Sustainability, ESD and the Hindu Tradition

Kartikeya V. Sarabhai[14]

Kartikeya V. Sarabhai (India) is the Founder Director of Centre for Environment Education. He has long been associated with IUCN, and was the chair of South and South East Asia IUCN Commission on Education and Communication and is currently the vice-chair of the Indian National Commission of IUCN. He was a member of the Indian delegation to United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) at Rio in 1992 and World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) at Johannesburg in 2002 and was the co-author of India's report for UNCED.

At the sixty-fifth session of the UN General Assembly, in 2010, the UN Secretary-General submitted a report on how sustainable development approaches and initiatives have allowed communities to reconnect with the Earth. The report recognized that, "Around the world, ancient civilizations have a rich history of understanding the symbiotic connection between human beings and nature".[15]

It was a session devoted to 'Sustainable development: Harmony with Nature'. On the Hindu Tradition it noted, "The Vedic philosophy of India has always emphasized the human connection with nature. Vedism is a way of life based on scriptures called Aranyakas, or forest books, which were written by sages who lived in the forest. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas and Smriti contain some of the earliest messages on ecological balance and the need for people's ethical treatment of nature. They emphasize harmony with nature and recognize that all natural elements hold divinity".[16]

While respect for nature and all living things is a critical aspect of the Hindu tradition, there are many other aspects that need to be looked at when we discuss Hinduism, Sustainability and ESD. In this paper I first discuss values and ethics that are central to Hindu thinkers and how these relate to sustainability. For this we use the Earth Charter, which is perhaps the best articulation of values and ethical principles needed for "the transition to sustainable ways of living and sustainable human development"[17]

Recognizing this, UNESCO endorses that, "the Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a fair, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century. It serves as a base of ethical principles inspiring the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and promotes an integrated approach to global issues".[18]

In this article, we also look at how Hindu values and thinking are communicated and imbibed, the relationship this has with ESD, and the significance given to knowledge in the Hindu tradition.

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15. UN General Assembly A/65/314 Sixty-fifth session, Item 20 (i) of the provisional agenda, Sustainable development: Harmony with Nature, 19 August 2010. Para 17.

16. Ibid. Para 21.

17. "What is the Earth Charter?", http://www.earthcharterin-action.org, accessed on July 9. 2011

18. Values of Sustainable Development, http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/sustainable-development/values-sd/ accessed on July 9, 2011

Hinduism and the Three Pillars of Sustainable Development

The concept of Sustainable Development has three aspects to it: environmental, social, and economic.

Many studies have discussed the close connection between Hinduism and ecology. In a recent article, two Malaysian scholars write, "The religious traditions of India are rich and various, offering diverse theological and practical perspectives on the human condition. "

The Vedic traditions of Hinduism offer imagery that attests to the power of the natural world. Scholars of the Vedas have identified various texts and rituals that extol the earth (bhu), the atmosphere (Bhuvah), and sky (sva), as well as the goddess associated with the earth (Prthvi), and the gods associated with water (Ap), fire and heat (Agni) and wind (Vayu)."[19]

The concept that the Earth is the supporter of all life and that human action should be careful not to destroy the balance is also a strong theme running through the Vedas. In the Atharva Veda, for instance, a hymn goes, "May that Mother Earth, like a Cosmic Cow, give us the thousand fold prosperity without any hesitation, without being outraged by our destructive actions."[20]

When a classical Bharata Natyam dancer steps on to the stage, she touches the floor and in a little prayer asks forgiveness from the Earth for the fact that she is going to stamp hard on the ground while she dances.

Several elements of nature have also taken on specific meaning. The inner city of Ahmedabad has few trees but the ones you will see are usually Peepal (Ficus religiosa), the tree of enlightenment. It is a tree people will generally not cut. The monkey, the elephant, the peacock and the snake have religious significance and are not harmed. Even the Blue Bull (Boselaphus tragocamelus), the largest antelope in Asia, which lives near agricultural fields and often raids and damages crops, is thought to be a relative of the cow and therefore protected.

