Religion and Environment: A Perspective from the Community of Bishnois

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For survival, each society derives its resources from the environment. At one time we thought that the dependence of human beings on their habitat is far greater in simple societies, the so-called tribal and peasant, than in complex, the urban and industrial societies. Perhaps we were wrong. The direct dependence of human beings on their environment is easily visible among tribals and peasants. One may see hunters traversing long distances in search of game, or people with baskets tied to their backs gathering leaves and fruits. One may come across rainmaking ritual performances in Indian villages, or those explicitly concerned with warding off the fear of venomous snakes.

Because this is exactly what we do not see in modern society, we hurriedly infer that it is liberated from the shackles of environment. However, a sensitive look at things around us, the food we eat, the water we drink, the habitations we build and the clothes we wear, and from where they and their appurtenances actually come, will lead us to the womb of nature. The mere fact that a large number of contemporary movements for preserving environmental resources and endowments have surfaced in urban-industrial society amply indicates that modern man is devoutly concerned about the state of his depleting habitat, and before it is rendered unlivable, thus jeopardizing his survival, he would like to save it from further degradation.

In other words, all human beings know, consciously or sub-consciously, that whatever they need for their existence comes from their environment. They also know that if they fail to protect it adequately, they will be doomed in reality. They know full well the savage fury of nature and also, its unbounded love. Nature has the strength to annihilate man's species; at the same time, none can provide the nurturance that nature does. The dual role of nature – of creating and destroying – is well known to humans. But what they have always tried to find out is how nature can be protected, how its forces should be put to benefit, thus securing human existence, how it should be worshipped for its blessings on all forms of life. Human societies have always desired to know how and in which ways they should establish a relationship with nature and its multiple forms.

Today, the movements to conserve environment have gained momentum throughout the world. There are peoples' organizations that protest against the plundering of ecological resources. Felling down of trees – even trimmings or converting them into pollards – ignites strong sentiments. A nuclear experiment or emission of industrial effluents into rivers precedes protest marches and strong letters to editors. In each one of them, the issue is the deleterious effect of technology on habitat. The question that occupies our attention is how we should save our habitat. We are told about the techniques of using and re-using the resources – renewable, not so easily renewable, and non-renewable. We also come to know about the technology – quite expensive for the developing world – which checks eco-despoliation. But confining to techniques will not really solve the problem, unless a phenomenal change occurs in man's attitudes to his environment.

Many environmentalists and social thinkers submit that primary importance should be given to attitudinal changes. Once people have a respectful attitude towards their habitat and unswervingly follow the prescriptions (and also, the proscriptions) towards it, they will definitely succeed in conserving their resources, making certain their growth and safety for future generations.

In this context, one appreciates the views of local environmentalists, many of whom follow the Gandhian ideology of frugality. They think that many communities, especially of the industrial West, have viewed nature as a foe, one that should be domesticated in a never-ending relation of war. By submitting to it, or pleading with it, we cannot overcome the nature's ruthlessness. We can do so by resisting its forces, bringing them under definite control. Man can occupy the summit of the hierarchy of animals when it has accomplished in 'controlling' nature. The terminology used to indicate a relationship with nature is from the analogy of conflict and attrition. Man *tames*, *enslaves*, or *humbles* nature; he *conquers* its forces; he *emerges victorious* in this war – or deal – with nature. By extending this analogy, we find that nature is usually seen as 'female', whereas the conquerors of nature are 'male'. The social order where females are subjugated to males is extended to the relationship

of human beings with nature. Nature is female, and as females are subordinated to males, in a similar way, nature is subordinated to the designs of its exploiters, the human beings, who carry out their exploitation of nature with the help of culture. Incidentally, an American anthropologist, Sherry Ortner (1974), says that what nature is to culture, female is to male.

