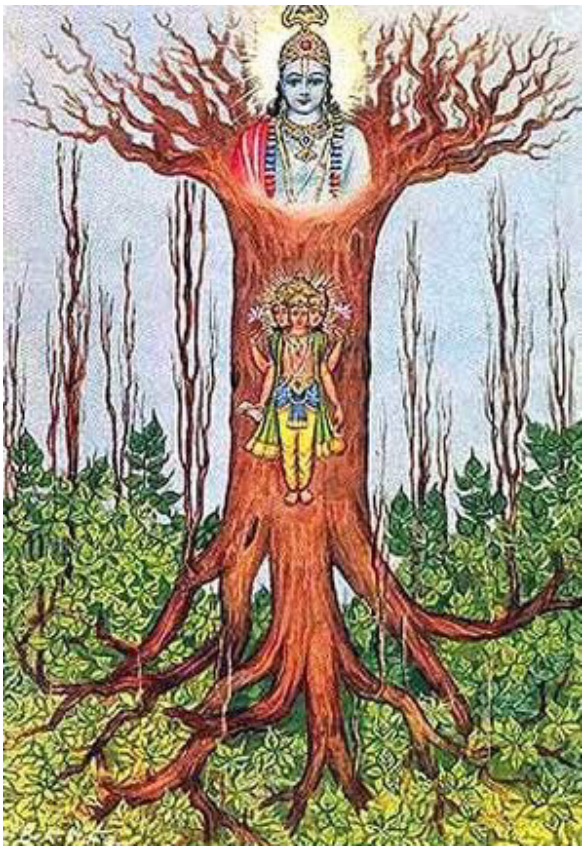
Figure 1: The Hindu "Tree of Life" as a Pipal tree. Image Title and Artist Unknown.

Pipal shrines vary in size and appearance and can appear simply as "bare patch of ground at the base of an unadorned tree where water offerings are poured, flowers or other offerings are placed, and into which sticks of incense are inserted."[90] These shrines will grow over time as they are continuously adorned with offerings made by worshippers. At the Assi Ghat of the Ganges in Banaras lies a very popular pipal tree shrine that is "a favorite site for fulfilling the

[87] David L. Haberman, *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid., 81.

Somvati Amavasya Vrat, [and] the pipal tree here is worshiped by hundreds of people every day."[91]

Sacred Plants: In Ritual and Healing

Like trees, it is believed that humans live in a sense of kinship with plants as they experience the world in very similar ways. Plants, with their many healing properties, are considered to be protectors. Madhu Khanna says that they have the same sensory experiences as humans: they are sensitive to their surroundings and are able to "see, hear, smell, taste, share joy and sorrow, and repair and rejuvenate their damaged parts."[92]

According to D. P. Agrawal, this sacred bond between humans and plants is mentioned often throughout ancient Hindu texts. A fitting example of the sacred properties of plants can be found in the *Vrikshayurveda*, The Science of Plant Life. Working in conjunction with the Asian Agri-History Foundation (AAF), Nalini Sadhale has translated this ancient text into English. A chapter on *Vrukshayurveda* is mentioned in the *Brhatsamhita* of Varahamihira of the sixth century, which contains texts pertaining to the "divining of groundwater, productivity and non-productivity of land."[93] D.P. Agrawal provides the following breakdown of the text's contents:

> The *Vrukshayurveda* is a systematic composition starting with the glorification of trees and tree planting. It then proceeds to discuss various topics connected with the science of plant life such as procuring, preserving, and treating of seeds before planting; preparing pits for planting saplings; selection of soil; method of watering; nourishments and fertilizers; plant diseases and plant protection from internal and external diseases; layout of a garden; agricultural and horticultural wonders; groundwater resources; etc. The topics are neatly divided into different sections and are internally correlated. The author

[91] Ibid.
[92] Madhu Khanna, "The Ritual Capsule of Durgā Pūjā," in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water*, eds. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 478.
[93] See: D.P. Agrawal, "Surapala's Vrikshayurveda: An Introduction," https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/t_es/t_es_agraw_surapala_frameset.htm.

has expressed indebtedness to the earlier scholars but claims that in writing the present text he was guided by his own reason.[94]

The following passage from the *Vrukshayurveda* exemplifies the sacred bond that is believed to be shared between humans and plants, and how certain sacred plants are connected to deities:

> A person is honored in Vaikuntha for as many thousand years as the days he resides in a house where *tulasi* is grown.
> And if one properly grows *bilva*, which pleases Lord Siva, in his family, the goddess of riches resides permanently. . .
> He who plants even a single *ashvattha*, wherever it may be, as per the prescribed mode, goes to the abode of Hari.
> He who has planted *dhatri* has performed several sacrifices. He has donated the earth. He would be considered a celibate forever.
> He who plant a couple of *banyan* trees . . . will go to the abode of Shiva and many heavenly nymphs will attend upon him.
> After planting *neem* trees a person well-versed in *dharma* attains the abode of the Sun. Indeed! He resides there for a long period.
> By planting four *plaksha* trees a person doubtlessly obtains the fruits of *rajasuya* sacrifice.
> He who plants five or six mango trees attains the abode of Garuda and lives happily forever like gods.
> One should plant seven *palasha* trees or even one. One attains the abode of Brahma and enjoys the company of gods by doing so.
> He who himself plants eight *udumbara* trees or even prompts someone to plant them, rejoices in the lunar world.
> He who has planted *madhuka* has propitiated Parvati, become free from disease, and has worshipped all deities.
> If one plants *kshirini*, *dadimi*, *rambha*, *priyala*, and *panasa*, one experiences no affliction for seven births.
> He who has knowingly or unknowingly planted *ambu* is respected as a recluse even while staying in the house.
> By planting all kinds of other trees, useful for fruits and flowers, a person gets a reward of thousand cows adorned with jewels.
> By planting one *asvattha*, one *pichumanda*, one *nyagrodha*, ten tamarind trees, the group of three—*kapittha, bilva*, and *amalaka*, and five mango trees, one never visits hell.
>
> --*Vrukshayurveda* (9-23)[95]

[94] Ibid.
[95] Krishna, Hinduism and Nature, 116-117.

Like trees, plants also play a significant role in Hindu ritual. It has been argued that "the vision of the earth as a sacred hierophany and material form of the divine is perhaps most dramatically displayed in Goddess theology."[96]

An excellent example of how the Goddess is worshipped, and perhaps the most notable application of sacred plants in Hindu ritual, can be observed in the rituals performed during Durgā Pūjā. After the *bodhana*, or awakening rite, the Goddess is worshipped as a *navabatrikā*, or a bundle of nine plants. In the brief description of the *bodhana* ritual processions below, it also becomes evident that these Durgā Pūjā rituals are very much "earth-centred," in the sense that natural objects such as stones, shells and various plants are used to pay respect to the goddess. Through a complex series of ritual processions, the Goddess is called upon by worshippers so that they may pay respect to her as the Mother, eliciting her "manifestation into a ritually constructed cosmos […] [through] awakening her presence in earth, water and life."[97]

In the Bengali interpretation of the Durgā Pūjā, prior to awakening the Goddess on the sixth day, earthen clay is placed in a jar and sat before a wood apple tree (*bilva*). On the commencement of the seventh day, the *purohita* draws a *sarvatobhadra maṇḍala* and builds a soil altar. Upon this he places five types of grain and a jar of water (which is later anointed with sandalwood), and a coconut is placed on top of this jar. He drapes this in a cloth, so that it represents a woman dressed in a sāri. The *purohita* performs utterances to "ritually induce the sacred female rivers to flow into the water which is used in this ritual."[98] This is called the *bodhana* or awakening rite. Through such ritual procedures, the Goddess assumes the form of a

[96] Sherma, "Sacred Immanence: Reflections of Ecofeminism in Hindu Tantra," 89.
[97] Hillary Peter Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess: The Liturgy of the Durgā Pujā with Interpretations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 11.
[98] Ibid.

branch of a wood apple tree, and then a conch shell.

After she is installed and worshipped in a conch shell, she is then worshipped as a *navabatrikā* (a bundle of nine plants), which is bathed and anointed with water from the Ganges. The bilva branch, itself already a form of the goddess, is "placed on the nine plants and the bundle of nine leaves […] [and is] bathed nine times by invoking rivers, oceans, lakes, [and] heavenly streams."[99] Each plant is a physical incarnation of the Goddess in her different forms. The leaves of a banana plant (*rambhā*) are often incorporated into lifecycle rituals in India, but during the awakening rite, the plant depicts the goddess Brahmâṇī or Brahma's Śakti. *Mānkacu* in the *navabatrikā* represents Cāmuṇḍā, who "slew the demons Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa."[100] The other plants include: *Kaccī*, a root plant for Kālikā; turmeric for Durgā; barley for Kārtikī, a bilva branch for Śivā, a pomegranate for Raktadantikā, *aśoka* for Śokarahitā and a rice paddy plant (*dhān*) for Lakṣmī. The *dhān* is considered to be the "most sacred plant, for it is the basis of life…and essential for *pūjā."*[101]

[99] Khanna, "The Ritual Capsule of Durgā Pūjā," 476; see also, Rodrigues, 179-84.
[100] Ibid., 476.
[101] Ibid., 477.

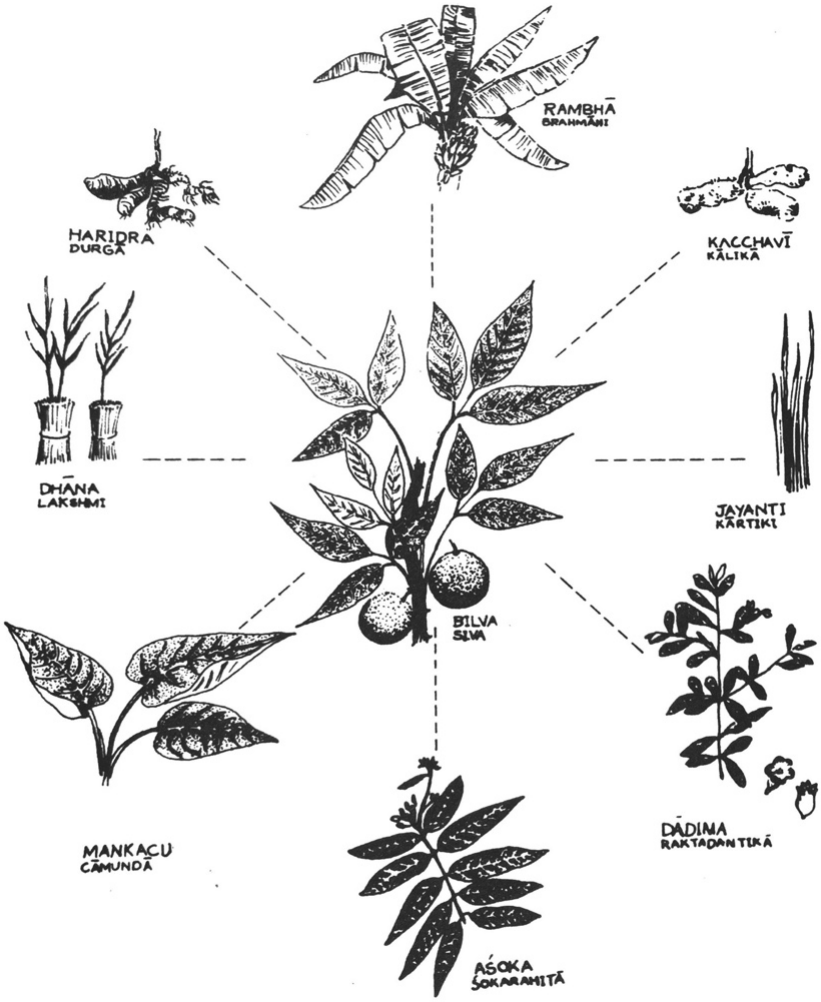

Figure 2: "The plant incarnations of Durgā. Center: A branch of the wood apple tree representing the goddess Śivā. Clockwise: banana as the goddess Brahmâṇī; kacu as Kālikā, Jayantī as Kārtikī; pomegranate as Raktadantikā; aśoka as Śokarahitā; the arum plant as Cāmuṇḍā; rice as Lakṣmī; and turmeric for Durgā."— Image by Matrika Ashram, Image found in Madhu Khanna, "The Ritual Capsule of Durgā Pūjā," 477.

The Goddess will later be worshipped in the form of "an anthropomorphic clay image, a sacred diagram, and a living virgin girl."[102] In each of her material forms, she is stroked with sandalwood, stones, natural flowers and grasses. Following the rites performed during her awakening, the *purohita* carries out a fire oblation rite (*homa*), flame worship, and ritual bathing.

[102] Ibid.

The latter is said to be "a symbol of countless rivers."[103] A "banana maiden" is then constructed out of a plantain tree and a coconut is placed on top of her head. Offerings to the sun (*argha*) are made by placing flowers, grass, rice and fruits in conch shells or elaborate containers. The use of clays, plants, vegetables, grains, water, fire, stones and various other natural objects reflect the five elements of material reality (earth, water, fire, air, and space). The procedures of the seventh day will be repeated on the eighth day, and on the ninth day, worshippers will bid farewell to the Goddess and release idols into the river.

When reading of the various manifestations of the Great Goddess and other deities, it becomes clear that there are recurring symbols and overarching themes that pertain to this topic of locating an ecological consciousness within Hindu ritual practice. Similarly, like in the rituals of Somvati Amavasya, when the divine is understood to manifest in trees, a bond between humans, plants and other natural phenomena and the divine is strengthened. This bond is one that further encourages the worshipper to recognise that a union exists between the environment and humankind.

