

***Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities.
Sustenance and Sustainability by Pankaj
Jain, London: Routledge, 2016***

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Jain's study belongs to a still rather rare genre exploring the link between Hindu traditions and ecology. In a way, a book touching on similar topics from a different perspective was M. Gadgil and R. Guha's *This Fissured Land...*, a part of which was devoted to describing how local traditions and community rites can be correlated with the rhythm of the ecosystem. Another example is a collection of articles edited by Ch.K. Chapple and M.E. Tucker, entitled *Hinduism and Ecology. The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*. It is also worth noting that among books researching the intersection of Hindu traditions, ecology, and politics in India, such as M. Sharma's *Saffron and Green...* and G.Drew's *River Dialogues...*, this is the newest addition to this list. Jain's book adds valuable fieldwork material and insights to this category of publications, though I must admit I do not agree with some of the author's conclusions.

Jain deals with the ecological practices of three Hindu communities in India: the Bishnois, the Bhils, and the Swadhyaya. The choice is

noteworthy, as each of these communities is different: the Bishnois may be regarded as a religious community, the Bhils are a tribe, and the Swadhyayis are a modern religious movement. What all three groups have in common is deep respect of nature, and the effort to protect it. The Bishnoi community lives mostly in Rajasthan (western India), and was established by the 15th Saint Jambheśvara, whom Jain considers "the first Indian guru to emphasize ecological awareness in his teachings." Jambheśvara teachings include, among others, a call to abandon cutting green trees, killing animals, and castrating some of them (the book's additional value is that it includes the saint's teachings in an appendix). Jain describes a number of Bishnois' present environmental activities, such as digging wells and protecting cattle. The Bishnois also pay special attention to an 18th-century event in which a number of their community members were killed while protecting the trees from being chopped down by the army of the local king. Thus, until today an act of sacrificing one's life or health while protecting nature is valued by the Bishnoi community. Then the Bhils are a community also based in the state of Rajasthan, where they keep and protect many sacred groves. The Swadhyaya movement was born in the 20th century, and is considered by the author to be a "New Religious Movement." It was initiated by P.S. Athavale, who preached, among others things, that the way nature works is based also on God's energy, and so the rural part of his community (the Swadhyayis) is known for establishing tree-temples.

One of the author's conclusions is that while the traditional "communities had little, if any, evidence of their ecological practices being influenced by modern scientific researches about global warming, the modern organizations, on the other hand, seem to be largely responding in their own ways to 'save the planet,' joining the global awareness movement." Of the three researched communities, two—the Bishnois and the Bhils—are considered by the author to belong to the earlier category. They existed much before the 20th century, they are

mostly rural, traditional in their own rites, and the scope of their activities is limited. Hence, according to the author, their "ecological" practices are mostly a part of their Hindu traditions. The Swadhyaya sect, in turn, was born in the 20th century, so it has more internationally active members, and derives its philosophy of protecting nature both from religious as well as modern ecological thought. Jain is also of the opinion that "[j]uxtaposing modern ecological discourses onto traditional communities is somewhat unfair. For the traditional communities, their daily 'way of life' was the focus, not the ecological discourse." For instance, worshipping a sacred grove came not from the view that trees as such should be protected, but from the belief that a particular plant or grove was connected to a worshipped deity. Similarly, various environment-related projects run by the Bishnoi community are considered by its members as "experiments" (*prayog*), started mainly for the benefit of local societies, and the Bishnois do not regard them as "ecological." For Jain, this means that with regard to the three researched communities, religion and ecology should not be viewed separately. As Jain says: "[T]heir 'way of life' implicitly includes environmentalism." At the same time, the author is of opinion that the Hindu way of life (*dharma*) may serve as an inspiration to modern ecological movements.

While I consider the subject as interesting and Jain's fieldwork as noteworthy, I must admit I disagree with some of his conclusions. Firstly, the author gravitates towards universalization, picking certain traditions and rites to prove his points (it must be stressed, however, that Jain makes his clear that most of his theses refer only to the three researched communities). The author observes, for instance, that Hindu religion and philosophy belong to those schools of thought that consider the divine, human, and natural elements of the universe as intertwined. Jain puts emphasis on the use of the word "way of life" and *dharma*, rather than religion. This is not uncommon. *Dharma*, a Sanskrit word, is nowadays often translated as "religion," but at the same time it also means

"universal order," "natural order," "law," "ethics," and "[one's own] duty." Thus, Jain's approach is visibly holistic. For the considered communities, environmentalism is not simply a separate idea, nor is it only a duty arising out of religion. It is rather that religion, environmentalism, and an array of other human activities are intertwined and grouped together under the general concept of *dharma*. On the semantic level, and with regard to many philosophical treatises, Jain is right. Yet, these treatises were theoretical, philosophical, and classical. Using such theoretical and holistic approaches while analysing fieldwork material may leave many gaps, unless the fieldwork is not holistic itself (and perhaps it can never be).

For instance, the holistic insistence that man's duty, religion, and environmentalism are just aspects of the same "way of life" ignores those religious practices which are visibly hurtful to the environment. While over millennia most the Hindu cults had abandoned animal sacrifice, it is still being practiced for certain goddesses. Are these practices not as much part of the Hindu "way of life" and of *dharma* as the traditions of Bishnois that prohibit animal killing? The author does mention the issue of the pollution of the river Ganga, but does not elaborate on it. "The goddess Ganga is supposed to clean both the river and the devotees," Jain claims. However, the religious practices of worship (which involve offering many objects to the river), and final rites (which involve scattering the ashes or not fully burned parts of the bodies of the dead in the holy water) make the river dirty. The relation between cleanliness and purity is not explored here, and by no means does the latter automatically lead to the former.