This attitude has been handed down to us from the last century and a half, the history of our colonization. But Indian philosophy and religion is far away from the materialistic conception of nature. For Indians, nature is far more than a repository of resources, exploited and invariably, overexploited, for the survival, and unlimited comforts, of humans and their burgeoning population. Nature is symbolized as female, but not just as female, to be mastered by her male counterpart, symbolized in the form of culture. She is the mother, the bountiful mother goddess, who feeds the inhabitants of earth as her own children. In the event of a shortage of resources, a flood or drought, the people beseech nature for compassion rather than confronting it. In the traditional religion, nature is worshipped in a variety of forms: the rivers are goddesses, the trees are the abodes of supernatural forces as well as some of them are deities themselves, the natural entities are divine things. According to the traditional thought, nature gives all means and wherewithal – and has the infinite ability to give more and more – because it is an embodiment of divinity. In case it is annoyed, it can unleash unimaginable terror to remind its exploiters of its measureless strength.

Against this background, one may easily contrast the Eastern and the Western perspectives on nature. In simple terms, materialism reigns the West whereas spiritualism is the core value of the East. These perspectives are respectively extended to nature, as they envelope the other spheres of social living. If for the West, nature is a soulless mine of assets, for the East, it is a living deity whose ability to generate resources of all types is beyond our imagination. Nature's secrets are fully knowable, so believe the Western scientists. By contrast, the Eastern philosophers submit that nature reveals what she wants to and she herself decides which secrets of hers are to be exposed and in what measure, and which should remain concealed for the time being.

Our predictions of natural phenomena and their behaviour often fail because we cannot fully grasp the designs of nature. Howsoever optimistic we may be in scientific terms, perhaps we shall never succeed in mastering nature, so believe people from the East. Moreover, whenever we boast of our knowledge of nature and mastery over her, we encounter her almost unsurpassable wrath. Notwithstanding our claim of our knowledge of natural phenomena, our people and the life on the planet have perished in earthquakes, floods, droughts, landslides, cyclones, and tornadoes. The Eastern philosophy exposes the lacunae of the Western view of controlling nature, suggesting that our chief good lies in cultivating a reverential attitude towards her. Therefore, in the Eastern thought one finds an intimate relationship between religion and environment. Religion safeguards the environment, thereby guarantees its salubrious perpetuation. In fact, the Eastern view has gained ascendancy in several environmental movements that have taken off in the last two decades or so in Western soil. Not only that, other religious movements have also adopted a more spiritualistic view towards nature; for instance, the White Witchcraft movement in West regards the earth as the 'mother' (*gaia*, the term it adopts for the earth), who should be protected against its unabated exploitation.[1]

One of the greatest achievements of Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist, was that he made a distinction between 'what people do', of which they are aware, and 'what emerges from their collective acts', of which they are unaware. The first acts are intentional: people know what they are doing and why. What they do not know – and perhaps cannot anticipate – is the unanticipated consequence of their actions, and it is for the observers of their actions to envisage the outcome. Durkheim (1976) showed in his work on Australian totemism, which since then has become a classic in the sociology of religion, that the periodic totemic rituals create a sense of solidarity among the clanspersons. People certainly do not assemble for a ritual with an explicit aim to generate cohesiveness among them; they come together to venerate their totems that are their ancestors; they perform rituals for the multiplication of their totems. From all this would follow a sense of well being, which is essential for their continued existence. But these rituals would create and rejuvenate ties between people within the clan as well as of different clans. Because of these rituals, the individuals are integrated in a whole. No more are they isolated and lonely. It is the sense of adhesion that gives them a meaning of life.