"Embedded" Ecologies in Brahmanical and Tribal Ecological Insights

Chapple suggests that, when mapping the ecological potential of Hinduism, it is useful to begin by looking to certain "tribal insights into ecosystems, [and] Brahmanical models that emphasize an intimacy between the human and the cosmos."[104] He defines Brahmanism as a "naturalist, religion-based indigenous"[105] orientation in Hinduism, in which all humans are seen as part of a larger whole, or "a microcosm of the great cosmic body, which is the Supreme

[103] Ibid., 48.
[104] Chapple, "Introduction," xl.
[105] Chapple, "Toward an Indigenous Indian Environmentalism," 21.

Being's mode of self-expression."[106] Through this lens, the natural world is understood to be intrinsically bound to the human in the sense that they share the same existence. This interconnectivity with the Supreme Being is explained in the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*: "ether, air, fire, water, earth, planets, all creatures, directions, trees and plants, rivers and seas, they all are organs of God's body; remembering this, a devotee respects all species."[107] In speaking of this devotional orientation, Lina Gupta has said that "[a]ll parts of this Nature have intrinsic value; as such, all of Nature should be treated with dignity, kindness, and righteousness."[108]

Although such a Brahmanical model would appear to share many characteristics with deep ecology in the sense that both envision or postulate an intimacy that is shared between all beings, given deep ecology's neo-colonial undertones, these models should remain as two separate entities. The difference between the two, we may say, is that deep ecology imposes an extrinsic environmental ethics on Hindu traditions, but within Brahmanism this ethics emerges from an embedded dharmic ecology.

The preceding discussion of ecological elements in Brahmanism is but one example in which scholars have located embedded environmental concerns in Hindu traditions. In an essay that I discuss extensively in the third chapter of this thesis, "*The Earth Goddess as Bhū Devī*," Vijaya Nagarajan uses the term "embedded ecologies" to refer to how "cultural, aesthetic, and religious conceptions orient perceptions of natural spaces."[109] Chapple builds on this notion by

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[106] Ibid., 26.
[107] *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* (2.2.41), quoted in ibid.
[108] Lina Gupta, quoted by Nelson, Lance E. "The Dualism of Nondualism: Advaita Vedānta and the Irrelevance of Nature." In *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water*, edited by Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 64.
[109] Vija Rettakudi Nagarajan, "The Earth as Goddess Bhū Devī: Toward a Theory of "Embedded Ecologies" in Folk Hinduism," in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance E. Nelson (New York: SUNY, 1998), 270.

suggesting that an embedded ecology refers to one's relationship or intimacy with the world, which Chapple says, "is culturally supported by an anthropocosmic vision of the earth, instantiates a person in immediate and intimate contact with one's surroundings." [110] He further advises environmentalists interested in exploring how Hindu traditions contain embedded ecologies, to look to the values held by Indigenous or village communities in India who practice ecological care as a religious duty.[111] Like Ramachandra Guha, Chapple argues that by observing the successful actions of these communities, we may come to understand "that the modern world can learn much from indigenous wisdom and ways."[112]

In speaking of "embedded" environmental themes which appear from within Hindu traditions, Chapple says that we may also look to Hindu renouncer models, yoga practices and teachings on nonviolence. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, it has been argued by scholars, such as Lance Nelson, that philosophies of world-negation (Advaita) may prohibit Hindu environmentalism. Chapple, however, explains that Advaita has also been interpreted in a positive light, and many have suggested that it contains an "ecological conscience."[113] This is best illustrated through the belief in the "indwelling God" of Brahman in oneself (*ātman*). If one and all of the universe is Brahman, he explains, a concern for the environment is a natural extension of this devotional philosophy. While this standpoint on Advaita may be interpreted as being "overly-positive," Chapple argues that, "just as Christianity and Judaism are rediscovering nature metaphors in the Bible as resources for the development of an ecological ethics, [...] Brahmanical texts are being mined as rich resources in celebration of the earth."[114] Although I

[110] Chapple, "Hinduism and Deep Ecology," 62.
[111] Practicing environmental care as a religious "duty" will be discussed in more detail in the fourth chapter of this thesis. I will illustrate how this type of practice is informed by a "dharmic ecology."
[112] Chapple, "Toward an Indigenous Indian Environmentalism," 23.
[113] S. Cromwell Crawford, quoted in Nelson, "The Dualism of Nondualism, 63.
[114] Chapple, "Toward an Indigenous Indian Environmentalism," 26.

would resist the language of "mining," we can nevertheless discern in Brahmanical texts an immanent ecological ethics, which Chapple is right to call a celebration of the earth.

Another "embedded ecology," he says, can be found in yoga, "a pan-Indian system of spirituality utilized by nearly all the religious traditions of India, [which] includes within its disciplines several resources that can, at minimum, increase environmental awareness. It affirms the reality of the natural world (see *Yoga Sutra* 4.16), whereas Advaita Vedanta and other schools of Indian thought assert that the world is mere illusion."[115] The practice of yoga is a means to both recognize the relationship between the body and the cosmos, and to unify the body with the elements of earth, water, fire and air. Like in the renouncer model, "Yoga sets forth ethical principles that accord well with environmental precepts: through nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) harm is minimized to animals; through nonpossession (*aparigraha*) one consumes only bare necessities; through purity (*sauca*) one becomes mindful of pollution and will seek to avoid it in any form."[116]

Nonviolence

Although the concept of *ahiṃsā* is usually traced to Jainism, the practicing of nonviolence is "selectively observed by Hindus, particularly of the Brahmin caste."[117] In Hindu traditions, all animals and humans are seen to possess souls and "[t]hus a person, an animal and an insect are equally part of the cycle of life, death and rebirth."[118] Moreover, animals live in a sense of kinship with humans and can experience the world as they do, and they are able to

[115] Ibid., 29-30.
[116] Ibid., 30.
[117] Christopher Key Chapple, *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), xii.
[118] Nanditha Krishna, *Sacred Animals of India* (India: Penguin Random House, 2010), 1.

"metamorphose themselves at will and understand human speech, thus becoming divine."[119] Certain animals are deemed sacred because of their affiliations with divinities, while others, like dogs, are sacred for their ability to offer companionship. Some, Nanditha Krishna says, are valued for their economic purposes; and, others because they are understood to act of vehicles of the soul.[120] Cows in particular are seen to be sacred for their affiliation with the earth. "In times of distress," Krishna says, "the earth is believed to take on the form of a cow to pray for divine aid."[121]

We may find mention of *ahiṃsā* in sources such as the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Yoga Sūtra and the *Mahābhārata*. As Chapple notes, in the epic of the *Mahābhārata*, an "underlying tenet of the Indian world view [is revealed]: that we are all interconnected beings and need to more fully recognize and embody this fact."[122] In the Yajur Veda (13.49), we find the following passage, which pertains to protecting sacred cows: "O king. You should never kill animals like bullocks, useful for agriculture, or like cows, which give us milk, and all other helpful animals, and must punish those who kill or do harm to such animals."[123] *Ahiṃsā* is also practiced by Hindus through vegetarianism and the worship of sacred animals. Furthermore, O.P. Dwivedi claims that "almost all the Hindu scriptures place a strong emphasis on the notion that God's grace cannot be received by killing animals or harming other creatures. That is why *not* eating meat is considered both appropriate conduct and one's *dharma*."[124] Chapple notes that "Mahatma Gandhi mobilized India with his twin projects of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) and holding to

[119] Ibid., 3.
[120] See: Krisha, Sacred Animals of India.
[121] Ibid., 75.
[122] Chapple, *Nonviolence to Animals, Earth, and Self in Asian Traditions*, 76.
[123] Yajur Veda (13.49), quoted in Krishna, *Sacred Animals of India*, 75.
[124] O. P. Dwivedi, "Dharmic Ecology," in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water*, Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker eds. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 7.

truth (*satyagraha*). Various sections of his voluminous memoirs advocate minimal consumption, self-reliance, simplicity, and sustainability—all clearly in accord with 'green values.'"[125]

The importance of practicing nonviolence is also, according to some scholars, intimately woven into the notion of karmic rebirth and the belief that "the pain a human being causes other living beings to suffer will eventually be suffered by that same person, either in this life or in a later rebirth."[126] Ethicist Kenneth Valpey says that Hinduism "invokes the well-known concept of *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence) as the moral basis for the position against violence toward nonhuman animals."[127]

"Traditional Knowledge" and Hindutva

Although it has been suggested by many scholars that the Hindu reverence for natural landscapes, plant and animals is a strong indicator of an embedded environmental ethic, others have argued that these belief systems have encouraged the development of eco-nationalism in India. In *Green and Saffron: Hindu Nationalism and Indian Environmental Politics*, Mukul Sharma argues that referencing these themes in relation to climate change discourse has led to the emergence of far-right conservative governance which has promoted violence and xenophobia through calling for the erasure of non-Indian populations. These violent advances are justified as attempts to preserve the "purity" of India's land—and eco-nationalists have argued that the growing population of "outsiders" is furthering the environmental collapse of India. As

[125] Chapple, "Introduction," xli.
[126] Ibid., 7.
[127] Kenneth R. Valpey, "Igniting Hanuman's Tail: Hindu and Indian Secular Views on Animal Experimentation," *Journal of Animal Ethics* 6, 2 (2016): 213, accessed March 29, 2020. doi:10.5406/janimalethics.6.2.0213—emphasis removed.

Owen Ellerkamp argues, it is thus necessary to draw attention to "how Hindu narratives are used as rhetorical and discursive tools to enact environmental initiatives and [...] to question how environmental work is used as a vehicle to further a Hindutva agenda."[128] While Guha and others have noted that environmental activism in India has begun to draw more on traditional values when formulating new climate action plans, this notion of "returning to the roots" of Indian culture and traditions may thus inspire a politics of exclusion.

However, although eco-nationalists may draw from this rhetoric, Amita Baviskar says that such discourse has undermined the "remarkable hybrid nature of India's ecological movement."[129] Baviskar argues that linking environmental politics with the fostering of eco-nationalism is "a startling claim, especially for readers who have grown up with Chipko and Narmada Bachao Andolan, and who have observed how these iconic campaigns have crafted a vision of ecological change that places the poorest first."[130] Sharma, Baviskar says, problematically suggests that

> Hindu environmental politics fabricates glorifications of "Hindu" land, rivers, forests, community, tradition, self-reliant villages, and ancient nature philosophy; simultaneously it condemns modernisation, Westernisation, and globalisation.' If that is the case, then not only are Chipko and Narmada tainted with 'saffron', but Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy contains all of the above elements, should be placed in the same category as his killers. In his anxiety to make his case, the author does not acknowledge that, while environmental movements and Hindutva politics may share certain ideas, these ideas are refracted through very different political values and take on radically different trajectories in actual practice.[131]

[128] Owen Ellerkamp, "Purifying the Sacred: How Hindu Nationalism Reshapes Environmentalism in Contemporary India" (Honours Essay, Oberlin College, 2018), 8.
[129] Amita Baviskar, "God's Green Earth?: Mukul Sharma's Take on Hindutva's Influence on Environmentalism Ignores the Remarkable Hybrid Nature of India's Ecological Movement," *Himāl Magazine*, June 15, 2012, https://www.himalmag.com/gods-green-earth/.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid.

In addition, Baviskar argues that Sharma has referred to much of the existing scholarship on Indian environmentalism as "'largely celebratory in tone,' despite the fact that the literature contains critiques of neo-traditionalists, authoritarian biologists, deep ecologists, tribal romanticists, and bourgeois environmentalists."[132] Without dismissing the seriousness of eco-nationalism and how a politics of exclusion has entered into Indian governmental systems, Baviskar asserts that one must not refer to all Hindu rituals and acts of nature worship as being inspired by Hindutva. She also notes the following:

> Just as language is a set of cultural symbols that creates community and also dictates who is outside it (a book written in English does precisely that), the cultural symbols particular to a specific Hindu group may also leave other groups out, including other Hindus. Yet through translations and multilingualism, through fostering a democratic plurality of cultural symbols and promoting dialogue between diverse strands of environmental ideology, social movements attempt to acknowledge and address social and cultural differences. It is the friction created by the juxtaposition of incommensurable ideas and values that gives environmental movements their peculiar spark, one that ignites new ways of thinking and being.[133]

This is not to imply that eco-nationalism is not a persistent problem in India. However, as Baviskar says, scholars should not reduce environmental movements in India to products of an extremist politics, given that there are many groups across the country that are working towards implementing new an inclusive politics.

Like Sharma, however, many scholars of Hindu traditions have suggested that there are problematic tenants of Hindu culture and tradition which have negatively impacted the environment. While it is made evident through the Hindu canon that gods and goddesses are in some way linked to the natural landscape, trees, plants and animal life, it has been argued that "modern" Hindu ritual practice (or nature worship) has paradoxically encouraged environmental degradation. To better understand the complexities that problematize the evaluation of Hindu

[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.

practices as “ecological,” in the next chapter I discuss at length the works of Emma Tomalin, Vijaya Nagarajan, Bruce Sullivan and Kelly Alley.

CHAPTER III

On Ritual and Temporality: The Problems with Hindu Nature Worship

While a reverence for nature can be observed in the traditional teachings of Hindu traditions—for example, in the worship of sacred landscapes, trees, plants and animals as described in chapter two—it has been argued that "nature worship" prohibits or prevents religious environmentalism. In this chapter, I discuss at length issues that have been raised by Emma Tomalin, Vijaya Nagarajan, Bruce Sullivan and Kelly Alley. Although each scholar acknowledges that the implementation of religious values and traditional knowledge may appear to be beneficial in advancing ecological change in India, they draw attention to how religion, especially ritual, does not always lend itself to an ethic of environmental conservation.

