Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability (review)

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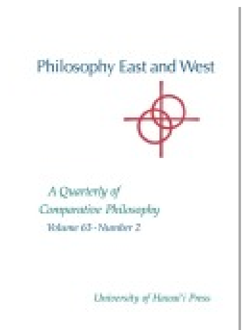

Philosophy East and West, Volume 63, Number 1, January 2013, pp. 92-95 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: 10.1353/pew.2013.0009

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BOOK REVIEWS

Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability. By Pankaj Jain. Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. Pp. xii + 211. Hardcover $89.95, ISBN 978-1-4094-0591-7. eBook, ISBN 978-1-4094-0592-4.

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In a 2009 article Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that "climate change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world . . . a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe."[1] In other words, while Subaltern Studies scholars have been attempting to uncover unique histories independent of the universalizing narrative of European historicism, humanity has become irrevocably universalized as a force of nature whose ecological impact has ushered in the Anthropocene epoch, and no amount of decolonizing the past will help us to escape our shared future: "[There] are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged," argues Chakrabarty, and "without that knowledge that defies historical understanding there is no making sense of the current crisis that affects us all."[2]

Faced with this problem, a growing number of scholars have turned to the study of religion to provide models that can reconcile this new, irrefutable universal category of the human as geological force with what Clifford Geertz calls "local knowledge." One such project is Pankaj Jain's *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability,* which comes out of the author's work with three communities in India that have been actively involved in preserving local flora and fauna, though not necessarily with the intention of ecological preservation. Jain focuses on the Swadhyayis of Gujarat and Maharashtra, a twentieth-century sectarian movement known for their building of "tree-temples" and "water-harvesting sites," and the Bishnoi and the Bhils, two Rajasthani communities that have been fighting to preserve their sacred groves from deforestation.

Central to Jain's project is his resistance to labeling anything these communities do as "ecologically conscious." Instead, he prefers the term *dharma,* a Sanskrit word sometimes translated as "law" (in either the legal-ethical or the natural-physical sense), "religion," "duty," or "ethics." While describing these communities in terms of the indigenous concept of *dharma* and eschewing categories like "religion" and "ecology" may move him away from the discourse of traditional religious studies (if there ever was such a thing), his recourse to the model of "great" and "little" traditions seems to be a step in the other direction. For Jain, "great" traditions like ISKCON, the Ramakrishna Mission, and Transcendental Meditation are "modern, English-speaking, urban-based, and fully conscious about environmentalism," while "little" traditions like the Swadhyayis, Bishnois, and Bhils are "traditional, vernacular, rural-based and only somewhat conscious about environmentalism" (p. 3). It is the "little" traditions, operating according to the principle of *dharma,* with which Jain is concerned. Jain wants to use *dharma,* which he understands as "holistic" and "help[ing]

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Indians to transcend the boundaries of subject and object" as the basis for "an alternative sociological and anthropological category to study Indic traditions" that can also "be successfully applied as an overarching term for the sustainability of the ecology, environmental ethics, and the religious lives of Indian villagers" (p. 3).

Jain's argument crystallizes in a sustained engagement with Emma Tomalin, in which he criticizes Tomalin's insistence that a "secular environmentalism" must replace "religious environmentalism" so that the "Hindu Right" cannot hijack the movement, and her fear that, because the ecological preservation that is connected to religion in India is an accidental by-product of regarding certain trees, groves, rivers, et cetera as sacred rather than a self-conscious program of action, it is not (so to speak) sustainable.[3] Here one is tempted to agree with her, given the polluted state of the Ganga, which an enthusiastic bather at a *ghat* once told a friend of mine was so sacred that nothing could live in it. But while it makes Tomalin uneasy that "biodiversity" seems to exist as a mere by-product of "biodivinity" (one thinks here of the puzzlement college students often experience when they come to understand that worshipping Kālī does not, in India at least, necessarily make one a feminist), Jain sees this relationship as the great hope presented by indigenous traditions. Jain argues that ecology "is an issue about the people, of the people and for the people," and "[if] the scientific community wants to reach out to the people, they will have to appreciate the role indigenous traditions have played in maintaining the balance in much of the world, where Western style progress has not yet invaded" (p. 14). Jain also questions Tomalin for "resort[ing] to the outdated practice of looking for 'great' and 'little' traditions within India by separating indigenous traditions from Brahminical" (p. 14). It is not, however, clear to me how this is very much different from what Jain does in his introduction. Using a different qualification to classify a tradition as "great" or "little" could not possibly solve whatever unnamed problems Jain sees within this model of Indian religious development.

The Swadhyayi movement, one of the "little" traditions, was founded in the 1940s by the Maharashtran Brahmin Pandurang Shastri Athavale, who stressed the cultivation of the Upaniṣadic "Indwelling God," understood largely through the Kṛṣṇaite framework of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa.* The Swadhyayis disavow environmentalism, understanding their actions to be purely motivated by "their devotion to the Almighty" (p. 18) and their mission "to generate and spread reverence for humans, animals, trees, earth, nature, and the entire universe in general" (p. 31). Despite one Swadhyayi informant's "apprehension that [Jain] might misrepresent Swadhyaya if [he] chose to research it from an ecological perspective" and emphatic statement that "ecology is not our concern" (p. 19), Jain sticks to the argument he puts forth in chapter 2 that "the case studies I describe do not see religion and ecology as separate" (p. 15). Using the term *dharma* instead of religion, Jain compares the Swadhyayi practices of building tree-temples, protecting cows, *Bhumi Pūjan* ("Earth Worship"), water-gathering, and *Yogeśvara Kṛṣi* ("Devotional Farming") with the secular projects of sustainable agriculture and reforestation implemented by NGOs. It should be noted here that, regarding the contentious split in the Swadhyayi community after the death of Athavale Jain, there is only one footnote pointing the reader to an online

bulletin board. This split has been connected to the murder of businessman Pankaj Trivedi in October 2003,[4] and the Swadhyay Parivar Wikipedia page, until March 9, 2012, contained an account of the split and its aftermath.[5]

