



Three Dimensions of Hindu Ecology: Soil, Soul and Society

by Satish Kumar

Introduction

Great movements and perennial philosophies have often summarised their essential messages in trinities.

One of the Hindu trinities is Brahman, Vishnu and Shiva – the principles of creation, continuity and decay. Christians have the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Greeks focussed on truth, goodness and beauty. The American Constitution came up with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and the French Revolution with liberty, equality and fraternity. In our own time, the new age movement gathered around the concepts of mind, body and spirit. These trinities have their point and are relevant in their own context but none of them represents a holistic and ecological world view. They may be spiritual or social, but they are anthropocentric and fail to highlight the human/nature connection.

However an ancient Hindu text, the Bhagavad Gita, contains a trinity which in my view is holistic and inclusive of ecology, spirituality and humanity. That

trinity in Sanskrit is *yagna*, *tapas* and *dana*. *Yagna* relates to human/nature relationships, *tapas* relates to human/divine relationships and *dana* relates to human/human relationships. I have translated this trinity into English as 'Soil', 'Soul' and 'Society'.

Ecology of the soil

'Soil' comes first. It represents nature and sustains the entire world. Everything comes from the soil and returns to the soil. Food which sustains life comes from the soil. Water which nourishes life is held by the soil, as is fire. The sun, the moon and the stars are all related to the soil. For me the soil is a metaphor for the entire natural system. If we take care of the soil, the soil will take care of us all. Through the soil we are all related and interconnected. We depend on the soil. All living beings depend on the soil.

Unfortunately the sciences, technology, economics and philosophy in the past few centuries have developed in such a way that we have elevated humankind to the ruling position and

given humans higher status. We have developed a world view which dictates that the human species is superior to all other species. Animals, forests, rivers and oceans must serve and fulfil not only the needs of humankind, but also its greed and desires. This way of thinking has been called 'species-ism' which means that one species, the human species, is considered the superior species above all others.

This arrogant worldview has led to the demise of reciprocal, mutual, respectful, reverential and spiritual relationships between humans and the rest of nature. In fact humans have come to believe that they are separate from nature and above nature. Nature is out there; the forests, the rivers, the birds and other wildlife and we humans are here enclosed in our homes, palaces, castles, apartments, offices, cars, trains and airplanes.

In the recent past there have been philosophers and scientists who have considered it right for humanity to go on a mission to conquer nature through technology, science, industry and trade. Humanity has been at war against nature during this industrial and technological age: poisoning the land with chemicals and pesticides in the name of increasing food production. We have put birds and animals in coops and cages and treated them cruelly so that greater and greater profit can be made through the increased sale of animal protein. Relentless destruction of rainforest, as well as deciduous forest, has been justified to increase areas of arable land for agribusiness. The industrial scale of fishing depletes

and destroys the natural balance of the oceans and rivers, and exemplifies another act of war against nature. Little do we realise that even if we were to win this war we would find ourselves on the losing side.

This war against nature is driven by our conviction that the function of nature is to drive the engine of our economy. This must change. The truth of the matter is that the economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of ecology. If the natural capital is depleted, the environment is destroyed and the economy comes to an end!

Thus the challenge for humankind, in the twenty-first century, is to find humility to overcome the duality inherent in our disconnection from nature. Nature is not just out there, we are nature too. Nature shares its root meaning with the words; natal, nativity and native. Whatever is born and will die is nature. Since we, humans, are also born and will die we are nature too. Thus nature and humans are one. Therefore we need to understand that what we do to nature we do to ourselves. We are all related; we live in an interdependent world.

With this sense of the unity of humans and nature we come to a new way of appreciating and valuing all life. The Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess, called it 'deep ecology'. When we value nature only in terms of her usefulness to humans, that is if we conserve her and protect her for our benefit alone, it is shallow ecology but when we recognise the intrinsic value of all life, small or large, then it is deep ecology. A blade of grass, an earth

श्री गणेशाय नमः ॥ श्री
 श्री भगवद्गीतामालाम्
 तस्य भगवत्चिदव्यामजपि
 रत्नं दुर्लभं श्री कृष्णः परा
 मात्मा देवता ॥ अशाच्या