Nature Religion and Religious Environmentalism

We firstly turn to the work of Emma Tomalin, who has argued against the potential for a Hindu environmental ethic, stating that "the way in which Hinduism is used in environmentalism in India tends not to be so much as a support for environmental ethics, but instead for pragmatic reasons."[134] She notes that it is firstly necessary to recognize that there is a distinct difference between *nature religion* and *religious environmentalism*.[135] The former relates to the ritual

[134] Emma Tomalin, "The Limitations of Religious Environmentalism for India," *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 6, 1 (2002): 14.

[135] The application of the term "nature worship" can be problematic for a number of reasons. It has been seen as a means to "other" localized traditions and communities; to reduce cultures and ritual practices; to racialize or deem certain groups as "primitive." However, some scholars, such as Graham Harvey, have suggested that the term can be re-evaluated, and that it may encourage people to begin thinking about important sources of local and Indigenous knowledge which present nature as holding sacred value. See: Graham Harvey, "Paganism and Animism," in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, Willis Jenkins, Mary Tucker and John Grim, eds., 211-219 (New York: Routledge, 2017).

worship of or toward the natural world, which, Tomalin says, often has "no basis in the ideas and values of contemporary environmentalist thinking."[136] Religious environmentalism, on the other hand, is reflective of a contemporary Western reading of nature religion, which tends to romanticize the ritual worship of nature in Asian and Indigenous communities by suggesting that these practices signal a universal environmental awareness not only across Hindu India, but throughout the world:[137] "tribal or Eastern spiritualities are frequently taken together as evidence of what is considered to be an ancient attitude of compassion towards nature that is shared by all non-industrial peoples or a 'global ethic.'"[138] Tomalin notes that scholars who take this approach are participating in "'new traditionalist discourse,' whereby traditional or pre-colonial society is portrayed as marked by harmonious social relationships, ecologically sensitive resource use practices."[139] She further asserts that scholars who advocate for a Hindu ecological ethic often disregard how socio-political conditions in developing countries like India—such as widespread poverty—may prohibit individuals from practicing environmental conservation.

Like Ramachandra Guha, whose work was discussed in chapter one, Tomalin appears to be launching a critique against deep ecology, or "radical" religious environmentalism. However, unlike Guha and many others, Tomalin seems to suggest that "nature worship" *cannot* inform religious environmentalism; that the two are entirely unlike one another. Quoting Freeman, Tomalin says that "cultural values are imputed to populations not on the evidence of their actually espousing and expressing those values, but on the basis of inferring that they must hold some such values and beliefs from the requirements of the analyst's own ecological model."[140]

[136] Ibid., 18.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid., 24.
[139] Sinha et al., quoted in ibid., 14.
[140] Freeman, quoted by Tomalin, 17.

That is, if one fails to differentiate between nature worship and religious environmentalism, this failure comes down to an error in one's own interpretation of Hindu traditions. Moreover, Tomalin argues that Hindu ritual practices do not necessarily translate into "an inherent environmental awareness, if only because such practices are very ancient and pre-date concerns about a global environmental crisis."[141]

Like others, Tomalin admits that there are two ways to read traditional practices and beliefs surrounding religio-environmental ethics. However, where "different readings of religious traditions are possible, only some of these readings can be interpreted to support contemporary environmental concerns. The contention that religious traditions are 'environmentally friendly' is an *interpretation of tradition* rather than a *traditional interpretation.*"[142] She continues:

> The religious environmentalist is searching for teachings that will provide support for the protection of the environment; the need for 'protection' comes first with the idea of 'sacredness' providing support for this desired outcome. With the example of sacred groves, it is 'sacredness' that comes first and their 'protection' is a by-product. This reflects a difference in emphasis where *it is already sacred therefore it should be protected* whereas for the contemporary religious environmentalist *it should be protected therefore it is made sacred.*[143]

Tomalin further suggests that regarding nature as something that is sacred does not necessarily correlate with "any explicit consciousness about the relevance of this to an environmental crisis."[144] She notes that the ancient practice of worshipping and protecting trees, such as the *bilva,* sacred to Shiva, "continues [today] within contexts where there is little concern or knowledge of their ecological significance."[145] Daily ritual practices and spiritual beliefs

[141] Ibid., 12.
[142] Ibid., 15–citation removed; emphasis in original.
[143] Ibid., 17–emphasis in original.
[144] Ibid, 15.
[145] Ibid., 17.

surrounding the reverence of trees, she explains, do not suggest that this concern extends beyond said practices. Nature religion in India, Tomalin argues, does not therefore signal a universal environmental concern.

On Worshipping the Earth Goddess and Embedded Ecologies

Similarly, Vijaya Nagarajan highlights a tension that arises in Hindu environmentalist thought through a discussion of "embedded" ecologies, in which "cultural, aesthetic, and religious conceptions orient perceptions of natural spaces."[146] Through exploring how embedded ecologies present themselves within Hinduism, Nagarajan is able to explore an important question in the context of this project: "How can we be more precise in illuminating the contradictions between an imagined ideal behaviour and what actually happens in everyday life?"[147]

To address this question, Nagarajan turns to a discussion of the *kōlam*. In Tamil Nadu, women construct a *kōlam* outside of their doorways in the early hours of morning during the ritual month of Mārgaḻi. These intricate designs are made from coloured flours or chalk laid upon a soil made from cow dung and water, and are a "sign of the social circulation of women's energies, […] located at the edge of the woman's spatial world, the threshold between home and street, between the inside and outside of the household."[148] After their completion, the fragile *kōlam* are left to be walked on, or to be carried away by the wind and rain.

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[146] Vija Rettakudi Nagarajan, "The Earth as Goddess Bhū Devī: Toward a Theory of 'Embedded Ecologies' in Folk Hinduism," in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance E. Nelson (New York: SUNY, 1998), 270.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid., 270-271.

The *kōlam* is "an identity marker of gender, bearing the traces of a woman's presence in the vicinity."[149] Moreover, they are a means to cultivate good energy and health in the household whilst preventing evil energies. The *kōlam*, Nagarajan says, is symbolic in the sense that it is rich with meaning, and it contains information pertaining to how the environment is understood within the context of Hindu traditions. *Kōlam* are a means to thank the Earth Goddess for her continued tolerance and care, and in choosing to construct them in the morning "is to exercise the memory of the debt felt to the earth goddess, who bears all human and nonhuman actions on her surface."[150]

Nagarajan says that the *kōlam* generally represents one of the four following goddesses: Bhū Devi (or Bhūmi Devī), the earth goddess; Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth and good fortune, prosperity and rice; Mū Devī, the goddess of laziness, sleepiness, and poverty; and Tulasī Devī, the goddess of Indian basil."[151] In Hindu folklore, Bhū Devī is perceived to be meek and fragile, much like the earth that she represents, and "[a]n explicit language of protection and vulnerability runs alongside the mythologization of the earth as goddess."[152] Nagarajan also says that in conversations had with local women, "Bhū Devī was referenced both as the physical earth, a large living being with a soul, and as the particular soil at a woman's feet in a particular village, town, or city."[153]

[149] Ibid., 271.
[150] Ibid., 273.
[151] Ibid., 271.
[152] Ibid., 272.
[153] Ibid., 273.

On "Intermittent Sacrality"

Although this daily act of revering Bhū Devī reminds a worshipper of the symbiotic relationship shared between humans and nature and "the fragility of the soils and the earth,"[154] Nagarajan suggests that this temporal recognition of the Earth Goddess and the intention to protect her does not appear to comprehensively inform the remainder of people's daily activities. Following the ritual act of praising the Goddess, household waste is often thrown onto the grounds that encompass the women's homes, that is, onto the very earth that was just worshipped. As Nagarajan says this is more problematic in today's age, where much of our waste consists of non-biodegradable plastics. Even the materials that are used to construct kōlams today, she says, often consist of "ground stone powder and plastic (stick-on) decals."[155]

Where the environment becomes sanctified through ritual acts, Nagarajan argues that it loses its sanctity when the performance of ritual acts cease. Although she acknowledges that there is no shortage of ecological *themes* in Hinduism, she explains that this disjunction between religious time and actual time (in which people carry out their daily activities) is the result of what she calls *intermittent sacrality.* Where the goddess is sanctified every morning at a specific hour, after the ritual is complete, there is no longer a need to honour her sanctity. If this is an accurate interpretation of the practice here, then the movement from ritual time into ordinary time signifies a distancing from the divine subject. Perhaps then, such practices are "compensatory rituals that do not imply a change of behavior in non-ritual time and space."[156] Intermittent sacrality, Nagarajan says, "occurs as a particular divinity is invited at a specific

[154] Ibid., 272.
[155] Ibid., 275.
[156] Ibid.

moment to come and be in a particular place, a site, or substance, and then at a later moment, is asked courteously to leave."[157]

If we return to the festival of Durgā Pūjā, in which the *navabatrikā* is worshipped as the incarnation of the Goddess, another example of this intermittent sacrality becomes apparent. Although the bundle of plants is integral to ritual worship during Durgā Pūjā, when the festival comes to a close and the goddess parts ways with worshippers, the sanctified natural objects are no longer acknowledged as sacred in the absence of the goddess.

Nagarajan further argues that the notion of intermittent sacrality also threatens the biodiversity of the Ganges. The current state of the river, she says, illustrates an almost universal view shared amongst Hindus: that the "goddess protect[s] the human, not the other way around."[158] This notion of intermittent sacrality, she explains, prohibits the actualization of long-term ecological care and conservation. This disconnect between a reverence for nature and environmental concerns over pollution, however, is not abnormal within Hindu traditions, as religious ritual practice "changes from one moment to another. One context may require asking for forgiveness, another may involve human needs of the moment, like removing garbage to an unseen place."[159] Thus, Nagarajan argues that although "the sacrality of the natural object does not expire, the active human relationship acknowledging sacrality to that natural place is temporary. That *relationship* is, therefore, also intermittent."[160]

[157] Ibid., 278.
[158] Ibid., 277.
[159] Ibid., 279.
[160] Ibid.

Embedded Ecologies

Despite her findings, Nagarajan emphasizes that this disconnect between nature worship and environmental conservation does not necessarily denote a lack of environmental care, or that Hindu ritual actions are "unecological." To better understand the "paradox" at hand, Nagarajan says that "[t]he notion of being "ecological" itself must be deconstructed historically and culturally. Cultural variations of ecological beliefs and practices must be explored within their own frames of reference."[161]

Returning to this notion of an embedded ecology, it is necessary to recall what is embedded in Hindu traditions: "[d]epending on caste, class, religion, community, and bio-region, different people arrange natural substances according to a diverse range of values."[162] Therefore, while it is necessary to recognize that a divide might often or even always exist between a religious reverence for nature and actual acts of conservation, the relationship between the two can also be extraordinarily difficult to demonstrate as there are many and varied underlying socio-cultural factors at play in any given community or context.

Bruce Sullivan: The Yamuna River, Vrindavan and the Sacred as a Commodity

Bruce Sullivan also illuminates how Hindu beliefs may conflict with environmentalism. He does so by discussing how the "sacred" may become commodified. In his essay "Theology and Ecology at the Birthplace of Kṛṣṇa," he speaks of the sacred groves in Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh and the Yamuna river—the region that Kṛṣṇa is said to have lived throughout his

[161] Ibid., 281.
[162] Ibid.

childhood. Sullivan notes that the *Bhagavata Purana*, amongst "other texts, and devotional songs make references to deeds of Kṛṣṇa in specific places in the vicinity of Vrindavan: Mount Govardhana, the Yamuna River, and others. Devotees are strongly encouraged to go to such places where they can feel a special closeness to Kṛṣṇa and Radha because of their actions there, and many will imitate certain of their actions at particular sites."[163] Sullivan notes that there is no division to be drawn between sacred and secular areas in the town, but, "while every molecule of dust may be sanctified, certain sites are regarded by devotees as more sacred than other because of particular deeds of Kṛṣṇa and Radha there."[164]

The city of Vrindavan "now has more than 5500 temples dedicated to the Hindu god Kṛṣṇa and attracts more than 6 million visitors a year causing both environmental impact and changes to the sites themselves due to creative infrastructure and urban development."[165] Despite the religious significance of the area, many of the sacred groves have been heavily deforested. At present, only the groves of Nidhivan, Seva Kunj, and Kishore Van are still intact. The once densely forested areas of the city have become barren, and "the area is rapidly turning into a desert such as is found just to the west in Rajasthan."[166] And, much like the sacred Ganges, areas of the Yamuna river are so badly polluted that the water has been deemed unsafe for bathing and drinking.

However, despite the dangers posed by these waters, religious worship in and around the Yamuna continues. Vrindavan "faces special ecological problems, because it receives over two million pilgrims per year […] [and] transportation and the big business of guiding pilgrims to the

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[163] Bruce Sullivan, "Theology and Ecology at the Birthplace of Kṛṣṇa," in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance E. Nelson (New York: SUNY, 1998), 251.
[164] Ibid., 251.
[165] T. Birtchnell, "Vastu Compliance: The Gentrification of India's Sacred Spaces and the Mobilities of Ideas," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42, 14 (2016): 2339.
[166] Sullivan, "Theology and Ecology at the Birthplace of Kṛṣṇa," 252.

sacred sites have increased traffic greatly, straining the capacity of municipal services such as water and sewage treatment."[167] The popularity of the site for religious devotees has thus drawn in enough foot traffic to pollute the air and change the biodiversity of the town and the surrounding area.

Another problem comes from an influx of new houses being built in the city, which are especially desirable for the wealthy class and retirees who wish "to live out their days in the setting most conducive to worship and the liberation from rebirth that is the reward."[168] Sullivan recalls seeing a real estate sign in Vrindavan that read: "Welcome to this holy land of Lord Krishna. Holy Forest plots for sale. Freehold residential complex in very peaceful and tranquil atmosphere."[169] A rise in residential offerings on sacred land may thus suggest that there exists "an Indian spirituality divorced from the country's sacred spaces and compatible with the global lifestyles and consumer tastes of a transnational capitalist class."[170] In this sense, the sacred has become commodified.