Chapter 4 examines Rajasthan's Bishnoi community, founded in the fifteenth century by Guru Jambheśvara following a severe drought that drove farmers to cut down trees and hunt local game to survive. Out of this ecological catastrophe, the result partly of the drought and partly of the human response, Jambheśvara had a spiritual awakening and began to spread a teaching of conservation and living in harmony with nature. Jambheśvara's Vaiṣṇava theology, which contained elements of both *nirguṇa* ("God without Qualities") and *saguṇa* ("God with Qualities") teachings, resulted in a list of twenty-nine rules for the community, eight of which concern protecting animals and trees, including an injunction against wearing blue clothes because "the dye for coloring them is obtained by cutting several shrubs" (p. 59). One striking story Jain recounts about the Bishnoi is the legendary "Khedajali sacrifice," believed to have taken place in 1730 and commemorated with a festival since 1979, in which 363 Bishnois were killed protecting their sacred khejari trees from the ministers of the local ruler Abbay Singh. In 1983, the Bishnoi actively lobbied to ban hunting in their state, threatening to follow the example of a non-Bishnoi who burned himself alive to protest the poaching of a blue bull. Like the Swadhyayis, the Bishnoi do not see themselves as environmentalists, despite their willingness to put the well-being of plants and animals before their own lives.

The last group Jain treats is the Bhil community of Rajasthan, whose sacred groves have been protected through the intervention of the government and other outside groups. Unlike the Bishnoi and the Swadhyayis, the Bhils are a caste community whose history is not traceable to a single founder. Of the three groups Jain examines, only in the Bishnoi does he find "the evolution from a religious ethos into ecological ethos" (p. 94).

Finally, after an exploration of the conscious development of ecological awareness in Hindu and Christian groups in India, Jain returns to his discussion of *dharma* as providing the framework in which ethics, theology, and ecology are intertwined. Jain concludes by revisiting his model of "great" and "little" traditions: "[I] have tried to describe the religiosity and ecology of these communities in their own 'little' categories" (p. 130). And in Jain's formulation, the "great" traditions are English-based "Neo-Hinduism," not Sanskritic Brahminical Hinduism, putting us in the strange position of reading the Sanskrit word *dharma* as an indigenous vernacular category. Although Jain has done an admirable job presenting case studies of how *dharma* has protected the environment in India, I am inclined to agree with Chakrabarty that we need something more universal than a term that describes the "sustainability of the ecology, environmental ethics, and the religious lives of Indian villagers" (p. 3) to cope with whatever the Anthropocene will bring.

In a video posted on The Forum of Religion and Ecology at Yale's Website, Mary Evelyn Tucker argues that "people will make sacrifices if they are asked for the right reasons," which is where she sees a role for the world's religions.[6] Religions can help people understand their finite lives as contributing factors to the planetary future,

giving them the perspective needed to make the sacrifices science is asking of them. This argument about limiting consumption in the present in return for a future benefit, which closely resembles the cynic's idea of Heaven as a place where you can have all the fun you denied yourself to get there, makes religion the handmaiden of science. Science cannot get people to feel urgency about what will happen in two or three generations, but religion, according to this understanding, can. Science provides the means, or at least the blueprint, and religion provides an understanding of the end. But where is philosophy in this discussion? Nowhere, according to Ray Brassier, one of the rising stars of the Speculative Realism school, who argues that "philosophy is neither a medium of affirmation nor a source of justification, but rather the organon of extinction."[7] For the Speculative Realists, it is only through embracing the inevitability of not just human extinction, but the coming cosmic extinction or "heat death," in which all energy in the universe returns to the zero point, that we can ever hope to understand our condition.

And in the face of extinction, "sustainability" becomes a relative term. Can we continue to call solar energy a renewable resource knowing that the sun will incinerate the earth in four billion years? There has to be a place for this kind of negativity, excluded from the religious aspects of the discussion, in our search to find new ways of thinking ecologically. And like Jain, I think that this project also has deep implications for religious studies. Just as John Caputo has argued that the inevitable extinction Brassier demands we acknowledge is in reality the only thing that could possibly give our human existence meaning,[8] I would argue that the total loss of distinction that defines the universe's *telos* of "heat death" can be the thing that frees scholars of religion from the paralyzing fear we have developed of theorizing the universal. And a theory of the universal, not the local, is precisely what the Anthropocene calls for.

Notes

1 – Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 197–222, at p. 222.

2 – Ibid., p. 221.

3 – See Emma Tomalin, "Bio-Divinity and Bio-Diversity: Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Conservation in India," *Numen* 51, no. 3 (2004): 265–295.

4 – http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2006–06–25/ahmedabad/27793601_1_swadhyay–parivar–murder–case–saurashtra.

5 – http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Swadhyay_Parivar&action=history.

6 – Mary Evelyn Tucker is the co-editor of *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water* (Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000).

7 – Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 239.

8 – John D. Caputo, lecture at Syracuse University, November 26, 2010.