धात्री गङ्गादुर्गदेवदेविपदिकीर्षवः ३३ सं पत्र ॥ गवमुक्तोदृषीकेशोपु
 अकेवानभारत ॥ मेनयोऽरुमपोर्मध्येस्थापित्वाथोत्रमं ३४ श्री षोडशोपासनादतः
 सर्वेषां तु मदीकृता ॥ नवावपार्थपक्षेपान्ममवेताकुर्वन्ति ३५ तत्राप्यपत्नीस्य
 तान्पार्थः पितृनृपितामसन् ॥ आवाधीन्मातृनारुभात्सुवाङ्घ्र्यान्मवाङ्घ्र्या
 ३६ सुश्रुशन्नुहहदभुवमनयोऽरुमयोपि ॥ तान्ममीक्ष्यमकीत्रेपः सर्वान् धनवीर्य

निपश्यमेवोगमेच्चरं ॥ इतश्चनृचप्रतस्थोमयात्माप्रतभावनः ५ पथाकाशस्थि
 नानिस्तुवापुः सर्वेषामपरात् ॥ नश्चामवाणिभूतानिमत्प्यात्नीसुपपाराय रं सर्वं
 भूतानिकोत्रेपश्कृतिपातिमाभिकं ॥ कल्पकपेपुनत्तानिकल्पादोविहृताम्प
 ६ ३ पकृतिस्वामदृष्ट्वादिहृत्तामिभुनः पुनः ॥ इतयापिप्रकृत्तमवरांश्क
 तेषंशात् ७ नचमोतानिकर्माणिनिवृत्तिर्धनंनय ॥ उदामोचवदासीनमम

स्यकाभाषाममाधिस्यस्यकेशव ॥ स्थितधीः किंचिद्भाषेतकिमासीतदवेतकिं
 ५४ श्री ॥ पत्र ॥ पुनर्दतीतपदाकामान्मवाङ्घ्र्यान्मनागतान् ॥ आत्मन्पवा
 त्पनात्तदृः स्थितश्चक्षुःसरोच्यते ५५ दुःखेषु हि प्रमनाः सुखेषु विगतस्पर्दः ॥ वी
 तरागम्यकोधः स्थितधीर्गुनिरुच्यते ५६ ॥ सर्वानभित्तिदस्तृत्तवाप्यशुभा
 सुभीनामिनेरतिनद्वेष्टितस्यश्चजायतीष्टता ५७ पदासहस्रं चोपकूर्मीज्ञानं

worm, an insect, even a mosquito has the right to life, so have trees, rivers, birds and fish, irrespective of their usefulness to humans.

As we have recognised human rights, deep ecology requires us to recognise the rights of nature. Deep ecology naturally leads to reverential ecology and spiritual ecology, and as such our relationship with nature must be embedded in an increasing awareness of the principles of nonviolence and reverence for life.

Nature is not a dead object. Nature is alive. According to the scientist James Lovelock, who formulated the 'Gaia theory', the earth is a living organism. Similarly in Hindu philosophy nature is intelligent and conscious; the elements earth, air, fire and water have divinity intrinsic to them. Hindus talk about the rain god *Indra*, the wind god *Vayu*, the fire goddess *Agni* and the earth goddess *Bhumi*. They also talk about the sun god, the moon goddess, the god of the Himalayas *Shiva*, the goddess of water *Ganga*. In essence god or gods are not separate from nature.

Commenting on The Gita, the Hindu scholar Vinoba Bhave writes, "All that is around us is nothing but god. He is standing before all of us all the time... It is the Lord, and the Lord alone, who appears in everything animate and inanimate".¹ Bhave continues, "God is everywhere in the Universe. As holy rivers, high mountains, serene oceans, tender hearted cows, noble horses, majestic lions, sweet voiced cuckoos, beautiful peacocks, clean and solitude loving snakes, crows flapping their wings, the upward rising flames, the

still stars – He is pervading the whole creation in different forms. We should train our eyes to see Him everywhere".²

Nature is divine, sacred and holy as well as abundant. And all the species are fed and nourished through the sacrificial act of 'life sustaining life'. We humans are blessed with the gifts of nature as long as we take from nature what we need to meet only our vital requirements for our living and survival. We are offered the gifts of food, water and shelter as long as we receive them with humility and gratitude and without abuse, waste, depletion or pollution. The great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi said, "Nature provides enough for everybody's need but not enough for even one person's greed." According to him waste is violence, pollution is violence and accumulating possessions which are not essential to living is violence.