Sullivan says that it is also important to recall how the deteriorating condition of the environment surrounding Vrindavan has become a problem for religious worshippers and those who have travelled to the city for pilgrimages. Note that David Kinsley illustrates the features of a pilgrimage here:

> In Hinduism, pilgrimage is often the process of learning to see the underlying or implicit spiritual structure of the land; this often involves a change in perspective, a change that is religiously transformative. Pilgrimage is the process whereby pilgrims open themselves to sacred power, the numinous quality, of the landscape, whereby they establish a rapport with the land that is spiritually empowering. An underlying assumption of pilgrimage

[167] Ibid., 253.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid., 253.
[170] Birtchnell, "Vastu Compliance: The Gentrification of India's Sacred Spaces and the Mobilities of Ideas," 2338.

> seems to be that the land cannot be intensely known and experienced from a distance; it can be fully known, its story deeply appreciated, only by traveling to the land itself.[171]

If pilgrimages are meant to be spiritually empowering experiences that further enhance the connection that one has with their beliefs, then we must consider the impression that travelling to Vrindavan may have on worshippers. When pilgrims and devotees enter the region, they are met with the sight of increasing urban sprawl, of both commercial and residential building projects. When someone travels to the region to carry out an act of worship in the sacred river, they are warned of the toxicity of the Yamuna. This, paired with the fact that visitors cannot experience sacred sites as they are presented in ancient texts, is often disheartening. Sullivan says that worshippers "have cited the appearance of the region as causing despair, […] so that a pilgrimage now might occasion loss of faith instead of deepening it. The conflict between descriptions in ancient devotional texts and the reality of today is stark."[172]

On the Slow Repair of Vrindavan

Sullivan does note, however, that there are local and international groups—such as ISKCON (or the Hare Krishnas)—that have made efforts to repair the damaged grounds and waterways of the area. Members of ISKCON "have raised money to purchase a forested plot called Ramana Reti, famed as a place where Kṛṣṇa and his brother Balarama played in their youth, and recently the target of real estate developers."[173] An integral member to this

[171] David Kinsley, "Learning the Story of the Land," in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, ed. Lance E. Nelson (New York: SUNY, 1998), 235.
[172] Sullivan, "Theology and Ecology at the Birthplace of Kṛṣṇa," 252.
[173] Ibid., 253.

movement, Shrivatsa Goswami, "points to Kṛṣṇa as the paradigm of reverence for nature; not only did he defeat the river polluting demon Kaliya, but the only two occasions on which Kṛṣṇa worshipped were when he led the cowherds in worshipping Mount Govardhana and when he worshipped the Sun God to cure his son of leprosy."[174]

Figure 3: Krishna bathing with the Gopis in the river Yamuna, India, Rajasthan, 18th century. Artist Unknown.

Ranchor Prime, an English member of the Hare Krishnas, has also gone to great efforts to restore the area by partnering with resident Sewak Sharan to restore Vrindavan's 11km long pilgrimage route. Followers of Kṛṣṇa, Sullivan says, believe that the environmental pollution of Vrindavan and elsewhere in India may be repaired by simply returning to traditional religious values and teachings. The answer to many of these concerns, they suggest, can be found in the stories of Kṛṣṇa's life. Those in support of reforestation projects have emphasized how the worship of Kṛṣṇa is linked to the worship of, and concern for, the land. These groups have used the "following slogan [...] to generate support: 'one who cares for Kṛṣṇa cares for His land.'"[175] "Those who worship Kṛṣṇa," Sullivan writes, "see his divine example, recounted in ancient myths, as still relevant today, and as the paradigm for human action that is desperately needed."[176]

[174] Ibid., 254.
[175] Ibid —emphasis mine.
[176] Ibid., 257.

The groves, especially Kishor Van, are now slowly being repaired by local efforts. According to the "Friends of Vrindavan" organization, plans are in place to encourage locals to not only participate in reforestation efforts, but to also restore the trees and shrubs of Braj and educate others, particularly children, about the environment and culture. The leaders of this project believe that these efforts will initiate "the reclamation of the sacred grove culture."[177] They also note that the cultural heritage site will be enhanced by incorporating sacred art and a sound landscape that will "give the tourists a divine feeling with the ambience of Braj-Vrindavan."[178]

As Sullivan has demonstrated, Vrindavan—the childhood home of Kṛṣṇa, once home to many sacred groves—has long been in danger of ecological devastation. An increase in "sacred tourism" has changed the air quality of the area, and foot traffic has damaged the lands. Sewage problems have led to the pollution of the Yamuna, which is no longer safely accessible to residents or worshippers. A desire to be closer to the sacred—to live on sacred land—has led to increased urban sprawl and residential housing projects. All of this comes at the cost of clear-cutting sacred groves and destroying the biodiversity surrounding pilgrimage paths. However, as mentioned above, Sullivan also reports that groups, such as ISKCON, have returned to Hindu traditionalism, as they define it, and the teachings of Kṛṣṇa to foster a new form of environmental care. This is one of the ways in which religious values are being mobilized towards repairing the environment.

[177] "Sacred Grove Restoration Programme: Kishore Van Revival Project," *Friends of Vrindavan* (blog), https://friendsofvrindavan.wordpress.com/2010/11/07/kishore-van-update/.
[178] Ibid.

Kelly Alley: On Worldviews, Purity and Pollution in the Gangā

Anthropologist Kelly Alley has been studying environmental issues in Northern India for the past twenty years. Her most recent research projects have primarily addressed environmental concerns about the river Gangā, and the tensions that have arisen between religious leaders, climate activists, and government workers. The conflicting views that have emerged, she says, "reflect a larger debate between worldviews and the divergent ways worldviews define the sacred and the profane."[179] Much like what Guha has argued, as discussed in the first chapter, Alley also says that it has become clear that there exists an overarching "conflict of worldviews holding different assumptions about human existence. The various logical and moral or ethical legitimacy from theology, scientific discourse, and the secular policies of the state […] are windows into the way Indian citizens and state officials use these assessments to articulate their worldview differences in public debates."[180]

In her essay "Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Ganga's Purity and Pollution," Alley explores the viewpoints of three different groups of people in regard to the current levels of pollution of the Ganga: government officials, scientists and activists; *Pandas* (pilgrim priests) in Dasasvamedha; and, members of the Clean Ganga Campaign. "Despite their varied orientations toward the sacred and secular," Alley says, "members of these groups have one thing in common: they consider the present period a degenerate one."[181] However, as is made clear in her essay, each group has different understandings pertaining to the actual causes of the pollution, and, there is a lack of consensus on how the river's biodiversity may be restored. Alley argues

[179] Kelly Alley, "Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Ganga's Purity and Pollution," in *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, edited by Lance E. Nelson (New York: SUNY, 1998), 297.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid., 299.

that much of these tensions arise from how the *Pandas* understand the differences between purity and pollution and how each group interprets "degeneracy."

The primary pilgrimage site for the Gangā is in the city of Banaras. Although the river stretches through hundreds of villages in India, Banaras is believed to be "the center of Siva's universe, as well as the beginning and end point of civilization."[182] In addition, the river is thought to be "a goddess who absolves worldly impurities and rejuvenates the cosmos with her purifying power."[183]

"On a more secular note," Alley writes, "the city is also the site of the largest combined pilgrim/tourist trade in India today."[184] Consequently, the river is highly polluted. Corpses are burned and released from the banks on funeral pyres after rituals of mourning, and further down the river it is common for partially burnt and/or decomposed bodies to wash up on the shores. Food items are sent adrift in the water as offerings to the Goddess, as well as many non-biodegradable items; and, as people regularly bathe in the waters for purification, the river contains a build-up of untreated sewage and waste from bathers.

Figure 4: On May 30, 2019, "India Today" reported on a map that was released by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), which showed that the water in the Ganga is unfit for drinking, and that there are only 18 places along the river that are fit for bathing.

[182] Ibid.
[183] Kelly Alley, "The Dirtying of the River Goddess Gangā," in *Sacred Geography of Goddesses in South Asia,* ed. Rana P. B. Singh (United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 357.
[184] Alley, "Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Ganga's Purity and Pollution," 298.

Here, I return to Tomalin's argument, as it is through this obvious human footprint that the government and climate activists have drawn attention to the fact that there appears to be a disjunction between religious environmental worship and environmental care. Despite the centrality of the sacred river to Hindu beliefs and rituals, the materials and human remnants that are released into the waters have caused immense damage. This apparent disjunction is what fuels debates surrounding the functions of purity and pollution in Hindu religiosity.

Alley writes the following: "Scientific assessments made by government officials and members of the Clean Ganga Campaign locate degeneracy in the ecological systems. From their point of view, human processes of population growth, urbanization, and industrial and technological development have brought on the decline of ecological balance."[185] However, the *Pandas* and residents of Southern Dasasvamedha

> envision themselves at the end of a cosmic cycle. In this context, they interpret immoral behavior and abuses of the Ganga as signs of diminished virtue and moral degeneracy […] [from] marketplace competition, cheating, and corruption. […] These factors, they believe, create an atmosphere in which people disrespect Ganga. The former group measures how polluted the Ganga has become, while the latter ponders how Ganga herself might help reset the degenerate moral and cosmic order. [186]

Both the residents and visitors of Banaras who frequent the river "see science and the state as powers which bring on ecological degeneracy in the name of preventing it."[187] Many of these residents, including those working in government positions, "emphasize the sacred purity of Ganga. They do this by calling upon her divine power in worship rituals (*puja*). They understand Ganga's deep symbolic history and cite eulogies to her developed in the sacred texts."[188]

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[185] Ibid., 299.
[186] Ibid., 299-300.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid., 301.

While scientists and climate activists assess the damage done to the river via religious degeneracy, residents of Dasasvamedha consider "how Ganga herself might help reset the degenerate moral and cosmic order."[189] Alley suggests that in this context, religious or theological "discourses, more than scientific and secular ones, establish various connections between moral and ecological values through sacred texts, drama and iconography."[190]

Sacred Confluences: On *Gandagi*

This "disjunction," Alley suggests, can be explained by examining how the residents of Banaras understand sacred "confluences" in the context of purity and impurity. In order to better understand why the river has been, and continues to be, polluted, climate activists, scholars and those who are examining the site through a secular lens must bear in mind the religious convictions of the individuals who revere the sacred site, and how within Hindu traditions, there is a blurred line between what makes for material pollutants versus spiritual pollutants (i.e., ritual uncleanliness). What is understood by locals as "material waste, encompassed by the term *gandagi* must be understood in its own terms, as something somewhat different from the scientific/official notion of environmental pollution." [191] The residents of Banaras regard Gangā as "a mother who cleans up human sin and mess with loving forgiveness."[192] Ritual ablutions (*snān*) are continuously performed for the Goddess, who will then purify both the organic and inorganic waste that is so frequently released from the banks into the river. *Snān* helps to "clean physical dirt through the presence of […] spiritual power, reproducing at one level an

[189] Ibid., 300.
[190] Ibid., 297.
[191] Ibid., 305.
[192] Ibid.

interlocking relationship between ritual, purity and physical cleanness."[193] As the remainders of bodies are sent adrift in the water from the banks of the river, ritual ablution thus aids in their natural purification, and performing ritual ablutions simultaneously pleases the Goddess. So, when something unclean (*gandagi*) enters the river, Gangā harnesses her sacred power to further sanctify *gandagi* until it is no longer considered to be a pollutant. *Gandagi*, Alley explains, "invokes ideas about geographic-sacred power […] [and] there are limits to the extent that *gandagi* can impact or cause transformations in the human, natural or sacred order."[194]

The Views of *Pandas* (Pilgrim Priests)

Through Alley's survey of the area and her discussions with locals, she has found that the disjunction between environmental pollution and ritual cleanliness/uncleanliness is especially apparent in observing the beliefs of *Pandas* (pilgrim priests) in Varanasi, who "are more concerned about ritual purity and do not consider physical pollution to threaten the spiritual purity of the Ganga."[195] Climate activists, scientists and government workers, on the other hand, are largely concerned with the impact that the rivers pollution has on the health of locals and the biodiversity of the region. The *Pandas*, she says, classify *gandagi* into the following four pairs:

> The first two pairs—*saflganda* and *svaccha/asvaccha*—refer to material or external cleanness and uncleanness. The other two—*suddha/asuddha* and *pavitra/apavitra*—refer to purity and impurity of cosmos, soul, and heart. […] For example, a Banaras resident might say that Ganga water is *suddha* as if he or she means both good to drink in the sense of cleanness and good to worship in the sense of possessing eternal power. This means that *saflsvaccha* and *suddha/pavitra* can signify similar conditions.[196]

[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid., 306.
[195] Tomalin, "The Limitations of Religious Environmentalism for India," 18.
[196] Alley, "Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Ganga's Purity and Pollution," 306.

The complex relationship that exists between the ritually pure and the ritually impure is demonstrated by how *Pandas* view the death rituals that commence on the banks of the river. Families that cannot afford a proper cremation after the death of a loved one will set bodies alight on pyres and will release them into the river. As aforementioned, partially burned or decomposed corpses will wash up on the banks further down the river. The *Pandas* believe that, given there was an effort to respect ritual practice, partially burned corpses retain their ritual purity. Corpses that have been released into the Ganga without following ritual protocol, however, are impure. In Dasasvamedha, the *Pandas* "point out that most of the fully uncremated corpses found floating down the Ganga should have been cremated according to rules set out in the *sastras* (because they were neither Sadhus, children, lepers nor smallpox victims). To the priests, this indicates a lapse in the public respect for ritual order."[197] Alley notes that in her interactions with the *Pandas*, it was evident that they, much like the residents of Dasasvamedha and elsewhere, showed little concern for how corpses are actively polluting the waters. That is, neither ritual impurity nor material uncleanliness are considered to be forms of environmental pollution. The Dasasvamedha residents believe "that fully uncremated bodies in the Ganga are less dangerous than the social conditions they reflect. These bodies represent, to them, a decline in the practice of cremation and therefore mark the moral degeneracy of contemporary society."[198] Alley also notes that "local residents complain that the police are often responsible for the problem because they dispose of unclaimed dead bodies in the river to avoid the costs of electric cremation."[199]

[197] Ibid., 309.
[198] Ibid., 310.
[199] Ibid., 309.