In an article on the Earth Charter and Hinduism, Kamla Chowdhry wrote, "Hindus regard everything about them as pervaded by divine presence. The rivers, mountains, lakes, animals, flora and fauna, are all manifestations of God, and therefore there is a deep respect and gratitude felt towards nature."[21] This respect is manifested in a vast network of sacred rivers, sacred mountains, sacred forests, trees and plants, and even sacred cities across India. "The whole emphasis of the present as also the ancient Hindu religious practices is that human beings cannot separate themselves from their natural surroundings, because Earth has the same relationship with man as that of mother with her child".[22]

On the social plane, a key aspect is how a society deals with diversity. In a multicultural world this is an essential element of sustainability. It is important for people to have an understanding of alternative belief systems, customs, and even values. In what is perhaps the most fundamental of beliefs of any faith, Hinduism does not believe there is only

19. Razak, Ratna Roshida Ab and Zainal Abidin Sanusi , 'The Concept of Sustainable Development in Human Civilisation: An Introspective View', KEMANUSIAAN: the Asian Journal of Humanities 17 (2010), 19–36

20. Atharva Veda, Kanda 12, hym 1, verse 45, quoted in Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker (ed.) Hinduism and Ecology: the intersection of earth, sky, and water Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass., 2000. p..11.

21. Chowdhary, Kamala, "Earth Charter: Sacred India" in Earth Charter + 5: A Progress Report, Steven C. Rockefeller and Mirian Vilela (editors), The Earth Charter, 2005, p147, http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/invent/images/uploads/Earth%20Charter%2B5%20Progress%20Report%20%20August%202005%20(3).pdf , accessed July 17, 2011

22. Ibid p147-148

one way to God and that only one of the Hindu ways is right. A Sanskrit shloka goes, "Akashat patitam toyam, yatha gachati sagaram, sarva deva namaskarah keshavam prati gatchati." Just as every drop of rain falling from the sky ultimately finds its way to the ocean, so do prayers offered to any god find their way to the Supreme.

There are several dimensions to social sustainability.[23] Among these are poverty alleviation, equity, removal of discrimination and gender equality. Traditionally Hindu society has been stratified by varna and caste. There is also the concept of Karma, which implies that deeds in past lives will affect one's current situation. This leads believers to conclude that both the fortunate and the less fortunate are in that position as a result of their own actions.

These beliefs have traditionally not led to a sense of equity. The saddest part of the caste system was the treatment of some sections of society as 'untouchables'. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a jurist, philosopher and thinker who became the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, was born into one such poor family of an 'untouchable' caste. He fought a losing battle against untouchability in Hindu society, but finally renounced Hinduism along with several of his followers to convert to Buddhism. "His main objection to Hinduism was that it sanctified inequality and untouchability through its doctrine of Chaturvarnya [four varnas]. Buddhism, on the other hand, rejected Chaturvarnya and supported equality."[24] So while tolerance and the acceptance of social diversity are very positive aspects of Hinduism, the caste system can be a hindrance to the social and economic aspects of sustainability.

23. Earth Charter, III Social & Economic Justice, http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/TLSF/theme_a/mod02/uncom02to5s01.htm#III, accessed on July 17, 2011

24. Ramendra Nath. 'Why Dr. Ambedkar renounced Hinduism?' 2000. http://www.ambedkar.org/Babasaheb/Why.htm accessed on July 17th 2011.

Hinduism has many references to needs and consumption. According to Manusmirti (4.2), believed to be one of the oldest codes and rules of conduct and behaviour: "Happiness is rooted in contentment; its opposite is rooted in misery."[25] The Isa Upanishad speaks of how we should consume only according to our needs. The first verse of the Upanishad is:

Ishavasyam Idam Sarvam Yat Kim Cha Jagatyam Jagat

Tena Tyaktena bhunjitha, ma gradha kasyasvid dhanam

Know that all this whatever moves in this moving world is enveloped by God.

