

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: An Effective Way of Biodiversity Conservation

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ABSTRACT

The concept of '*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*' adopted by our ancestors played an important role in the conservation of biodiversity since time immemorial. It helped to maintain harmony among various components of the Earth ecosystem. With modernization of society, men imposed themselves as the master of the Universe and undermined the importance of other living creatures that led to the imbalance of ecosystem, loss of a remarkable fraction of biodiversity that had a reverse impact and resulted in climate deterioration over the period of time. Humanity had to pay hard to its own action and witnessed various kinds of natural calamities posing a serious threat to the existence of man. It is a high time to revisit our religious philosophies and work accordingly before nature is forced to revolt back. The present article will explain the significance of old rituals and practices of Hindu religion.

Keywords: Biodiversity loss, conservation, religious philosophies, old rituals

Hinduism always advocated the philosophy of the *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, that every element of the environment is precious and should be protected as mentioned in Maha Upanishads. Our ancestors realized the importance of the environment since early times and had a very high regard for it. Therefore, they woven it with every ritual of Hindu culture to maintain harmony with nature. Our ancestors saw nature as a manifestation of God and always expressed their gratitude for all its components, being it living or nonliving. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is a Sanskrit phrase used in Hindu text Maha Upanishads meaning the "World is one Family". **Vasudha** means **Earth**, **iva** means **is** and **Kutumbakam** means **Family**. It recommends the principle of **INCLUSIVENESS**.

Inclusiveness and Hinduism

According to an ancient famous Hindu dictum. '**The earth is our mother, we are all her children**'. It explains the concept of inclusiveness and does not differentiate between man and other life forms. In **Rig Veda** the Sun is considered as the soul of the entire universe that controls both the animates and

the inanimate. The healing power of the Sun's rays were known in ancient times. The **Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, is associated with a river in the Indian tradition**. Hindus have always believed that water of **Ganges River** has extraordinary healing power that prevents diseases and worshiped it as the holiest river.

According to Hindu Vedas there are **33** major deities though Hindus are primarily devoted to a **single God** and other Gods are considered as **different avatars of the primary deity**. **Trinity** occupies the highest position among all deities. Lord Vishnu, one of the trinity Gods of Hinduism along with Brahma and Mahesh is presented as the **protector of Universe** and is also called as **Narayan or Hari** who is famous for his incarnations or Avatars. The mythological bird **Garuda** is his vehicle. Brahma, another trinity Gods of Hinduism is perceived as the **creator of this universe** who thought himself evolved from the **lotus flower in the navel of lord Vishnu** as per belief. He is considered as a four-head God representing four directions east, west, north, south and resides in Brahmaloka. It is believed that in fact, he had five heads but because of the pride,

his fifth head was severed by lord Shiva. There are very few temples of Brahma in India and the most famous is in **Pushkar**, Rajasthan. Shiva is the third of Trinity and popularly known as **Mahadev** who is believed to reside at **Kailash mountain**. He is considered as the master of meditation, yoga and dance art, decorated with the sacred river Ganga and Chandra (moon) on his head, wearing snakes around his neck and hands as ornaments. Indra is known as **king of heaven** and leader of Devas. He is also considered as **God of rain** and his vehicle is an auspicious **white elephant**. A **chariot drawn by 10,000 horses** is mentioned as another vahana of Indra.

Hinduism and Nature

In Hinduism Nature is beholden through art, architecture, landscape and it is **seen as manifestation of divinity**. The symbolic meanings of tree, mountain, water and Earth in religious thought are described nicely. **In the Vedic literature, many examples are available where natural elements like air, plants, rocks etc. are anthropomorphized as gods, goddesses and even as normal human beings**. An excellent and popular **example** is the case of Devi **Ahilya** who turned to an ordinary rock due to the curse of **Rishi Gautama** and she later resumed her original form **when touched by lord Rama**.