As we can see from the work of Alley, the residents who utilize the Ganga as a place of ritual worship do not believe, given her purifying powers, that they are disrespecting the river. It is also true that the *Pandas* "do not deny the presence of *gandagi* in the river." [200] For the *Pandas* of Dasasvamedha, "[e]cological degeneracy is, for them, a consequence of human activities associated with industrialization, urban growth, and the overpopulation of the river basin.[201]"

The Clean Ganga Campaign and The Ganga Action Plan

Although discourses surrounding "ecological degeneracy" and river pollution have only entered into public discourse recently, several local environmental organizations have emerged—such as The Clean Ganga Campaign (*Swatcha Ganga Abhiyan*), which was formed in 1982 and was originally "listed [...] under a religious institution run by one of its principal members."[202] Although the group was primarily concerned with the physical waste that was accumulating in the river, unlike many Western environmental groups, the *Swatcha Ganga Abhiyan* was equally aware of, and concerned with, the religious and ritual significance of the Ganga for the local Hindu community—and, most importantly, they did not argue against the purifying powers of the river. Alley explains that "[t]he leading member of the group is also the head priest of a religious institution, the Sankat Mochan Foundation. This organization manages the Sankat Mocan Temple, an important Hindu temple where the saint-poet Tulsi Das received his vision of Hanuman, the monkey-god of the *Ramayana.*"[203]

[200] Ibid., 313.
[201] Ibid., 317.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid.

The organization pushed for the integration of sewage management programs and water treatment facilities. After 1986, the Ganga Action Plan "was set up to create pollution prevention programs and sewage treatment infrastructure in five Class I cities (those with populations over 100,000) bordering the Ganga."[204] By 1993, numerous waste management facilities were in operation, despite a great number of design pitfalls, which led to backlash from the Indian government. As Alley notes, the Clean Ganga Campaign accredits themselves as being integral to promoting environmental initiatives through offering residents' access to educational forums. In 1994, Alley invited *Pandas* of Dasasvamedha to attend a public forum featuring Dr. Karan Singh, "the chairman of the People's Commission on Environment and Development and former Indian Ambassador to the United States."[205]

Although Alley encouraged the *Pandas* to participate in this forum, she has still found that there is a reluctance amongst religious officials and residents alike to consider how the state of the Ganga is slowly deteriorating. Funded treatment plants and government reports revealing the severity of the damage are often interpreted as elitism that favours the scientific over the religious—a means to denigrate the beliefs which posit Ganga as a purifying goddess. Alley says that "the *pandas* of Dasasvamedha argue that their knowledge, informed by sacred texts, is more authoritative."[206] Moreover, the *Pandas* believe that the scientific evidence "negate[s] divine power."[207]

[204] Ibid., 320.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid., 321.
[207] Ibid.

Potential Solutions: Reconciling Physical and Ritual Impurity

Environmental groups, then, such as the Clean Ganga Campaign, have faced hardships in attempting to convince residents of the physical uncleanliness of the river given their belief in the purifying powers of the Goddess. Although organizations like the CGC have worked towards bettering the conditions of the Ganga, residents and religious leaders—who are aware of some kind of *gandagi*—maintain the belief that the Goddess can purify herself. As Alley notes, the CDC has not disqualified these beliefs as they have not been scientifically proven to be untrue. Similarly, it is necessary for the government to take religiosity into consideration when formulating new environmental action plans and policies. However, the issue still stands, and while *Pandas* believe that the implementation of new sewage treatment plants suggest a disdain for the sacred, "Government officials [...] blame pilgrims and residents of Banaras for their adherence to a tradition that encourages an intensive use of the river for religious purposes. Furthermore, government officials point out that *pandas* uphold the ideology of purity to support their own economic interests."[208] Finally, Alley notes that during the time of her fieldwork, it became clear that "all groups are suspicious that the anthropologist, with her curious concern for Ganga, is studying pollution to make money."[209]

The Sacred and Secular: A Problem of Communication

Alley has suggested that religious nature worship (in this instance) is in direct conflict with secular interests. However, the continuing pollution in the Ganga cannot solely be blamed

[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid., 322.

on religious ritual, and the overarching problem is, in all reality, very complicated. As Mary Douglas writes in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, in Hindu traditions, "[w]hat is clean in relation to one thing may be unclean in relation to another, and vice versa. The idiom of pollution lends itself to a complex algebra which takes into account the variables of each context."[210] This is certainly true with regard to the Ganga, Alley says, because "even *pandas* know that waste drainage and treatment systems are essential to keeping Dasasvamedha liveable. Residents seem to want better enforcement of both religious and secular laws to regulate public behaviour on the *ghats*. Unfortunately, current scientific-official projects do not, in many residents' eyes, meet this need."[211] Moreover, "[a]cademics and officials, even while respecting religious ideas about Ganga's power to provide for human well-being, locate degeneracy in the ecological balance of the river. There is no common agreement between academics, officials, and residents of Dasasvamedha about how to approach the problem of *gandagi* and its impact on the Ganga. *Pandas* and Clean Ganga Campaign members evoke the distinction between physical cleanness and sacred purity and therefore share some common ground in their assessments. However, the scientific knowledge of the latter group is meaningless to the former."[212]

Potential Solutions and Conclusion

Despite the tensions between the sacred and secular beliefs that are in play, Alley importantly stresses that environmental activists, scientists, and government officials "need to be

[210] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1984), 8.
[211] Alley, "Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Ganga's Purity and Pollution," 323.
[212] Ibid., 323-324.

aware that the worldview of the local people must be an important factor in any solution."[213] In this sense, although religious ritual would appear to present us with a paradox, it is nonetheless incredibly important to consider the views of locals and worshippers when it comes to developing new policies. Communication between the conflicting parties is essential. Even Tomalin, who quotes Alley, gestures toward potential means of reparation in saying that:

> environmental activists find that the belief in sacred purity ultimately allows residents to reject or opt out of projects to tackle the problems of *gandagi*, they should try to interact with local religious leaders to sort out how occupational interests linked to ritual purity can become more connected with the need for physical cleanliness.[214]

This conflict between religious and secular environmental concerns instead illustrates how religious nature worship anticipates different outcomes. Indeed, through her fieldwork, Alley has determined the"[t]he crucial sentiment […] is the idea that if the priests could be persuaded to incorporate environmental cleanliness into their ritual activities, then they could act as a conduit to transmit environmentalist ideas to local people."[215] She provides some hope in suggesting that it is possible for religious beliefs to compliment secular environmental thought.

Alley further reminds us in her essay that it is important to recall that the "paradoxical" nature of Hindu worship cannot be properly analyzed through Western interpretive frameworks. Although the Gangā is actively being polluted, this does not signify a disregard for her wellbeing, nor does it suggest that people lack a reverence for nature. The Gangā is still sacred geography. Alley observes that a majority of locals do not believe that they are disrespecting her but honoring her. Although she has illustrated the importance of the river and the role it plays in Hindu religiosity, there is still a concern as to whether beliefs surrounding ritual time can extend into actual time in order to foster conservation efforts.

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[213] Ibid., 324.
[214] Ibid., 324.
[215] Ibid., 323.

Where both Nagarajan and Alley illustrate possible sources of tension within Hindu traditions pertaining to environmental conservation, the real question at hand is whether there are sources in Hinduism that can be drawn upon in order to re-contextualize the relationship shared between humans and the environment. It is how these ecological themes are sometimes interpreted, especially within the context of modern religiosity, that seem to problematize how individuals understand their relationship to nature.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have drawn attention to the apparent disjunction that exists between religious and secular notions of purity and pollution and have discussed how scholars like Tomalin have questioned the status of endogenous religio-environmental ethics in relation to the practice of nature worship. Similarly, Nagarajan has presented us with the concept of "intermittent sacrality," which illustrates how worshippers may become distanced from the sacred after rituals have been carried out and completed; while Sullivan has illustrated how the sacred can become commodified.

The environmental degradation of sacred sites (such as those in Vrindavan) is a pressing concern which requires urgent attention. However, it is important to recall that Tomalin, Nagarajan, Sullivan and Alley have pointed to potential remedies for the crisis at hand. Despite Tomalin's critique of nature worship, she has indicated that returning to traditional sources of knowledge may prove to be beneficial in initiating environmental care. Nagarajan has highlighted how despite a distancing from the divine subject through ritual, embedded ecologies exist within Hindu traditions which can, and have been, mobilized by communities across India.

Sullivan has shed light on how groups such as ISKON have been active in restoring the biodiversity of Vrindavan; and, Alley has shown how, despite the complexities presented by the distinctions of purity and pollution, larger, publicly funded organizations have begun to take into consideration the needs of local communities and have encouraged a dialogue with religious leaders when formulating climate action plans.

In moving on to the next chapter of my thesis, which will discuss village and folk communities that have practiced conservation efforts for the protection of sacred resources, it is important to bear in mind the potential sources of tension that scholars such as Tomalin, Nagarajan, Sullivan and Alley have drawn attention to. It is, however, also necessary to recall how—as has been discussed in chapter two—Hindu traditions possesses an endogenous ethics which seeks to recognize, worship, and protect natural resources because of their affiliation with a particular divinity. In discussing the following nature-oriented sects of Hindu traditions, the Bishnoi, the Chipko Movement, Swadhyay Parivar and the Bhils, I hope to illuminate how traditional beliefs and values surrounding the environment have been mobilized.

CHAPTER IV

Local Communities and Environmentalism

As we have seen throughout the previous chapters of this thesis, Hindu traditions present us with a multidimensional and complex presentation of the environment. Many from within and outside of Hindu communities acknowledge that Hindu texts and traditions are rich with imagery of nature; and, scholars such as Chapple point to an overarching unity emphasized between humans, animals, and plants in the Vedic Brahmanical tradition, and, similar ontologies characterize traditions like Advaita Vedanta (as well as Hindu theistic traditions and Tantra). Much of India's geography is considered to be sacred; and both daily and festival rituals honour the earth, forests, rivers, and mountains.

Despite the prominence of nature and reverence for natural phenomena as sacred or as an embodying divinity, scholars like Tomalin, Nagarajan, Sullivan and Alley have suggested that Hindu ritual practices and belief systems present us with a series of complications which may ultimately prevent an environmental ethics from being actualized. Moreover, the relationship that is shared between religion and the environment—as Ramachandra Guha has explained in the first chapter—is further influenced by underlying political, socio-cultural and economic factors. Given the complexities at hand, Hindu traditions that envision the natural world as interconnected with divinity have often not translated into environmental conservation, preservation or protection.

It is therefore remarkable that, in the context of the current planetary environmental crisis, the world's largest environmental movement has emerged from within India, where there

are currently "over 950 nongovernmental organizations dedicated to environmental causes."[216] Moreover, many Indian communities mobilize their traditional religious teachings towards bettering local ecologies. Furthermore, these movements include those of many Indian communities who mobilize their traditional religious teachings towards bettering local ecologies.

In this chapter, I describe several nature-oriented religious movements that have emerged in India: the Bishnoi, the Chipko Movement, the Swadhyay Parivar and the Bhils.

A Note on the Great and Little Traditions

Before proceeding, it should be noted that a majority of the groups that will be discussed in this chapter are perhaps best understood as part of what scholars refer to as folk, village, or *Laukik* Hindu religiosity. These communities—some whose origins date back to the medieval era—are said to be part of what many anthropologists and religious studies scholars refer to as the "Little Tradition" of Hindu religiosity, or *Laukik*. The Little Tradition generally refers to the worldviews, folklore, and oral traditions of smaller, local communities. It is also understood to be pre-sanskritic and non-sanskritic.[217]

The Little tradition is often contrasted with "The Great Tradition," or *Shastriya*—the latter often associated with a more institutional form of religiosity which is influenced by "fixed" texts and traditions as opposed to oral tradition.

The distinction between the two "traditions" in the context of Religious Studies was first made by the anthropologist Robert Redfield, who said village or "folk religion" refers to "a

[216] Chapple and Tucker, *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water*), xxxiv.
[217] The ancient pre-sanskritic folklore of Laukik is, in itself, considered to be canonical. The early folklore and ritual practices that have been passed down through centuries are thus fluid in the sense that they were practiced differently amongst varying communities.

society [that] is small, isolated, non-literate and homogeneous with a strong sense of group solidarity. The ways of living are conventionalized into that coherent system, which we call 'a culture.'"[218] Redfield "called oral and informal traditions like this 'little traditions' because they have few adherents and most often are highly localized in a family, a clan, a village, or small region. They can be compared to the underbrush that grows in a forest, the smaller trees and vines that sprout in clearings or hang from branches."[219]

Although it is commonly understood that the "Great Traditions" are in some way representative of a modern, fixed or institutionalized form of "religiosity," Nancy Auer Falk argues that *Shastriya* is just as diverse and complex as *Laukik*. Much like the Little Tradition, the Great Tradition is diverse and presents us with a complex interweaving of customs and beliefs—resembling that of patchwork, or a web.[220] Moreover, as Ramanujan has noted, Redfield's attempt to bifurcate two different streams of traditions has been regarded as problematic. The notion of there being a "static" Hindu tradition disregards how histories and traditions are continually evolving within communities. "Past and present, what's 'pan-Indian' and what's local, what's shared and what's unique in regions, communities and individuals, the written and the oral—all are engaged in a dialogic reworking."[221]

[218] Vijay S. Upadhyay and Gaya Pandey, *History of Anthropological Thought* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1993), 364.
[219] Nancy Auer Falk, *Living Hinduisms: An Explorer's Guide* (Canada: Thomson Wadsworth, 2016), 16.
[220] See Ibid., 17.
[221] Ramanujan. "Who Needs Folklore: Ramanujan on Folklore." *Indian Literature* 162, vol. 37, 4 (1994): 96.