Nature is kind, compassionate and generous; she is filled with unconditional love: for example – from a tiny seed grows a great apple tree which produces thousands upon thousands of apples, year after year, after year. The tree never consumes its own apples. It offers fruit without asking anyone for anything in return, it delights all comers with fragrant, sweet, nourishing fruit unconditionally. Whether a saint or a sinner, a peasant or a philosopher, a human or an animal, a bird or a wasp: all are invited to enjoy fruit indiscriminately.

According to the principle of *yagna* we should celebrate the beauty, abundance and grandeur of nature by replenishing what we have taken.

If we take five trees to build our home we must replenish them by planting fifty trees. If we have taken goodness out of the soil through crops of wheat, rice and vegetables, we must replenish the soil with manure and compost as well as leave the land fallow after seven years of cultivation, thus offering the land a sabbatical. This is what we refer to as *yagna*: replenishment, restoration and renewal. Vinoba Bhave writes, "If a hundred of us crowd together in one spot for a day that will spoil the place, pollute the atmosphere, thus harm the nature. We should do something to recoup nature, to restore its balance. It is for this purpose that the institution of *yagna* was created. *Yagna* is intended to reimburse, to put back what we have taken from nature ... to make good the loss is one of the purposes of *yagna*."³

Nature seen as an inanimate machine becomes an object of exploitation, whereas nature seen as sacred becomes a source of inspiration for the arts, culture, architecture and of course religion. We admire and pay tribute to great artists like Van Gogh for painting sunflowers, all the while forgetting that sunflowers themselves are great works of divine art that stimulate the imagination of the artist. If there were no sunflowers there would be no Van Gogh, there would be no Monet without lilies in the pond, and no Cézanne without Mont Sainte-Victoire. Artists have always recognised the sacred quality of nature. Now it is imperative that scientists, industrialists and politicians do the same and cease to think of nature as a mere resource for profit.

When we practice humility and gratitude we are able to learn much *from* nature. But in our anthropocentric modern civilisation we learn *about* nature. There is a great deal of difference between learning 'from' nature and learning 'about' nature. When we learn about nature she becomes an object of study, leading to her exploitation. This is why some scientists have spoken about the human mission "to steal the secrets of nature". But when we learn 'from' nature we establish a close relationship with her. Then there is implicit humility and reverence towards the mystery of her natural processes.

The great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore established a school near the city of Kolkata called Shantiniketan, meaning 'house of peace'. There he held classes under mango trees and said to his pupils, "You have two teachers; one myself, your human teacher, and the other, the tree, under which we sit." Tagore went on "I can give you intellectual knowledge but you can gain much experience by observing the trees, when knowledge and experience meet wisdom is born."

When we observe trees we realise how everything is interconnected and interrelated. From the energy of the sun the leaves of the tree create photosynthesis, by the rain trees are nourished and the soil holds the roots. The Buddha was enlightened while sitting under a tree.

When we experience nature we develop a deep sense of empathy and love for nature. When we love something we care for it, we conserve it and we protect it. The current environmental



movement is driven by fear of doom and disaster. That cannot be the right motivation for a truly sustainable future. Love and reverence for the earth will automatically result in sustainability, harmony and coherence.

We need to realise that harmony is the most fundamental principal of ecology. Wherever there is a breakdown in harmony there is discord and conflict. Our human responsibility is to restore and maintain harmony. The Iranian Sufi scholar, Hossein Ghomshei, says that the knowledge of universal harmony is science, the expression and communication of that harmony is the arts and the practice of that harmony in our daily life is religion. Thus there is no conflict between science, the arts and religion, they complement each other. Many of our environmental problems arise because we have put the sciences,

the arts and religious practices into different compartments. If we wish to create a sustainable future and mitigate problems of resource depletion, population explosion and the demise of biodiversity then we need to create a coherence between the sciences, the arts and religions. This can be achieved through a deep sense of respect for soil, for the earth: to be human is to be humble and practice humility!