Therefore find your enjoyment in renunciation, do not covet what belongs to others.

Mahatma Gandhi said about this verse that, "If all the Upanishads and all the other scriptures happened all of a sudden to be reduced to ashes, and if only the first verse in the Ishopanishad were left in the memory of the Hindus, Hinduism would live forever."[26] He interpreted this verse as, "Since God pervades everything, nothing belongs to you, not even your own body. God is the undisputed unchallengeable Master of everything you possess. If it is universal brotherhood – not only brotherhood of all human beings but of all living things – I find in this first Mantra of Isa Upanishad."[27] We have so far discussed the values that Hindu thought espouses. For ESD it is also interesting how Hinduism communicates and helps inculcate these values.

25. Cited in KL Seshagiri Rao, "The five great Elements(Pancamahabhuta): An ecological perspective" in Hinduism and Ecology, Chapple and Tucker (editors).2000, p. 36

26. http://www.intent.com/paulgopal/intents/study-isha-upanishad-gandhi-said-if-all-upanishads-and-all-other-scriptures-happen

27. Gandhi, Mohandas K cited in Eknath Easwaran, The Upanishads. Translated for the Modern Reader, p. 205. Nilgiri Press, 1987.

Hinduism and ESD

In the Mahabharata, the final war took place between two sets of cousins: the Pandavas, who represented the good and the just, and the Kauravas, the evil and unjust. Before the war they both went to Lord Krishna to seek his help. Krishna agreed to help both. He offered his entire army of millions to one side, and himself to the other--not as a warrior but only as an advisor. Arjuna, who came on behalf of the Pandavas, had the first choice. Without the slightest hesitation he chose Krishna and his counsel. The importance of knowledge over material property is seen throughout Hindu stories and scriptures.

Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of Knowledge and Learning. "The name Saraswati came from "saras" (meaning "flow") and "wati" (meaning "a woman"). So, Saraswati is symbol of knowledge; its flow (or growth) is like a river and knowledge is supremely alluring, like a beautiful woman.....She is not adorned heavily with jewels and gold, ...but is dressed modestly — representing her preference of knowledge over worldly material things.... In India it is customary that, out of respect, when a person's foot accidentally touches a book or any written material (which are considered as a manifestation of Saraswati)..., it will be followed by an apology in the form of a single hand gesture (Pranāma) with the right hand, where the offending person first touches the object with the finger tips and then the forehead and/or chest."[28]

Hinduism does not see knowledge as static. The scriptures and ancient texts are seen not as the final word, as they are in many religions, but as the beginning of a journey seeking truth. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, a philosopher and scholar of Hinduism who became the President of India, wrote:

"*Hindu thought has no mistrust of reason. There can*

28. Saraswati, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saraswati, accessed on July 25, 2011

be no final breach between the two powers of the human mind, reason and intuition. Beliefs that foster and promote the spiritual life of the soul must be in accordance with the nature and the laws of the world of reality with which it is their aim to bring us into harmony .... Precious as are the echoes of God's voice in the souls of men of long ago, our regard for them must be tempered by the recognition of the truth that God has never finished the revelation of His wisdom and love. Besides, our interpretation of religious experience must be in conformity with the findings of science. As knowledge grows, our theology develops. Only those parts of the tradition which are logically coherent are to be accepted as superior to the evidence of the senses and not the whole tradition."[29]

He concludes that "Hinduism is a movement, not a position; a process, not a result; a growing tradition, not a fixed revelation."[30]