Dharma and Dharmic Ecology

Pankaj Jain uses Redfield's model and adapts it to interpret his own data. He presents the Great Tradition through the lens of modern environmental concerns, saying that it is "English-speaking, urban-based, and fully conscious about environmentalism in its list of social causes." On the contrary, he continues, the Little Tradition "is traditional, vernacular, rural-based, and only somewhat conscious about environmentalism."[222] Communities that fall under the category of the latter, he asserts are not "being influenced by modern scientific research about global warming."[223] However, as we will observe in this chapter, the Bishnoi, Chipko, Swadhyayis and Bhils carry a unique set of dharmic values which illuminate a concern for local ecologies. Here, I suggest that "dharma" is a better suited conceptual lens than "religion" through which to highlight the environmental practices of these communities. Further, and as other have noted, dharma is a preferable term to "Hindu" in certain contexts.[224]

To practice *dharmic action* is to consider the wellbeing of others and to recognize that their needs "take precedence over private good (including individual material and personal well-being)."[225] In other words, the concept is tied into the notion of practicing care as a duty, which cultivates the "common good" of all living beings (*sarva-kalyāṇkarī-karma*).[226] As Vasudha Narayanan notes, in recent times many Hindus have returned to the concept of dharma to evaluate contemporary issues—including that of catastrophic climate change.[227] She says "the regulation of dharma with a dual emphasis on text and practice has given it a flexibility that we

[222] Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, 3.
[223] Ibid., 2.
[224] See: Anne Pearson, "Hinduism," in *World Religions: Canadian Perspectives—Eastern Traditions*, ed. Doris Jakobsh, 30-85 (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013).
[225] Dwivedi, "Dharmic Ecology," 12.
[226] The *Bhagavad Gītā* also advocates the welfare of the world (*loka-samgraha*).
[227] See: Narayanan, "Water, Wood, and Wisdom: *Ecological* Perspectives from the Hindu Traditions," 179-206.

can use to our advantage today."[228] It is "an ethos, a set of duties, that holds the social and moral fabric together by maintaining order in society, building individual and group character, and giving rise to harmony and understanding in our relationships with all of God's creation."[229] It is noteworthy here that, according to Narayanan, texts such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, discuss dharma in relation to "the planting of trees, [and they have] condemned the destruction of plants and forests, and said that trees are like children."[230]

Scholars studying the relationship between ecology and Hindu traditions often employ the term "dharmic ecology" to illustrate how dharmic duty can be extended into caring for the natural world: the environment, animals, and other non-human lifeforms. Jain says *dharmic ecology* "can be successfully applied as an overarching term for the sustainability of the ecology, environmental ethics, and the religious lives of Indian villages. The distinct categories of "religion" "ethics," and "ecology" work well for the "modern" urban Indians. However, for millions of rural Indians, "dharma" unifies and synthesizes their way of life with environmental ethics."[231] It is for these reasons that I use the term "*dharma*" to explain the environmental practices in which these communities participate.[232]

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[228] Ibid., 182.
[229] Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, 13.
[230] Narayanan, Water, Wood and Wisdom," 187
[231] Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, 3.
[232] It should be noted here that much of the information presented here on the Bishnoi, Swadhyayis and Bhil communities comes from Pankaj Jain's extensive work on these groups. Jain immersed himself in these communities to understand their ethics, worldviews and ways of living. In the year 2006, he says, he spent time in the communities of the Bhils and Bishnoi and studied their sacred sites. Also, he notes that he has been both a friend of the Swadhyayis and a participant in their movement. See ibid.

The Bishnoi

We begin with the Bishnoi community of Rajasthan, a group that was founded in the fifteenth century by their Guru, Maharaj Jambheśvara. Pankaj Jain—who undertook an in-depth study of the community—suggests that Jambheśvara was perhaps "the first Indian guru to emphasize ecological awareness in his teachings."[233] The Bishnoi was born from a spiritual vision which overtook Jambheśvara following his experience of a 10-year drought in Western Rajasthan, which had caused the deaths of many species of flora and fauna. In his vision, Jambheśvara saw "people quarreling with nature and destroying their environment that [had] sustained them."[234] He assumed the duty of forming a community that would "sustain the environment around them in order for nature to [continue to] sustain humans."[235] Jambheśvara introduced twenty-nine injunctions for Bishois to follow, eight of which concern the practicing of nonviolence towards nature (particularly trees) and animals. Included in their code of ethics is the order to observe a vegetarian diet, and to examine firewood to ensure that it "is devoid of small insects before burning it in their hearths."[236] The Bishnoi must refrain from wearing blue clothing, "because the dyes for coloring them used to be obtained by cutting a large quantity of shrubs."[237] Jamnhesvara also "proclaimed that 'killing the creations of God in the name of God is not only wrong but is also an act of arrogance.'"[238]

The community holds the belief that "the entire region of Western Rajasthan is their tree-temple."[239] Their dharmic code of ethics was exemplified in 1730, when soldiers were sent to cut

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[233] Ibid., 9.
[234] Ibid., 57.
[235] Ibid., 57.
[236] Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, 9.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Christopher Key Chapple, "Religious Environmentalism: Thomas Berry, the Bishnoi, and Satish Kumar," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 50, 4 (2011): 340.
[239] Ibid., 129.

sacred *khejari* trees near Jodhpur for the construction of a new palace. A woman in the village, Amrita Devi, was joined by her family when she protested the operation by hugging the trees. After hugging her first tree, Amrita Devi said: "'*Sar santey rookh rahe to bhi sasto jaan'* ('If a tree is saved even at the cost of one's head, it's worth it')."[240] As many as 363 other community members had joined the family, only to be met by retaliation from the king's army, which ultimately led to a massacre in which all villagers' lives were lost. Amrita Devi is now considered to be the first ecological martyr of India, and this act of heroism has since inspired many conservation projects and Indian communities—including the Chipko movement of Uttarakhand.

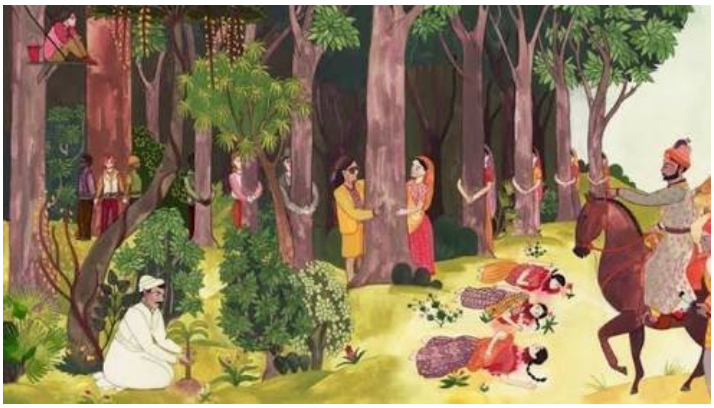

Figure 5: A painting depicting the massacre of Amrita Devi and 363 people from the Bishnoi Community. Artist Unknown.

Pankaj Jain notes that in today's time, the Indian government presents an award in honour of Amrita Devi every year. The award was first given posthumously to Gangaram Bishnoi in August 2000, after he "sacrificed his life trying to protect a chinkara deer."[241] Another recipient was Chailuram Singh Rajput, who "died attempting to protect blackbucks."[242] Throughout the history of the Bishnoi, there have been many similar instances of human sacrifice for the protection of animal life. In 1983, Harinarayana Bajpat self-immolated when poachers threatened to kill a blue bull, and the Bishnois "immediately came into action and sent the reports to various government officials in New Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. When they did not

[240] Irene Dankelman ed.,"Women Organizing for a Healthy Climate," in *Gender and Climate Change: An Introduction* (London: Earthscan, 2010), 224–emphasis mine.
[241] Ibid., 67.
[242] Ibid.

get any response from the government officials, they announced that every day one Bishnoi would follow the footsteps of Harinarayana at the same site where he had immolated himself."[243]

The continuing acts of dharmic environmentalism that the Bishnoi practice are directly informed by the teachings that were handed down to the community by Jambheśvara. Their guru is understood to be a manifestation of Viṣṇu, and the Bishnoi "see several similarities in his life with the legends of Viṣṇu's incarnations."[244] Safeguarding sacred trees and forests "goes much beyond the recognition of bio-divinity based on the Hindu cosmology or Hindu texts […] [and] unlike other Hindu communities, the dharma of Bishnoi is not limited just to the Hindu scriptures or rituals but also includes natural resources."[245] For example, the community chooses to bury the dead instead of cremating them in order to protect the lives of trees.

There has been some debate as to whether the group is part of the Hindu or Muslim community, but Jain notes that their values are consistent with both traditions. At present, they "are considered a caste-group within the Hindu community but in the 1891 Census of Marwar, they were classified with Muslims."[246] The group was subsequently "hinduized" following the partition of India and Pakistan that resulted in increasing polarization of Hindus and Muslims."[247]

Outside of their ongoing commitment to protect animal life, the group tends to sacred groves across the desert that they inhabit. The Bishnoi have become known for their compassionate acts of animal stewardship and the efforts that they have put towards tree planting. In news sources and documentaries, photographs of the community nursing wounded

[243] Ibid., 71.
[244] Ibid., 57.
[245] Sadowski, "Religious Motivations for the Protection of Forest Ecosystems," 142.
[246] Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities,* 55.
[247] Ibid.

animals back to health and caring for orphaned gazelles and blackbucks have been shared widely. Chapple says that some of "India's leading eco-feminists, including Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy (also a renowned novelist), Gaura Devi, and Vandana Shiva have drawn inspiration from this legacy."[248] Their continued stewardship of the desert lands in Rajasthan have led to the formation of natural sanctuaries for many birds, wild pigs, wolves and desert foxes. At present, somewhere between 600,000 and 700,000 Hindus across India are part of the Bishnoi community.[249]

The Chipko Movement

As mentioned above, it is likely that the Chipko movement was inspired by actions of the Bishnoi. The Chipko movement began in the early 1970s after a severe flood was caused by mass deforestation of ash trees in Garhwal Himalaya. For four days, Gaura Devi and other local women of Reni village "hugged trees in the area […] and thus spared them from logging, despite threats from lumbermen and their leaders. The women then announced, "'This forest is our mother's home, we will protect it with all our might."'[250] The forest contractors then left without felling a single tree. From this emerged the Chipko

Figure 6: Women from the Chipko community embracing a tree, 1987 (Photographer Unknown)

[248] Christopher Key Chapple, "Religious Environmentalism: Thomas Berry, the Bishnoi, and Satish Kumar," 340.
[249] See: Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*.
[250] Sadowski, "Religious Motivations for the Protection of Forest Ecosystems," 142—emphasis mine.

Movement, "a major grassroots movement of hill women and men, demonstrating their power as nonviolent activists—inspired by Gandhi's philosophy of peaceful resistance."[251] Protesting the deforestation of trees in the Uttarakhand region, Sunderlal Bahuhuna—one of the movement's founders—called for the state to become involved. In response to his refusal to eat, the government "introduced a fifteen-year moratorium on all commercial felling in the Uttarakhand region of the Himalaya, and eventually an unconditional ban on the felling of all trees above one thousand meters in elevation."[252] Sunderlal Bahuhuna argued that:

> The solution to present-day problems lies in the re-establishment of a harmonious relationship between man and nature. To keep this relationship permanent we will have to digest the definition of real development: development is synonymous with culture. When we sublimate nature in a way that we achieve peace, happiness, prosperity and, ultimately, fulfilment along with satisfying our basic needs, we march towards culture.[253]

Since its inception, the Chipko movement has spread across India and has inspired other grassroots environmental organizations, with activists promoting the protection of forests, "whose fate is closely linked with the fate of people living in the area."[254]

Unlike the Bishnoi, however, who unambiguously participate in environmental conservation as a dharmic duty, the religious motivations of the Chipko movement have been debated. On the one hand, Ramachandra Guha, for example, has said that the movement is deeply rooted in political activism and thus should be "categorized under Social Ecology."[255] The Chipko's activism, Guha says, has been motivated by their economic survival.[256] On the other hand, scholars such as O. P. Dwivedi argue that the Chipko movement is motivated by religious duty to carry out environmental activism, and that the community embodies a dharmic

[251] Dankelman, "Women Organizing for a Healthy Climate," 224.
[252] Ibid.
[253] Sunderlal Bahuhuna, quoted in ibid., 143.
[254] Ibid., 143.
[255] Jain, *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities,* 76.
[256] Ibid.

ecology rather than a social ecology.[257] Sadowski argues that the religious motivations of the movement are apparent in a statement that was given in Brazil in 1997 at the meeting of the International Alliance against Large Dams. It was there that a Chipko representative said the following: "Indian culture sees divinity in nature. To the rulers, the Ganga is megawatts of power and hectares of irrigated land. To the local people, she is a life-giving goddess."[258]

Despite these different interpretive stances, it is important to emphasize the profound affinity between the Chipko and the Bishnoi, and to observe how the groups have inspired other communities to participate in similar environmental initiatives. "The Bishnoi and Chipko experiences," Dwivedi writes, "demonstrate that when appeals to secular norms fail, one can draw on cultural and religious sources for environmental conservation."[259] The activism of the Chipko community "continue[s] in many ways—not only preventing further deforestation, but also in preserving the agro-biodiversity on which the agricultural system depend and ensuring food sovereignty, with more and more emphasis on the changing conditions due to climate change."[260] Perhaps further study on understandings of dharma among members of Chipko would shed light on the movement's religious character, since dharma, as noted earlier, does encompass the social, the economic, and the political without sharply distinguishing these from the "religious."