Ecology of the Soul

As we are urged by the Gita to live in harmony with the natural world, 'soil', we are also guided to live in harmony with ourselves, 'soul'. As we are at war with nature we are also at war with ourselves. Making peace with ourselves is a prerequisite for making peace with the earth. And making peace with

ourselves means realising our true nature and being who we are.

Each and every one of us is a unique and special being. As the Sri Lankan art historian, Ananda Coomaraswami, said, "An artist is not a special kind of person but every person is a special kind of artist. He was talking about the immense potential of every human being. Hindu philosophers have spoken of "aham Brahmasmi, I am Brahman – pure consciousness."

In Sanskrit the word for the individual soul is *atman*, the intimate being, and the word for the universal soul is *paramatman*, the ultimate being or god. Similarly the Sanskrit word for the human individual is *nar* and for the universal being (or god) is *narayan*. In Persian we find a similar linguistic formulation – the individual person is called *khud* and the divine being, god, is *Khuda* – just by adding an 'a' the individual is released from his or her narrow identity or ego and is transformed into divine consciousness and united with god.

The way to such an enlightened state is through self knowledge, selfless service, and the surrender of the ego in favour of the understanding that "I am part of the whole". I am an organ of the earth body, I am a member of the earth community.

Often we are weighed down by the burden of our narrow identities of nationality, race, religion, class, gender and similar other divisive concepts and mental constructs. We become imprisoned in the idea of 'I' separate from the other and 'mine' separate from the other's. Through universal

love we are able to break out of this 'ego' and become part of the 'eco' - making a quantum leap by changing the letter 'g' to 'c'. The Greek word *eco* is very beautiful. From it we get ecology and economy. *Eco*, or rather its Greek derivation *oikos*, means 'home'. In the wisdom of Greek philosophers home is not only where we physically live – our house – with a kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, dining room and living room. The entire planet is our home where 8.7 million species live as members of one household, one family, where all species are kith and kin. So home or 'eco' is a place of relationships whereas 'I' as a separate self or ego is a state of separation, disconnection and isolation. Our soul gets starved in isolation.

When we realise, "I am a microcosm of the macrocosm," then we touch the mind of god; freed from narrow identities we become liberated from sorrow and separation, and free from fear and fragmentation.

Sometimes we become convinced that the world needs saving so urgently that we force ourselves to work day in and day out to save the planet. As a consequence of this view we neglect our own wellbeing and suffer from burnout, depression, breakdown of marriage and disillusionment.

Therefore Gita teaches us that there is no need to separate caring for the soil from caring for the soul. We need to do both. The practice of the latter is called *tapas*, which means taking time for inner purity, meditation, spirituality and living a life of elegant simplicity. Mahatma Gandhi said, "Be the change

you want to see in the world". He believed that there should be integrity between theory and practice, between word and action. Words gain power only when they are backed by a living example. This is why Mahatma Gandhi integrated into his day time for prayer, meditation, solitude, study, gardening, cooking and spinning; he considered these activities as essential as negotiating with the British rulers of India, organising the campaign for independence and working for the removal of untouchability. Thus Mahatma Gandhi was a perfect example of uniting the care of the external world with the care of the internal world. The inner landscape of spirituality and the outer landscape of sustainability are intricately linked. We need to cultivate compassion, seek truth, appreciate beauty and work towards self realisation. Thus we can connect outer ecology with inner ecology.

The contemporary environmental movement, in the main, follows the path of empirical science, rational thinking, data collection and external action. This is good as far as it goes but it doesn't go far enough. We need to include care of the soul as a part of care of the planet.

Ecology of Society

Care for the 'soil' and the 'soul' needs to be extended to include care for 'society'. In spite of the unprecedented growth in the economy, science, technology and world trade almost half of humanity is hungry, homeless and ignored.

After the Second World War the president of the USA, speaking at the UN declared that, there are two worlds, the developed world and the undeveloped world. The developed world is the world of industry, technology, free trade and consumerism which lifts the living standards of all people and the undeveloped world is the world of agriculture, rural life, local economy and low consumption which keeps people in poverty. The mission of mainstream economists and politicians is to industrialise the world, create economic globalisation and allow the free market to solve the problem of underdevelopment.