Durkheim's ideas, later substantially developed by many anthropologists and sociologists, can be usefully applied to the religious practices of people to understand their unanticipated consequences.[2] An example will make this proposition clear. Some religions instruct their members to dispose of their dead by the method of burial, rather than by

[1] See Srivastava (1990).

cremation. An unanticipated outcome of this practice is environmental conservation: the woods are saved, pollution caused by the burning of wood and corpse does not occur, the rivers are spared from being polluted by ash and charred bones. Communities may legitimize the practice of burial on religious grounds – an idea that we emerge from the earth and return to it, or in graves the dead would lead their own existence with the other dead. These are the anticipated goals, but an unanticipated consequence of this practice is environmental conservation. It is also possible that a religious ideology may issue overt instructions about protecting the environment. People may desperately desire the health of their eco-systems but lack the requisite sanctions. The directions their political bodies (such as village and caste councils) issue may stand ill-respected and flouted. Against this background, religion performs a miracle, by providing an ideology that directly saves the environment.

Against this background, let us have a look at the religion (*dharma*) of the Bishnois, a community of north India, which is described by Bishnoi and Bishnoi (2000: 247) as a 'religion born out of environmental compulsions and convictions'. The basic philosophy of the Bishnois is that all living entities – plants and animals – of different types have a right to survive and share in the available resources. Founded by Guru Jambheshwar-ji Maharaj, fondly known as Jambho-ji, Bishnoi dharma has solely contributed to much of the greenery in arid Rajasthan. Wild life has been able to sustain itself because of the attitudes of Bishnois towards it.

It is well known that the twenty-eighth principle (*niyam*) of Bishnois prohibits its followers from eating non-vegetarian food (*mans nahin khana*). Bishnois know that armed with lethal technology and weaponry, human beings can unleash terror in the world. They can kill animals not only with the intent to eat them but also for sport, as enjoyment, to prove their supremacy over the world and its beings. They can uproot trees not only to meet their needs of fuel and house-building material, but also to prove to themselves that they can transform the environment in the way they want. If this attitude continues unchecked, both animal and plant life will be imperiled. Keeping this in view, the Bishnoi dharma contains maxims that promote the sentiments of compassion and sympathy. The tenth principle (*chama sahanshilta rakhna*) submits that human beings should pardon others. They should also develop in themselves the capacity to tolerate and bear. According to the eleventh principle (*daya namrbhava se rahna*), Bishnois should be kind and approach all around them – the floral and faunal world – softly, patiently and compassionately. When strong sentiments for living and non-living beings have developed, then only would one have feelings for them and would serve as their guardian and vanguard. In principle number eighteen, it is clearly stated that one must shower compassion on animal life (*prani matr par daya rakhna*). It is closely connected to the twenty-third principle (*bail ko badhiya na karna*) that forbids Bishnois to castrate the bull as it causes pain and injury to the animal. With this, another principle of Bishnois (i.e. *thath amar rakhna*) preaches that they should take care of goats, sheep and other benevolent (*paropkari*) animals.

The Bishnoi dharma knows that people need wood for their hearth. If they fall short of fuel, their survival may be endangered; hence for cooking (and keeping themselves warm) they need a minimal level of natural products. But for fuel (or any other thing), one should never cut the 'live' (i.e. green) trees: this is the nineteenth principle of Bishnois (*hare vriksha nahin katna*). However, one is permitted to collect dried wood. While gathering, one should take care that it does not harbour the colonies of termites or any other parasites; this principle is coupled with another: milk should be sieved before drinking (*indhan bin kar ve dudh chan kar len*). Besides cleaning, it will also separate it from any of the living objects. This idea is also contained in their eighth principle: they should sieve water before drinking (*pani chan kar piyen*). This principle also has another part, which emphasizes the purity of one's speech (*vani shudh boley*). They should also control their passions (*kama*), anger (*krodh*) and lust (*moh*) – this is Bishnoi's twentieth principle (*ajar ko jarna*).

Bishnoi are also expected to cook their own food: this is their twenty-first principle (*apne hath se rasoi pakana*). By doing so, they will be able to preserve the purity of their food. When others (especially those of other castes) cook for you, you cannot be sure whether they have cared for the mores of purity and cleanliness. If you wish to practice strict vegetarianism, then it is imperative that you cook your own food. This would explain why Bishnois avoid eating in non-vegetarian households even when they may cook vegetarian food for their guests, or in restaurant that serve both vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods. At the same time, they do not keep commensal relations with those who eat meat. I have come across Bishnois in Rajasthan who do not eat in the house of anyone except that of a member of their faith.