[257] See: Dwivedi, "Dharmic Ecology."
[258] James, quoted in Sadowski, "Religious Motivations for the Protection of Forest Ecosystems," 143.
[259] Dwivedi, "Dharmic Ecology," 18.
[260] Dankelman, "Women Organizing for a Healthy Climate," 224.

Swadhyay Parivar

A more recent example of ongoing efforts to protect India's forests have been made by the Swadhyay Parivar, a new age sect of Hinduism that emerged in 1954.[261] The Swadhyay Parivar are a devotional group who are concerned with the cultivation and understanding of the Self in relation to both the divine and the earth. The word *Swadhyay* refers to "self-study" or "knowledge," and *Parivar* can be translated as "family." Swadhyaya, Jain says, is "a holistic Vedic philosophy based on Gnaan (knowledge), Karma (knowledge, Karma (action) and Bhakti (devotion)."[262] The worldviews of the Swadhyay Parivar are inspired by the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the Upaniṣads. They primarily follow the *mahāvākyas* (great teachings), which stipulate that the self is in unity with all of creation and that God is a part of the self (or that God is "indwelling").[263] However, it is important to note that the community "rejects the label 'Hindu organization.' It has maintained a distance from other "Hindu" organizations and prefers to focus on socio-spiritual grassroots work in thousands of villages across India."[264] The group has "no organizational hierarchy and not a single paid worker."[265] The Swadhyay Parivar has expanded globally and their communities can be found in Asia, North America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Australia, and the Caribbean.

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[261] Much like the Bishnoi, scholarship on the Swadhyayis is sparse. Pankaj Jain, however, has written extensively on the community after gathering information from members through conducting interviews and visiting their tree temples.

[262] Pankaj Jain. "The Swadhyaya Phenomenon." http://www.goodnewsindia.com/Pages/content/newsclip/swadhyayaPankajJain.html.

[263] See W. J. Johnson, "Mahāvākya," in *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009: "Short Sanskrit sentences, or mantras, from the Upaniṣads believed by many Vedāntins to embody the essence of Vedānta. They include tat tvam asi ('that is you'), ahaṃ brahmāsmi ('I am brahman'), ayam ātmā brahma ('ātman is brahman'), prajñānaṃ brahma ('wisdom is brahman'), and sarvaṃ khalu idaṃ brahma ('all this [everything] is brahman'). The first four are imparted by the guru to his pupil as the latter undertakes the orthodox ritual of renunciation (saṃnyāsa).

[264] Ibid., 19.

[265] "Swadhyaya: A Five Decades-Old Quiet Revolution." An Indian's American Journal. Blog.https://www.rameshrao-n.com/single-post/2017/06/15/Swadhyaya-A-Five-Decades-Old-Quiet-Revolution.

Although they have been very active in initiating acts of environmental repair across India, the Swadhyaya do not consider themselves to be environmentalists. It is through their worldviews and cultural practices that the community naturally fosters an ethic of nonviolence, of care for animals and the environment. Jain writes:

> Although environmentalism is neither the means nor the goal of Swadhyaya's activities, natural resources such as the earth, the water, the trees, and the cattle are revered and nurtured by Swadhyayis based on this understanding. Environmentalism does come out as an important by-product of its multi-faceted activities.[266]

The movement promotes "equal respect for all religions, races and creeds," and due to the outreach efforts that have been made by the Swadhyayis, village communities across India "have also started communal farms and orchards and organized to create new forests." [267]

Dharmic Ecology

To better understand how the Swadhyay Parivar perceive the environment, one must return to the concept of *dharmic ecology*. Jain argues that the community does "not regard environmentalism as their main duty, their dharma." However, he says "from the outside, one can regard their dharma, their cultural practices, as ecologically sustainable."[268] Here, then, a religio-environmental ethics emerges from dharma, not dharma from a religio-environmental ethics. In this way, using dharma as a conceptual lens allows us to reframe the question of the relationship between religion and ecology: care for the environment does not follow from, and is not made visible by, the imposition of an extrinsic ethos or interpretive framework (such as deep

[266] Jain, Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities, 18.
[267] "Swadhyaya: A Five Decades-Old Quiet Revolution."
[268] Ibid.

ecology or Western models of environmental ethics), but is rather immanent to, and flows from, an intrinsic dharmic ethos. It is this dharmic ethos that can lead to a vision of a dharmic ecology. As Daniel P. Scheid writes, a "dharmic ecology leads humans to see the divine presence in all things, and as a result to treat all creatures with respect, and without harm or exploitation."[269] In this "ecologically oriented dharma," he continues, "dharma is a dynamic reality that, through the omnipresent Lord [Krishna], binds all finite beings together; and this interdependency has a moral force, such that dharma ought to promote the welfare and flourishing of this interconnected whole."[270] Put otherwise, dharmic ecology leads to *dharmic environmentalism.*

Following Jain, Scheid discusses this understanding of dharmic ecology in the context of the Bishnoi. And, as he makes clear, again following Jain, "these groups do not espouse an 'environmental ethic' per se, as those in the West might understand it."[271] Instead, he says, "traditionally rooted groups like the Bishnois adopt ecologically praiseworthy choices based on dharma, which weaves theology and religious practices, ecology and ethics, into one coherent whole. When the Bishnois save and protect an animal like the blackbuck, they do so because of the dharmic teachings of the guru. *Thus they embody a form of conservation simply as part of their religious observances.*" That is, the ethico-religious environmental action and "eco-friendly practices like tree worship" of the Bishnoi are not motivated by an environmentalist ethos; instead, "devotees experience themselves as simply living out their dharma."[272]

Pandurang Shastri Athavale, the guru and founder of the Swadhyay Parivar, believed one's dharma—respect and reverence—for their family and loved ones should be expanded so as

[269] Daniel P. Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 131.
[270] Ibid., 132.
[271] Ibid.
[272] Ibid.

to "see the entire universe, including natural resources such as trees, as a family. [...] The dharmic approach is to connect the humans with the ecology based on one's belief of the 'truth' of the words of a historic person or scripture."[273] Much of Athavale's philosophies are based on content found in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a source that contains many ecological references that illustrate the interconnectedness between all living things with the Supreme Being. According to Athavale, the *Bhagavad Gītā* also illuminates the importance of practicing nonviolence towards animals and the environment: "As the divine dwells in all, the true pundit is one who treats a cow, an elephant, a dog and an outcaste with the same respect shown to Brahman" (5.18).[274] Athavale also "inspire[d] Swadhyayis to be world-affirming and actively work to restore Vedic culture. To that end, Swadhyayis have taken several socio-economic projects based on devotion, such as farming, *Yogeśvara Kṛṣi* (named after Kṛṣna in the *Bhagavadgītā*) and fishery, *Matsyagandhā* (named after the mother of Vyāsa, the Vedic sage). Athavale called them *prayogs*, experiments conducted on human society."[275]

Athavale believed that trees possess their own dharmic ecology, and that they nourish and protect human beings without expecting anything in return. He explains that, "by observing and following the dharmic qualities of a tree, one can develop one's moral and ethical qualities, […] and this can help develop the dharma for the environment, [an] *environmental ethics*."[276] Jain says that Athavale had "offered *traditional interpretations* of Hindu myths and legends without any major *reinterpretation* or reconstruction."[277] For example, he saw that trees were sacred because Kṛṣna's power is contained within them. He also "compared Śiva, who drank poison so

[273] Jain also says that "this dharmic approach is different from shallow ecology's utilitarian approach, i.e., to protect ecology for human needs. The dharmic approach is also different from deep ecology's biocentric approach of privileging nature more than human society."—Ibid., 32.
[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid., 19.
[276] Ibid., 41.
[277] Ibid—emphasis in original.

that other gods could get nectar, with the trees which intake carbon dioxide so that others can get oxygen."[278] The trees provide shelter, food, and care for humans, and thus "sacrifice all their parts for others without any expectation of gratitude in return."[279] It is for these reasons that Athavale encouraged his followers to both revere and protect the trees.

The community is best known for their efforts in mass-tree planting across barren lands in India and elsewhere. Jain notes that in 1979, the guru gave a practical shape to his dharmic ecology, "when he inaugurated the first tree temple at the village of Kalavad in the Rajkot district in Gujarat, where 6000 trees were planted."[280] Similarly, in 1993, "Swadhyayis everywhere planted tree saplings and jointly nurtured their plants for 100 days with daily chanting of Śrisūktam and Nārāyaṇopaniṣad verses […] [and] seven million saplings survived."[281] To this day, they have erected many tree temples, and their growing community has also been active in "convincing the villagers to transcend their reverence from Hindu gods and goddesses to revere plants and trees."[282] However, despite these large-scale efforts, Athavale continued to reject the notion that tree-planting was carried out for the sake of restoring the environment. For him, environmental decay was a "direct consequence of industries and it has to be dealt at that level."[283] The construction of temples and other environmental "actions" undertaken by the community are thus carried out as an act to honor God (*prayogs*). Athavale asked his followers to perform "action oriented devotion or devotional action" to "develop their bond with the trees and to learn the moral qualities from trees."[284] While some "[p]eople might turn toward God out of fear or out of materialistic expectations, […] Swadhyaya prayogs are to

[278] Ibid., 32.
[279] Ibid., 33.
[280] Ibid., 34.
[281] Ibid., 38.
[282] Ibid.
[283] Ibid.
[284] Ibid.

be practiced to reform this perspective. One should remember God selflessly, out of sheer gratitude. Prayogs help Swadhyayis transform their lives and continuous participation in them helps them continuously."[285]

While Athavale has been active in encouraging "arboreal dharma,"[286] he has also promoted nonviolence towards animals, particularly cows.[287] This is something that Jain calls "bovine dharma."[288] He believed that cows were "one of the seven sustaining forces of the earth, (alongside Brahmins, Vedas, Satis (noble women), truthful people, charitable people, and people without lust or greed)."[289] Based on this concept of "bovine dharma," he created an initiative called *Gorasa*, and established dairies in villages where people could get the milk throughout the year at a nominal price and the profit earned from such collective effort was distributed to needy local families or saved for future projects." The project "also inspired farmers to domesticate more cows and thus inspired more love and care for animals."[290]

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[285] Ibid.
[286] Ibid., 38.
[287] Here, it is perhaps necessary to return to our earlier discussion of Hindu nationalism in chapter one. The seven earth sustaining forces that Jain speaks of have been used in discourse surrounding Hindutva. Cow protection, especially, has become centred to eco-nationalist discourse in India. The act of protecting cows began in India when it was under British rule in the late 19th century, whilst a strong nationalist movement was emerging. "Although ancient Indians ate beef, the cow came to be considered sacred by around 300 BC. In a society that was largely agrarian, the living, milk-producing cow was seen to be a giver of food. Many food restrictions were also caste based, and the lower caste did not follow them, at times due to poverty but also due to complex religious and cultural reasons. […] In 1881, the Arya Samaj—credited for the Hindu reform movement—presented the "slaughter of the cow as an anti-Hindu act." This rhetoric permeated the ideals of a growing nationalist body, who created "a militant form of Hinduism [which] forments fear among minority groups," and in turn has been used to justify xenophobia towards Muslims who slaughter cows. This violence, Kalpana Jain says, has become more prevalent in recent years, and is generally carried out towards people of lower classes. As I have discussed in chapter two, a rise in Hindu nationalism is exceedingly problematic, and such targeted attacks are morally condemned; and are protested against by people across India. These nationalistic ideals are not part of the worldviews of the Swadhyayis, who promote inclusivity and environmental protection, but, the history of nationalism in India must be discussed here in relation to the protection of cows, as well as the seven earth sustaining forces –See Kalpana Jain, "Cow Vigilantes and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism," *Kennedy School Review*. May 3, 2019, https://ksr.hkspublications.org/2019/05/03/cow-vigilantes-and-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism/.
[288] Ibid., 39.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid., 41.

The Swadhyayis are also known for nurturing their "earth dharma" by harvesting rainwater through constructing wells. For example, Jain reports that between 1992 and 1996, "99,355 wells were recharged along" with more than 500 irrigation ponds for farms.[291] The community also shares a "water ethic," which follows from the idea that "rain falling on your roof stays in your house; rain falling in your field, stays in your field; rain falling in your village, stays in your village."[292]

The Swadhyay Parivar thus have at the heart of their worldview an eco-theological concern for nature, and their continued participation in tree-planting "has helped give rise to several grassroot projects to connect local people with ecology."[293] Their code of ethics was fostered by Athavale, who inspired a concern for the conservation and care of the natural world. Like the Bishnoi community, the Swadhyay Parivar's concern for the environment is not motivated by the environmental crisis. Instead, the relationship that is fostered with the land is one that is inspired by a *dharmic ecology*. They see nature as being interwoven with the divine and that the environment is continually in need of care.

The movement promotes "equal respect for all religions, races and creeds," and due to the outreach efforts that have been made by the Swadhyayis, village communities across India "have also started communal farms and orchards and organized to create new forests." [294]

[291] Ibid., 43.
[292] Ibid., 44—emphasis mine.
[293] Ibid., 39.
[294] "Swadhyaya: A Five Decades-Old Quiet Revolution."