Understanding sustainability issues requires people to think of long chains of relationships, of cause and effect, intentional and otherwise. Often to explain how a particular lifestyle impacts climate change, one needs to go into several such loops of actions and their consequences. In a Climate Change Masters programme, I usually start with a story from the Mahabharata. In the beginning there is a story of how the river Ganga came to Earth as a beautiful woman. King Santanu fell in love with Ganga and wanted to marry her but she had a condition: "If perhaps I do something, whether it pleases or displeases you, O king, I must never be stopped nor harshly spoken to.... If you must stop me or scold me, I shall surely forsake you."[31] He agreed. She bore the king seven sons and she drowned each one in the river. Only when the eighth son was born the king could no longer be a silent spectator and stopped her and asked why

29. Radhakrishnan, S. (1926) The Hindu View of Life, Harper Collins Publishers India, New Delhi, 2009 p. 5-9

30. Ibid p. 95

31. Ibid p. 219

she did that and who she really was. She revealed the truth and then left. The son who survived is Bhishma, one of the central characters of the epic. When I ask students what was the reason for this strange behaviour, all hands go up. And each story has another to understand the one before it. As the students mention each story, and each story behind each story, I draw little circles to show the connections, and a long complicated chain appears, perfectly comprehended. So when a similar long chain showing complex relationships connecting human actions to environmental consequences is drawn, there is no difficulty in understanding the causes and the consequences.

The story associated with the writing of the Mahabharata is also very interesting from an ESD perspective. The story goes that Vyasa, the sage who wrote the Mahabharata, was looking for someone to write the story while he dictated it. Lord Ganesha volunteered but laid down a condition. "My Lord, you should not stop the narration at any point. The story must flow without pause. I shall write it down as smoothly as one gulps down a cup of water. If you stop at any point, I will give up my job and go away". Vyasa, in turn, accepted this condition but laid down one of his own. "Yes,... But you should understand every word before you set it down." And so started the composition of the story of Mahabharata. Vyasa dictated and Lord Ganesha wrote. "Even before Vyasa completed a stanza, Ganesha would finish writing it. He would hustle Vyasa to go on with it. Vyasa knew he could not stop.[So] Whenever Ganesha hustled him, he hurled a difficult stanza at him. By the time the child-god understood it and wrote it down, Vyasa would be ready with the next stanza. The stanzas over which Ganesha had to pause have come to be called Vyasa Rahasya".[32]

Very often these stanzas are like riddles. I interpret this as a device to get an audience that may accept religious scriptures as absolute truths to instead think critically, a communication tool to prevent

people from becoming just passive listeners. In fact, most Hindu stories contain seeming contradictions which force the listener to pause and think. Characters themselves are complex, neither all good nor all bad, with human frailties and strengths, who cannot be understood in terms of black and white.

Truth itself is to some extent seen as contextual and may vary from the perspective it is seen. "The Vedas bring together the different ways in which the religious-minded of that age experienced reality and describe the general principles of religious knowledge and growth. As the experiences themselves are of a varied character, so their records are many-sided (visvatomukham) or 'suggestive of many interpretations' (anekarthatam)". [33]This understanding of reality and truth is very conducive to multi-stakeholder dialogues, which are an essential component of ESD.

To conclude in the words of Radhakrishnan, "Any change of view to be real must grow from within outwards. Opinions cannot grow unless traditions are altered. The task of the religious teacher is not so much to impose an opinion as to kindle an aspiration. If we open the eyes, the truth will be seen. The Hindu method adopts not force and threats but suggestion and persuasion."[34] He goes on to say that, "Hinduism is more a way of life than a form of thought. While it gives absolute liberty in the world of thought it enjoins a strict code of practice. The theist and the atheist, the sceptic and the agnostic may all be Hindus if they accept the Hindu system of culture and life. Hinduism insists not on religious conformity but on a spiritual and ethical outlook in life".[35] And that is the fourth and most fundamental pillar of sustainable development.

32. Story of Ganesha and Vyasa Source: http://www.freeindia.org/biographies/sages/vedavyasa/page10.htm accessed on July 28, 2011

33. Radhakrishnana, op.cit p5-6

34. Radhakrishnana op.cit p 26

35. Radhakrishnana op.cit p 53