[2] See Merton (1957).

The environmental concerns of Bishnois are staunchly supported by their principles that insist on cleanliness. They should bathe every morning before they perform any worship (*puja*) – this is their third principle (*prata kal snan karna*). Bishnoi women are advised to remain in seclusion for five days during menstruation. This means they cannot enter the kitchen; they should abstain from conducting ritual performances, and observe distance from members of their family, especially their husband. This is Bishnoi's second principle (*panch din ka rajaswala rakhna*). Closely connected to this is their first principle: the kind of seclusion women observe during the period of their menstrual flow is also applicable to newly delivered women. They follow the period of 'impurity' for thirty days, six times of what it is for menstruating women (*tis din sutak rakhna*). Further, Bishnois should keep themselves in a state of bodily purity, and should observe the tranquility of mind and contentment (*shil, santosh va shuddhi rakhna*).

Then follow the Bishnoi principles that deal with the nature and style of their rituals. Every Bishnoi should conduct *puja*, meditation and contemplation every morning and evening (*prata sanya sandhya karna*). Every evening they should wave lamps around their principal deity, Bhagwan Vishnu, a ritual act known as *arti* (*sanjh arti, Vishnu gun gan*). It may be noted here that Guru Jambheshwar-ji Maharaj is regarded as an incarnation of the Hindu god, Bhagwan Vishnu. Bishnois are also instructed to sing the praises – in the form of devotional songs – of Bhagwan Vishnu (*bhajan Vishnu ka karna*). Every morning Bishnois should make offerings to the fire altar, a religious performance termed *hawan* (*prata kal hawan karna*). On moonless nights (*amavasya*), they are expected to keep complete fast (*amavasya ko vrata rakhna*).

In their personal habits, Bishnois have been commanded to follow nine proscriptions, viz. they should not steal (*chori nahin karii*); they should not denigrate others (*ninda nahin karni*); they should not engage themselves in fruitless arguments (*vad vivad nahin karna*); they should not lie to others (*jhut nahin bolna*); they should abstain from opium (*amal nahin khana*), tobacco (*tambakhu nahin khana va pina*), cannabis and other intoxicants (*bhang nahin pina*), and liquor (*madyapan nahin karna*); and finally, they should not wear clothes of blue colour (*niley rang ke vastra dharan nahin karna*). The relevance of the last principle is that blue-coloured clothes absorb sunrays and thus are unsuitable in the dry and hot weather of Rajasthan (and also other parts of north India). Bishnoi men are generally clad in white-coloured clothes, however their married wear colourful dresses, like their counterparts from other castes but they also avoid blue colour.

These twenty-nine principles give an identity to Bishnois. It is because of these that Bishnois have their specific name: the followers of the *bisnau* (meaning 'twenty-nine) *niyam* (principles). A sociological question always asked in this context – and also in the context of those societies (or social categories) where there exist explicit principles according to which their members should live – is how far do people subscribe to these principles in their everyday life? And, how relevant are these principles in the contemporary world?[3]

There is no doubt that the Bishnoi thought has made one of the greatest contributions to eco-regeneration; and in future, it will be extremely significant for inspiring people to care for their habitat, their bio-diversity. Eco-care and eco-heal are the kernels of Bishnoi dharma. Even those who have cursorily looked at Bishnoi habitations have found them bubbling with vegetation and animal life. Well known to every Bishnoi is the sacrifice of 363 Bishnoi women and men in 1730 A.D. (Samvat 1787) serving the auspicious trees of Khejri (Prosopis).[4] Since then there have been several cases of Bishnois giving up their lives for the safety and endurance of deer, peacocks, Khejri, and other living beings, and these cases have been recorded in detail in Jambhadesh and Jambhajyoti, the periodicals of the community of Bishnois published from Jodhpur. The impact of Bishnois is tremendous on other communities. As they happen to constitute a dominant caste in the villages they inhabit, they are always in a position to lead an ideological revolution, to spread the values of vegetarianism, ecological regeneration, benevolence, and sustainable development.[5] Gradually, the state is also recognizing the micro-level efforts of Bishnois in eco-regeneration and eco-preservation: it may be inferred from the award that has been instituted in the name of Bishnois to be given to an individual or institution that has done commendable work in the field of environmental development. The Government of India has also released stamps honouring the tree of Khejri, for which Bishnois have paramount love. Incidentally, in many parts of Rajasthan, Khejri is almost equated with the sacred plant of Tulsi (Basil).