The Bhils

We move onto our final section of this chapter to discuss the Bhils and their worldviews pertaining to local ecologies, particularly sacred groves. The group is indigenous to Rajasthan and mention of their community was made in early texts, such as the *Bhillaveṣamupeyuṣim*, a work on dance from 1240 CE. Jain notes that the Bhils "may have originated in the Dravidian-speaking southern part of India and then may have traveled north to [their] later home in the central Indian forests. They are the largest caste-group of Rajasthan and the third largest in India."[295] In the present day, they are found in both village and urbanized communities across India. The Bhils are pioneers in forest protection in India: they "were one of the first communities to have participated in the protest against the Indian Forest Act of 1878 that denied the village forest rights to indigenous people and sought to expand the commercial exploitation by the state machinery.[296]

Much of the knowledge that we have of the Bhils, Jain says, has come from their folklore. What is evident is that they, like the other communities that have been discussed here, are concerned with the protection of sacred groves and plants—many of which are associated with various deities. In some cases, the government has remained conscious of the Bhils' belief system and have provided aid to them by implementing wildlife reserves and creating tree planting initiatives.

The rituals of the Bhils often consist of worshipping nature. Two trees in Banswara, for example, are known as the Kalpavṛakṣa (*adansonia digitata—baobab*), a tree deity. Numerous lifecycle rituals are performed around these trees, the rituals that are carried out express an

[295] Ibid., 83.
[296] Ibid., 84—in-text citation removed.

affinity between trees and human beings. For example: "couples tie the sacred threads around both the trees 108 times, believing that like the thread they will be tied in matrimony for eternity […] [and a] newly born baby is carried around *Kalpadeva* anticipating a long life."[297] The Bhils reverence for trees can also be observed in a festival which takes place in the rainy season called *Hariyālī Amāvasyā*. According to Jain: "the barren place becomes alive with people and a fair is held—attended by Bhils from remote places. The trees are given a bath with the Mahi water and people return with soaring hopes. The dried bark and fruit of the tree are placed with granaries by farmers in hope of bringing prosperity. The age of these trees may be over 500 years according to a local forest officer."[298]

Another legend that has been passed down concerning the Ekpaniyā Bāvasī sacred grove in the Madar Village provides an indication of how the Bhils have been inspired to protect their local environment:

> Several decades ago, somebody wanted to cut a Haldu tree from the forest. From the first cut, milk flowed down, and water in the second cut. The third cut yielded blood and the axe-man lost his sight. His sight could only be regained when the axe-man promised to construct a new temple for Ekpaniyā Bāvasī.[299]

Their continued care for the environment has contributed to the restoration of many sacred groves, and as Jain notes, their efforts have allowed for trees to grow to immense heights. The Churail (*Holoptelia integrifolia*) tree, for example, in the Amrakjī sacred grove, "is the largest tree of this species in India, having a height of more than 33 meters, and a girth of 6.91 meters. Only fallen and ripe fruits are collected from the grove and the wood from mature trees is used only in religious rituals."[300]

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[297] Ibid., 89.
[298] Ibid.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Ibid., 87.

Verrier Elwin, who was an environmental anthropologist, "lived with the Bhils for several decades during 1940s and 1950s."[301] Ramachandra Guha notes that Elwin observed first-hand that the Bhils "had a deep knowledge of wild plants and animals; some could even read the great volume of nature like an 'open book'. This knowledge comes with a clear religious dimension: "They liked to think themselves as children of Dharti Mata, Mother Earth, fed and loved by her."[302]

At present, the Bhils and many other indigenous communities in India continue to risk displacement given the disastrous Narmada Valley project, which consists of the creation of over thirty dams along the 1,312 kilometers of the Narmada River. It has been predicted that the construction of these dams "will displace an estimated one million people and will submerge 350,000 hectares of forestland and 200,000 hectares of agricultural land."[303] Since the 1970s, the Narmada environmental movement, (Narmada Bachao Andolan), has protested for the rights of these communities. According to Pratyusha Basu and Jael Silliman, "the transnational environmental network has, to a large extent, forced the state and multilateral development organizations, like the World Bank, to reconsider their pursuit of development through mega-dams. […] The environmentalism pursued by the Andolan is thus one that seeks to balance the interests of human beings and nature, instead of pitting them against each other."[304] The Narmada River, they note, has similar properties to the Ganges and holds religious significance. "It is said that even the Gaṅgā […] bathes in the Narmada to purify herself."[305]

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[301] Guha, quoted in ibid., 84.
[302] Ibid.
[303] Sonia Bhardwaj, "Role of Public Participation in Protection of Environment," *Journal of Energy Research and Environmental Technology* 5, 1 (2018): 12.
[304] Pratyusha Basu and Jael Silliman, "Green and Red, Not Saffron: Gender and the Politics of Resistance in the Narmada Valley," In *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water,* Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 424.
[305] Ibid.

Amita Baviskar, however, cautions against a romanticization of the relationship between tribals and the river. She notes that while the tribals "have rituals for the propitiation of almost every nature phenomenon, little or no ritual surrounds the river. […] Despite these qualifications, the Narmada plays an important role in both tribal and Hindu cultures. The alteration of the river's course, as well as the actual human displacement due to the dams, deprives both men and women of their culture and spiritual relationships with the river."[306] "The Narmada movement," She continues, "opposes this narrow view of land as commodity and highlights the impossibility of compensating people for the loss of their cultural ties to the land, river, and forests. The attachment to land is more marked in the case of tribal people and the movement thus foregrounds the tribal when it stresses links to the land."[307]

Chapter Summary

I have attempted to demonstrate here that there are several groups across India which have been inspired by their dharmic worldviews to foster environmental care. The Bishnoi, Chipko, Swadhyay Parivar and Bhils have conserved and restored sacred landscapes and have been active in protecting local wildlife. It is important to recall that there continues to be an increasing number of conservation movements taking shape in India, many of which have been inspired by traditional religious values. Many of these conservation efforts concern the protection of sacred groves and other sacred geographies. In discussing the practices and belief systems of these communities, it becomes clear that "religiosity"—or, better, *dharmic ecology*—has positively inspired and sustained an environmental ethic. If these smaller communities

[306] Ibid., 425.
[307] Ibid., 426.

support and encourage the conservation of sacred landscapes, can their views be re-examined in the light of dharmic ecology to foster a more widespread sense of care?

CONCLUSION

The imminent climate crisis is affecting all nations on a global scale, leading to a loss of biodiversity, an increase in toxic pollution levels of air, sea and land; and, ultimately representing a threat to many species. India, much like the rest of the world, has suffered immensely from these changes. Dwivedi says that observing the "extent of some of these major environmental problems reveals that all India's environmental issues are interconnected and together constitute an increasingly deteriorating environmental and rapid depletion of natural resources."[308] At present, in the words of Chapple, "[o]ne of the difficulties encountered by environmental activists stems from a lack of awareness on the part of the general population as well as the government regarding the severity of the ecological ravage being felt throughout India."[309]

As I have discussed in this thesis, Hindu traditions may have contributed to India's rapid environmental degradation. As some scholars have suggested, "Hindu philosophy […] dismisses and perhaps denigrates the ontological status of the physical world. Simultaneously, renouncer tendencies place highest religious value on leaving behind the things of the world, again relegating the earth to a secondary status."[310] Or, as Tomalin has argued, a boundary appears to be in place that may prohibit nature worship from becoming synonymous with environmental conservation. Nagarajan, Sullivan and Alley have each said that this limitation is most apparent in the practice of ritual, where the environment becomes subject to an intermittent sacrality, or to

[308] Dwivedi, "Dharmic Ecology," 3.
[309] Chapple, "Introduction," xxxvii.
[310] Ibid., xliii.

a paradox of purity and impurity that encourages pollution since sacred natural phenomena do not admit of any imperfection or limitation.

Although others have not entirely discredited the potential conflicts that scholars such as Tomalin, Alley, Sullivan and Nagarajan have drawn attention to, it is also clear that many Religious Studies scholars have suggested that Hindu traditions provide a potential framework for a lived environmentalism, and that an endogenous environmental ethic can be viewed through the conceptual lens of a dharmic ecology (as well as a dharmic environmentalism) and actualized through the mobilization of religious beliefs. However, in order to do so, it must be kept in mind that "India's environmentalism, both in philosophy and practice, will remain distinct from similar movements in different areas of the world."[311] And, as Guha and others have maintained, there are important socio-cultural factors that must be taken into consideration before creating a sustainable ecological model for India. Dwivedi says that "'environmentally sound' foresight based on a holistic approach to problem-solving are required and entail bringing the secular, socioeconomic, cultural, religious and traditional domains together."[312] Similarly, Sonia Bhardwaj has argued that "environmental sensitivity […] can only grow through a major public awareness campaign. Green movements can grow out of small local initiatives to become major players in advocating environmental protection to the government."[313]

Many of the environmental organizations that exist across India have remained dedicated to educating locals and cleaning polluted rivers and other landscapes. Some of these organizations, including the Clean Ganga Campaign, were created with Hindu belief systems borne in mind. As Alley and others have suggested, climate action plans must take into

[311] Chapple, "Toward an Indigenous Indian Environmentalism," 14.
[312] Dwivedi, "Dharmic Ecology," 4.
[313] Bhardwaj, "Role of Public Participation in Protection of Environment," 11.

consideration the centrality of religiosity and ritual practice in order to prove effective, and it is necessary for these initiatives to take into consideration how worshippers understand and utilize sacred sites. It is also necessary to understand how devotees understand the environment, and how it informs their worldviews. Moreover, the success of such initiatives requires ongoing communication to occur between scientists, government officials, and religious devotees.

Although Tomalin, Nagarajan, Sullivan and Alley have highlighted potential sources of tension between uniting Hindu nature worship with a lived environmental concern, this does not mean that Hindu traditions and beliefs are devoid of environmental stewardship, nor does it suggest that Hindu traditions as a whole lack concern for the environment.

In order to recognize the environmental potential of Hindu traditions, it is necessary to take into consideration the multi-faceted worldviews that have informed Indian culture and history. Vasudha Narayanan has argued that in observing Hindu texts and traditions, (especially those pertaining to the practice of nonviolence), it becomes clear that Hindu "resources can undoubtedly be used to raise people's consciousness about environmental problems."[314]

Moreover, to better understand how a "religious" conservationism may take shape, it is also imperative to learn from—on a more local level—the many efforts that are being made from within village communities such as the Bishnoi, Chipko, Swadhyay Parivar and the Bhils. These groups, amongst many others across India, see environmental care as a duty—or what I have previously referred to as *dharmic environmentalism*.

I have attempted to demonstrate that these groups have made an immense difference to the environmental landscape across India; that communities like the Swadhyaya Movement have restored barren lands through reforestation, while the Bishnoi have dedicated parts of Rajasthan

[314] Narayanan, "Water, Wood, and Wisdom: *Ecological* Perspectives from the Hindu Traditions," 183.

as wildlife reserves. Through examining the actions of these communities from the perspective of a dharmic ecology, it becomes possible to suggest that acts of "nature worship" can potentially be synonymous with a dharmic "environmentalism."

Although "religion" as a whole can still be interpreted as a problematic (or ambiguous) factor in the larger picture of ecological conservation, this does not mean that religious values are inevitably incompatible with environmentalism. Much like in India, smaller religious activist movements have emerged from within other religious traditions: for example, there has been a rise in the number of Jewish Farming communities across America, and there is the Buddhist EcoSattva movement, which has emerged as a response to the climate crisis.[315] Thus, despite the ways that religion has complicated our relationship to the environment, it is perhaps possible that it contains resources that can be mobilized in new ways. Vasudha Narayanan comments: "Hindus are beginning to use these notions of sacrality and rituals of pilgrimage as one inspiration for ecological clean-ups."[316] As I have argued here, Hindu "religiosity" contains an intrinsic environmental ethic that can and has been mobilized by various Hindu groups and communities.

I hope to have highlighted how these Hindu communities' practices carry the potential to encourage regional and global involvement in restoring the biodiversity of the planet. Where many scholars have suggested that there exists a paradoxical affinity between environmental reverence and environmental non-action in Hindu traditions, illuminating these endogenous

[315] For information on the Buddhist "Ecosattva" movement, see: Stephanie Kaza, "To Save All Beings: Buddhist Environmental Activism," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment,* ed. Roger Gottleib, 330-350. New York and London: Routledge, 2004). See also: Leah Koenig, "What Is the Jewish CSA Movement?" (*My Jewish Learning*, https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/taking-root-in-the-jewish-csa-movement/.
[316] Narayanan, "Water, Wood, and Wisdom: *Ecological* Perspectives from the Hindu Traditions," 185.

environmentalist resources may allow for traditions to be viewed in a new light, while further encouraging regional and global involvement in environmental activism.

By way of conclusion, I suggest that the actions of environmental care that these communities practice illustrate how people may mobilize "religious" traditions to address catastrophic climate change. Indeed, listening to and learning from the people in these communities might enable greater appreciation among outsiders for the ethical sophistication of communities such as the Bishnoi, the Chipko, Swadhyay Parivar or the Bhils. Against the methodological temptation to impose an extrinsic interpretive framework—a temptation that mirrors the imposition of an extrinsic ethical or philosophical framework—we can look to the lived religious practices and traditional knowledges of these *laukik* communities themselves and to the acts of environmental care that follow from an intrinsic dharmic ethos. "[W]hat is significant now," Scheid concludes, "is to support those [eco-friendly and dharmic] practices as they are embedded in daily life." For "it is precisely this organic connection between embodied practices of faith and the practices that lead to a sustainable human society that dharmic ecology must uphold."[317] It is this very organic connection that is made clear through conceptual lens of dharma—or, more specifically, dharmic ecology—and to which scholars of the study of religion should attend. Moreover, it is this notion of a dharmic ecology that suggests a way in which lived religious practices both can and do participate in environmental care and may be mobilized to address catastrophic climate change.

[317] Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*, 138.

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