In spite of nearly seventy years of relentless efforts towards industrialisation, the suffering of people in the so called undeveloped countries has continued to increase. Even in China, India and Brazil where governments, industrialists and business leaders sacrifice their cultures and traditions, and destroy their natural capital in order to follow the path of modern materialism, the majority of their citizens are still living below the poverty line. Even where living standards have risen- such as where cars, computers and highways have proliferated- general wellbeing, human happiness, social cohesion and job satisfaction remain a distant dream.

This new religion of materialism has grown side by side with the growth of militarism. Total expenditure on nuclear and conventional weapons has quadrupled in recent years without any sign of an increase in security or peace. Violence in one form or another, albeit



legal wars waged by governments or illegal wars waged by so called "terrorists," continue to occupy many parts of the world without any resolution of national or international conflicts.

Humanity is not only at war against nature it is at war against itself: the values of profit, power, control and greed rule the minds of mainstream politicians and industrialists, whilst advertising and misinformation seduces the minds of the majority of people, who dream of a lifestyle based on consumerism, comfort, and extravagance.

This state of affairs is hardly conducive to a vision of harmony, coherence and wellbeing. Therefore a strong social movement is needed to establish justice, equality, liberty and

freedom; a movement that leads to the wellbeing of all. This cannot be done merely by social engineering or political manoeuvring. It can only be done by a spiritual awakening and a new awareness about mutual care and selfless service. The Gita calls it *dana* which means sharing, generosity, giving before taking and rising above self interest.

In a culture where self interest is promoted as a paramount value, one would naturally ask why should we give up our self interest? The Gita's answer is, as Vinoba says, "Because we are already highly obliged to society. We were totally defenceless and weak when we were born. It is the society that looked after us and brought us up, we should therefore serve it."⁴

We have inherited great architecture; the Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, the great mosques and cathedrals. We are blessed with so much literature, poetry, music and paintings. We are enriched by the great teachings of enlightened masters such as the Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus Christ, Lao Tsu and others. We have been endowed with philosophy, science and technology.

The list of gifts we have received and inherited from our ancestors and our fellow human beings is endless. We are indebted to them. And now it is our own turn to contribute to that culture and civilisation and ensure that no child in our human family goes without food, no sick person is left unattended, and that no country or community is afflicted by war, exploitation or torture. We may not achieve this goal tomorrow but efforts towards the wellbeing of all must start today by rising above the narrow confines of self interest and working towards mutual interest.

But that vision of working for mutual interest is never easy. There are vested interests in society which prevent us from acting in mutual interest and push us towards self interest. The strong exploit the weak, the rich keep the poor down, seekers of power subjugate the powerless. In such a situation The Gita advocates struggle and action.

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the most ardent followers of Gita principles. He happily went to prison "like a bridegroom goes to the wedding chamber". He practised non violence, truth and compassion yet fought a

battle against colonisation and the sake of freedom.

Activists such as Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, Mother Theresa and Wangari Maathai are examples of people who acted in the spirit of The Gita, offering their lives as *dana* for the wellbeing of society as a whole. From these outstanding activists we can learn the lessons of social ecology and strive to establish a new moral order of human dignity.

So the way of the Gita is the way of a spiritual warrior, a peace warrior and an eco-warrior – what Gita calls a *Karma yogi*: one who is engaged constantly for the upliftment and wellbeing of the deprived and dispossessed but who acts without desiring the fruit of his or her own actions. The Gita says that as the tree does not eat its own fruit and the river does not drink its own water, the *Karma yogi* should not seek any benefit of his or her own action. Rather he or she should offer their action for the benefit of others. That is *dana*.

The trinity of the Bhagavad Gita is like the three legs of a stool: through *yagna* we replenish the soil, through *tapas* we replenish the soul and through *dana* we replenish society. But they are not mutually exclusive. All of us need to engage in all three types of action simultaneously. In a nutshell we need to live a spiritual way of life that engages in the protection of the earth, enlightenment of the self and restoration of social justice. This ancient trinity of Gita is as relevant today as it ever was.

Notes

- 1 Bhave, Vinobe, *Talks on the Gita*, Paramdham Parakashan, Pavnar, India, ch.9, p.124. http://www.mkgandhi.org/talksongita/talk_gita.htm
- 2 *ibid.* Ch.10 p.153.
- 3 *ibid.* Ch.17 p.241.
- 4 *ibid.* Ch.17 p.242.



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