Through their practices many religions, sects and cults have indirectly contributed to environmental preservation. The axiom of thrifty living, utilizing only those resources and only to that extent they are

[3] See, for this point, Srivastava (2000).
[4] See Srivastava and Srivastava (1989).
[5] See Srivastava (1997)

imperative for a bare survival is found in many religious systems and this assists in a judicious use of the habitat. But quintessential to Bishnoi thought is that it makes the practices, which would lead to eco-preservation, explicit, and attribute them with religious sanctity. People do not cut green trees because they have been advised against it by their faith. They know that flouting it will be a sacrilegious act, for which they may earn the displeasure of their fellow members and also, fine from their community council, apart from accumulating the demerits (*pap*) of their acts for which they would be treated punitively in this and the subsequent births. Similarly, they completely abstain from non-vegetarian food, which is one of their principles as we saw previously. All the twenty-nine Bishnoi principles enjoy an equal measure of sacrosanctity. For being a true Bishnoi, one must adhere to them as punctiliously as possible, even when the conditions may be adverse to the actual practice of a principle.

For instance, when one is traveling long distance, it may be difficult for him to subscribe to the practice of bathing everyday, but the point is that one must endeavour one's best to follow the dharma as conscientiously as possible. In normal times, one should not be lax about compliance with the twenty-nine principles. It is the positive mental attitude towards these principles that counts more than any other thing. Thus, when you are in an alien land, first of all, explore the possibility of cooking your own meal; if it is not feasible, look for an eating-place run and managed by a Bishnoi. If such a place is not available, then visit a vegetarian restaurant (*shudh shakahari bhojnalaya*) run by any other vegetarian caste; and if none of the above possibilities work out, subsist on raw foods, fruits and vegetables, or even remain empty-stomach. What one has to avoid is eating vegetarian food at a non-vegetarian restaurant. In my fieldwork in Rajasthan, I have met Bishnois who prefer hunger to any compromise with forbidden food, or a place where such food is prepared. If you are a Bishnoi, you cannot even look at non-vegetarian food or the shops that sell meat and fish.

None of the twenty-nine principles states that one should stop others from cutting green trees or eating non-vegetarian food. What they essentially do is to advise the individual to live truthfully according to the principles that are divinely ordained. The emphasis is on the purification of the individual. If the individual is purified, he will be in a position to purify others, his or her community. In this way would result a 'community of pure people', who stick to a set of principles, correct and infallible. Bishnoi religion recognizes the value of the individual, who internalizes the twenty-nine principles and passes them on to posterity.

However, Bishnoi dharma does not say anything about what one should do when others fell trees or kill animals for food or fun. Bishnois are least bothered if others remain hygienically in a sullied state or their women distance themselves from birth or menstrual pollution. The Bishnoi response to these people would be of complete avoidance. Similarly with people who tell lies or nurse addictions, Bishnoi will rarely have any dealings. They would consciously refrain from their company in order to maintain their individual purity and also, of their community. But when it is a matter of trees being axed in their area or animals slaughtered and hunted, they would not leave a stone unturned in saving the lives of trees and animals, whether or not an explicit principle exists to that effect.