Man-animal Hybrid forms as God

The significance of animals in human life is beautifully mentioned in Hindu religion that finds many examples of close symbiotic association between man and animals. The best examples are **Elephant headed Lord Ganesha and Vanar God Hanuman**. Lord Krishna who is believed to be a cowboy and who used to play flute to mesmerize not only **gopis** but the **entire flora and fauna of Vrij and Vrindavan**. At his time all were at peace in harmony with their surroundings and environment. Krishna could be justified as the most perfect poster boy of **PETA**. Lord Rama also had a symbiotic relationship with **animals**. The **vanaras, especially Hanuman and Sugreev, were** his close allies. **Bear-men Jambavant and birds like Jatayu and Sampaati** helped him in his search for wife Sita when she was kidnapped by Ravan.

Reverence of Animals as Vahana of Gods

Association of Hindu deities with various animals as vehicles signifies their interdependence on each other. Surya's chariot is pulled by **7 steeds**, Chandra rides an **antelope**, Saraswati rides a **Swan**. Lord Dattatreya is shown as always surrounded by cute little puppies. Snakes are mentioned as a symbol of healing and primal energy, Lord Vishnu reclines on the serpent **Anantanag** eternally. **Hindu literature is full of many such examples where Gods/ Goddesses are associated with birds and animals to symbolize certain qualities of that particular divinity**. **Nandi the bull of Lord Shiva symbolizes power**, the God of wisdom Ganesha riding **Mushak** represents ignorance. Kartikeya rides Parvati **peacock-vanity**, Ganga rides a **Makar or alligator**, the dominant animal species of its water, Shani dev with **Kak and Goddess Lakshmi** with owl Pacheka teaches the wise use of wealth.

Reverence of plants

The mountain Kailash Parvat has always been considered as the abode of Lord Shiva that is a hub of innumerable medicinal plants and origin of several sacred rivers. **Associating mountain Kailash with God Shiva helped the conservation of its natural wealth, a home to thousands of valuable medicinal plants**.

Hindu religion always had a very high respect for plants and gave them significance by including them as an important component of their rituals like basil, mango leaves, kusha (doob grass), banana, coconut, betle leaf, lotus etc. There is a long list of sacred plants that are planted in Indian households and worshiped on a daily basis. Some important plants are **Tulsi, Peepal, Bargad, Banana, Mango, Coconut, Neem, Belpatra** etc. The **sandal wood, areca nut and turmeric** occupy very high religious values and are invariably used in all Hindu rituals. It is now a scientifically well proven fact that all these plant species have multiple medicinal uses. The vast contribution of our ancestors must be **admired, acknowledged and adapted to safeguard the future**. The preservation of sacred trees by placing Hindu deities under them has been a common but excellent practice in our country and can be seen on the roadside (Fig 1A-D) that helped in their conservation.



Fig 1. A-D. Temples under sacred trees on the roadside in urban areas

An excellent verse of the **Upanishads** beautifully summarizes the equality of all living species in the World and puts the humans *Homo sapiens* back in its place as:

'Isavasyam idam sarvam yat kim ca jagatyam jagat, tena tyaktena bhunjitha, ma gridhah kasyasvid dhanam'

Indians especially Hindus that own a rich treasure of holy literature advocating to respect all creatures equally must remember as mentioned in Hindu scriptures that:

"God sleeps in the rocks, dreams in the plants, stirs toward wakefulness in the animals, and mankind is awake to his own ego and individuality."

CONCLUSION

By recognizing the **five elements** that are essential for life and elevating every species of plants and animals to sanctity, ancient Indians especially Hindu Rishi -Munis emphasized the importance of **biodiversity and its conservation**. Today we have drifted from our traditions of **sustainable use and co-existence**, created a man centred world that has led to the vast destruction of biodiversity, pollution of natural resources, frequent natural disasters and a large number of environmental problems that are posing serious threats to our own existence. The readaption of our old traditional practices for conservation of valuable biodiversity is required on an urgent basis before it is too late.

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