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Nature, Dignity and Conflict: A Perspective from Indian Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper draws from the ancient Indian philosophy to examine the concepts of Nature, Dignity and Conflict, and their intersection. There are many ancient Indian scriptures, which have focused on nature. Besides the Hindu concept of human body consisting of five natural elements – earth, water, fire, air and ether, there are many hymns in Sanskrit that particularly focus on nature, emphasize how a peaceful nature is necessary for an integrated wellbeing of individual and society.

Take, for example, this hymn from the Vedanta:

ॐ द्यौः शान्तिरन्तरिक्षं शान्तिः
पृथिवी शान्तिरापः शान्तिरोषधयः शान्तिः ।
वनस्पतयः शान्तिर्विश्वेदेवाः शान्तिर्ब्रह्म शान्तिः
सर्वं शान्तिःशान्तिरेव शान्तिः सा मा शान्तिरेधि ॥
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

Oh Lord God almighty,
May there be peace in celestial regions.
May there be peace on earth.
May the waters be appeasing,
May herbs be wholesome, and
May trees and plants bring peace to all.
May all beneficent beings bring peace to us,
May thy Law propagate peace all through the world,
May all things be a source of peace to us,
And may thy peace itself, bestow peace on all,
and may that peace come to me also.

Many Indian leaders were deeply influenced by this ancient tradition. One of the foremost Indians who emphasized on sustainable environment was Mahatma Gandhi. Known for his famous saying, ‘my life is my message’, the loincloth clad Gandhi emphasized on frugal living and harmony with nature. Following the footsteps of Gandhi, many Indian leaders launched movements for ecological balance in India, including in the Himalayas and the Northeastern parts. The prominent leaders in this regard include Sunderlal Bahugana, Anil Joshi, Rajendra Singh and Medha Patkar. After India’s independence, the rapid growth of population and industrialization created friction between the demands of growth and ecological balance. The tension between the Gandhian vision of Gram Swaraj (village self-rule) and the Nehruvian vision of heavy industrialization contributed to this friction. The paper, while focusing on these tensions, on the tensions between the ‘ancient’ and the ‘modern’, factors dignity in the analysis, and emphasizes how undermining of dignity – a core element of the ancient Indian tradition – has contributed to ecological imbalance in India.