At this moment, we shall recall the most famous Bishnoi sacrifice of the eighteenth century alluded to earlier. When the axe-men working for the Prince of Jodhpur arrived in Jalnadi (now known as Khejarla), a village in the district of Jodhpur, to cut trees for wood to be used in building the imperial palace, a Bishnoi woman tried to stop them by submitting that for the members of her faith trees were extremely dear, almost like their children. She argued that as her faith prohibited the axing of green trees, she would save them from being chopped off even if it meant laying her own life. Her earnest pleas fell on the deaf ears of the chief axe-man, known as Bhandari, who ordered his labour force to begin cutting trees notwithstanding the robust resistance. At that point, the Bishnoi woman hugged the Khejri, as if she was trying to protect her own children from predators, challenging the axe-men to behead her first before slashing any trees. The imperial order paid no heed to the Bishnoi faith as well as the submission of the woman. Before the trees could be razed to the ground, the axe-men mercilessly slaughtered 363 people who hugged the trees with intent to guard them against the cutters. The human slaughter eventually halted when the news of heartless killings reached the Prince who immediately called Bhandari and his men back, forsaking the mission forever. For many environmentalists, this is the first case of 'saving trees by hugging them'. Many regard the Bishnoi sacrifice as a precursor to the famous Himalayan movement for saving the environment known as Chipko Andolan.[6]

This famous Bishnoi sacrifice offers a paradigm for environmental protection. First, one should

[6] See Weber (1989) for a balanced treatment of various opinions on it.

cultivate in oneself affection for all living beings, religiously abstaining from cutting green trees or slaying animals for food. Second, if some miscreant attempts to harm the living objects, one should stop him from doing that. If the villain of life is powerful, one should unhesitatingly sacrifice one's life for the life of plants and animals, the mute bearers of human violence. It seems to us that while practicing the twenty-nine principles, Bishnois chanced upon the idea of martyrdom (*shahid hona*) for the wellbeing of others. This would also explain several cases of martyrdom that Bishnoi history has recorded since the eighteenth century. Furthermore, martyrdom reinforces the Bishnoi commitment to their principles and the conviction they arouse in people.

Thus, in our opinion, although sacrificing one's life for the sake of plants and animals may not be an explicitly formulated Bishnoi principle, the actual practice of the principles of non-harming, compassion for others, vegetarianism, and love for green trees, and the others that support them directly or indirectly, has inculcated in them the spirit of self-sacrifice. It is not only their duty to subscribe to the principle of non-cutting of green trees and observing prohibition from meat eating, but also to save the environment and keep alive its sustainability by protecting the life of plants and animals. Bishnoi dharma knows that imbalance is created when floral and/or faunal life is depleted. It is, therefore, necessary that all beings have an equal chance to survive in a synergistic relationship. Sustainable development will result from a harmonious relationship between different species and it is the foremost duty of human beings to guarantee the survival of all. Why human beings are the most important partner in this relationship because being at the apex of technological development, they can rocket a reign of dread, killing the bio-diversity, and at the same time, they can direct their technology to the healthy development of the other species.

In addition to martyrdom, Bishnois also think in terms of political agendas for environmental conservation and development. This explains their protest against the 'selling of fish openly in the market'.[7] A strict compliance with the twenty-nine principles, the concept of martyrdom, and political agendas and vigils for environmental works, make Bishnois an ecologically aware and committed community of India. They constitute a community whose 'value preferences', to borrow Madan's words (2001: 24), should be studied in greater detail, for their religion sets an ideal example of the ways in which the tasks of eco-protection may be carried out.

KEY WORDS Bishnoi, Religion, Eco-preservation, Sacred Principles.

ABSTRACT An attempt has been in this article to document the case of a religious order that expects its followers to save the environmental resources. It is argued here that there are religions that save the environment indirectly, but there are others, which are very explicit about it. In their religious principles, they ask their adherents to save green trees from being felled down. In this context, this paper gives a brief account of the Bishnois of north India.

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[7] See Ahmad (2001) for many other examples.