



Hindu Theological Statement on pilgrimage

We believe that our life is a sacred journey and we are all pilgrims on planet earth. Our scriptures tell us that being pilgrims is not just wandering aimlessly, or earning karmic merit by enduring hardship on a strenuous journey. They exhort us to follow Dharma so we may lead a daily life of contentment, discipline and righteousness without straining the earth's resources. Our every thought, speech and action is to be guided by the highest ethical code of Universal Benevolence or Sarva Bhuta Hita (Yajur Veda 12.32). This ancient injunction implores us to live unselfishly, put principle before power, people before politics, and the collective good without regard for personal gain.

As Hindus, how we follow the pilgrims' way is more important than the actual destination. The doctrine of Karma cautions us that every step we take today will yield a corresponding result in the future: If one sows goodness, one will reap goodness; if one sows evil, one will reap evil (Vedas). Thus we believe that the greenhouse effect, acid rain, toxic waste, soil erosion, pesticide contamination, groundwater pollution and other environmental problems that continue to threaten our survival, are the result of our past collective actions (Karma). Since good karma yields positive results, we should adjust our life styles and accept certain restraint on our desires so as to tread as lightly as possible on the earth and minimize our impact on the environment. Ishavasya Upanishat advises us to lead a devout and frugal lifestyle and eliminate greed and wasteful consumption: "Everything in the universe belongs to the Lord. Therefore take only what you need, that is set-aside for you. Do not take anything else, for you know to whom it belongs".

Our scriptures reveal a clear conception of the ecosystem and our belief system is permeated by a reverence for all life. We believe that the great forces of nature (Pancha Mahabhutas) namely earth (prithvi); water (apas), air (vayu), fire (agni) and sky (akasha), as well as our ecosystems are all bound to each other in a complex web of life within the great rhythms of nature which is sacred. We believe as the Chandogya Upanishad says that the universe truly is divine (Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma) meaning that the entire universe, which includes our ecosystems, and us are aspects of the same divinity called Brahman. This doctrine of an all-pervading divinity is confirmed as Vasudeva Sarvam, "Everything is God" in the Bhagavad-Gita, our most popular scripture. From the Panchatantra and the Hitopadesha flows the doctrine of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which means that the entire world (vasudha, "the wealth-yielder") is one family and our universe with all ecosystems including all sentient and non-sentient things in the nature is inter-connected. Thus we should tread lightly on the sacred ground being aware that all things in entire creation are in harmony through the all-pervading power of the Supreme deity and all sentient and non-sentient things in the universe are pervaded by the same spiritual energy. We should therefore worship them for their noble qualities.

We believe that cutting down trees and destruction of flora are a sinful act. We should worship trees as Vriksha Devata (Tree Gods), forests as Vana Devatas, mountains as Giri Devatas, rivers as

Goddesses, cow and cattle for their agrarian utility. Kautilya's Arthashastra prescribes various punishments for destroying trees and plants. The Vedas state, "Vriksho Rakshati Rakshitaha", meaning, "Protect trees, trees will protect you". We believe water is a purifier thus we offer a daily prayer to the deity of water: "The waters in the sky, the waters of rivers, and water in the well whose source is the ocean, may all these sacred waters protect me" (Rig-Veda 7.49.2)

We see all creatures as spiritually equal. We are urged by Krishna to 'see with equal vision a priest, a cow, an elephant and a dog.' We do not support the exploitation of animals, especially on the industrial scale that is commonplace in today's farming industry. We believe this exploitation does great damage to the natural environment as well as to the human spirit.

Our ancient sages personified the earth as Mother Earth and worshipped her as Goddess (Devi): "Mata bhumi putro aham prithivyaha", meaning, the Earth is my mother I am the Earth's son (Atharva Veda). Thousands of years later, at the Global Conference in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, the world experts addressed our planet as Mother Earth for the first time at an international meeting.

To the Hindus, the notion of subjugating or exploiting Mother Earth is akin to violating one's mother's body. The sanctity of our relationship with Mother Earth is expressed in our morning prayer recited before setting our right foot on the floor when we ask Devi to forgive us for trampling on her body: "Salutations to Lord Vishnu's divine wife, ocean-clad, adorned with mountains, pardon me Mother, for setting my foot on you." (Samudra Vasane Devi, Parvata Sthana Mandite, Vishnu Patni Namasthubhyam, Pada Sparsham Kshamasva Me).

We believe that this teaching may well be the earliest imperative telling us that we should tread more lightly on Mother Earth. We Hindus must acknowledge that our Dharma teaches us to love the Earth, appreciate her beauty and as "wanderers" explore her many mysteries. As we live and move in Her damaged biosphere we should contemplate on the sacredness of Earth as that may be one step towards changing our presence from threat to healing.

As followers of Sanatana Dharma, which teaches harmony and respect for nature, we call on all Hindus to:

- Follow Lord Krishna's message, "Conserve ecology or perish" and develop a sustainable lifestyle;
- Reduce your carbon footprint and ideally "leave a positive footprint";
- Support local conservation programs that protect terrestrial and marine species and their habitats;
- Protect portions of the planet that are held in common, including the oceans and the atmosphere;
- Help eliminate and clean up open sewers, impure water, unplanned development and polluted air;
- Do not waste water or electricity;
- Dispose of rubbish appropriately, no matter how much litter lies around.

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