Jain's conclusion and model of thinking works best when applied to small and rural communities. Such groups can have a better understanding of their local ecosystem, and, as long as their way of life is more nature-dependent, can feel that destroying the environment would be harmful to themselves. Also, as was also observed by Gadgil and

Guha, religion can play a role here. Rituals and taboos prevent the use of certain plants or the killing of certain animals continually, or in certain periods, or for certain groups, thereby restricting the abuse of natural resources. Modern governments moreover try to check this abuse by generally similar but secular and centralized mechanisms, such as establishing nature reserves. However, what the author does not elaborate on is that even the traditional ways of life did lead to a gradual destruction of the environment, such as the cutting down of the forests. Moreover, the choice of the flora and fauna protected through religious taboos does not have to be based—and often is not—on the "ecological" need to preserve the most endangered species. This is something that actually is in line with author's conclusion that the traditional way of life did not focus on ecology as such, but a logical conclusion is that ecology would have to be a final reference point after all, as without it certain species would not be covered by any religious taboo.

Religious rules also change over time, and do not always follow the "environmentalist" logic. Such logic is of course possible, though. It must be no coincidence that the saint whose teaching Jain describes, Jambheśvara, was born in the 15th century, when, one can assume, humanity's heavy influence on nature would become visible. The saint's rules recognized the need to protect more animals and plants than before. On the other hand, there are examples such as ancient cow sacrifice, which later was forbidden, as the cow was considered sacred. Similarly, Jain mentions a rationalizing point that humans are the only species that drink the milk of other animals, and that is why cows should not be killed. While Bishnois will not kill either a cow or a goat, most Hindus put emphasis only on cow protection. Moreover, goats or buffaloes can even be sacrificed in certain religious rituals. Thus, the point about milk drinking does not hold ground for most Hindus, and leads one to think that eventually the taboo does not follow coherent logic. Finally, the expansion of religious rituals beyond a regional community, or their

intensification due to population rise and the birth of new technologies, can often produce threats to the environment. This is showcased by the example of the pollution of the Ganga, but also the tradition of immersing idols in the seas and other waters.

Secondly, the relation between modern ecological thinking and traditional ways of life could have been analyzed more deeply. I do believe that the Swadhyayis as a new religious movement are more ecologically aware, while the other communities are not. However, I would assume the relation is much more nuanced than the simple ecologically-aware/ecologically-unaware dichotomy. In the modern world, unless one belongs to a detached community in a remote region, it is difficult not to come into contact with current ways of thinking. As the author describes, the Bishnois run their own NGOs, commemorate their 18th-century martyrdom in defense of trees, and have their own award for people who protect nature in an exemplary fashion. Maybe it is true, as the authors says, that these "communities had little, if any, evidence of their ecological practices being influenced by modern scientific researches [about ecological threats]." Yet basing his argument on the examples of Bishnois, it seems that their ways of protecting environment are not restricted to traditional behavior, and are clearly influenced by modern institutions. Similarly, Jain notices that the Tirupati temple in southern India "changed its usual *prasād* [offering to devotees] of sweets into small plants that are given to devotees to be planted. [...] A similar initiative is taken by the G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Ecology that has been working with the temple of Badrinath. Its scientists produce the saplings; the priests bless them and distribute them as *prasād* to pilgrims." If these reports are true, it is a new solution that shows how ecological awareness and scientific activities did lead to a change in religious thinking, but on the other hand the mechanism of a religious ritual may have helped to spread the message. The author also suggests that the reverse is possible: religious inspiration may help to strengthen

an ecological movement. According to Jain, during the *Chipko* movement some the defenders of the trees referred to Hindu religious scriptures. It seems that the point about the lack of the awareness of modern ecological thinking (or knowledge of it) should be made to contain more nuances, revealing a more intertwined coexistence between ecologists and religious activists in India.

My final point is about Jain's research methods. While I have no objections to the fieldwork and the choice of academic texts to which Jain is refers, the author's use of media and electronic resources is somewhat perplexing. For instance, when the author writing about the aforementioned Tirupati temple's initiative to distribute saplings, the footnotes reveals that this information is seemingly based on the temple's website only. Moreover, another footnote admits that: "recent visitors to this temple have not noticed this effort," and even this statement is based on an information from one person. Similarly, the author makes a statement which is beyond the subject of the book, but one I strongly disagree with: "After India's independence, the so-called backward castes have been privileged in almost every sector of society by the Indian government. In contrast, Brahmins [priests], the so-called upper caste, have no such advantages and their traditional professional job of observing rituals does not offer them any economic benefits either.". Not only can this opinion be contradicted by showing the Brahmins' political influence, but also the author's evidence is highly limited. That "[p]olitically, Brahmins have been increasingly marginalized" is stated by Jain referring to a single article in an Indian journal, followed by a reference to one article in the *Wall Street Journal* about a 10% drop in the number of Brahmins amongst Indian lawmakers. It is as if the author selects only some media reports to strengthen his views. This, however, does not mean that author's fieldwork and his voice in the debate on the relation between Hindu tradition and ecology are not valuable.