

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN INDIA

A personal reflection from the newsletter editor.

From December 28 to January 24, 2001, I traveled through India with a group of twenty university professors and high school teachers from Fort Collins, Colorado, part of a Colorado State University/Fulbright study group. The goal of this project was to introduce teachers who had never been to India to its tremendous cultural diversity, so that we could teach our students about it. As an amateur naturalist, I was also interested in exploring India's biodiversity, particularly its birdlife, and learning about efforts to conserve it. And as an environmental philosopher, I was anxious to learn more about Indians' environmental values. The group traveled to Delhi, Agra and Varanasi in the Gangetic plain, Cochi and the marshes (or "backwaters") of tropical Kerala state, Mahabalipuram, Kanchipuram and Chennai in Tamil Nadu, and Jodhpur and Jaisalmer in Rajasthan in the desert northwest.

Traveling through India was an exhilarating experience, above all because of the friendliness and hospitality of Indians. India is a country of tremendous diversity and contrasts, with a great richness of peoples, cultures, spiritual traditions, and landscapes. It was fascinating to trace out the mixture of continuity and change, as a 4,000 year-old civilization heads into the twenty-first century. Reading the papers and listening to the politicians, I sometimes wondered whether "I.T." (information technology) had replaced "OM" as the new Indian mantra. Then I would speak to visitors outside a temple, or hear a concert of Carnatic violin music, or listen to a new retelling of the Ramayana, and realize that Indians' deep connections to a rich past will not be easily severed.

I hope that this is true regarding biodiversity, and that future generations of Indians will be able to keep a thriving connection to the natural world. After hearing Ramachandra Guha and others say that preserving wild nature is a luxury for poorer nations, it was heartening to visit Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary in Rajasthan and see that Indians love to explore nature, just like Americans. At Bharatpur, a U.N. World Heritage Site, I saw a few American and European tourists, adding new bird species to their life lists. But I saw many more Indians along the paths: schoolchildren walking arm in arm, enjoying the day; old men with beat-up binoculars, trying for a closer look at the Siberian cranes. It was the same at other natural areas I visited. Whether at a small bird sanctuary in Kerala or a nature preserve overlooking the Taj Mahal, Indians seemed to enjoy being outdoors, seeing the flora and fauna, and showing these to a foreigner.

In India, it is clear that cultural diversity and biodiversity are intertwined. Wherever our group traveled, we saw and heard evidence of an ancient and rich appreciation of the natural world. At Mahabalipuram, I was dazzled by the 7th century granite carvings of elephants, lions and deer. Whatever the religious symbolism involved in these carvings, the artists and their patrons clearly knew and loved wild nature. The many styles of traditional dancing that we saw—including Oddisi, Kuchhupudi, and Bharatanatyam—all made reference to birds and beasts. Dancers reimagined the darting quickness of deer, the grace of cranes, and the proud fierceness of lions. 16th century Mughal paintings in Bombay's Prince of Wales Museum beautifully captured North India's biodiversity and the many human activities accompanying it, from hunting to lolling with a sweetheart. Traditional Tamil Nadu love poetry divided the landscape into five "ecotypes," we learned, and associated different emotions and activities, as well as different plants and animals, with each area. Can these traditional cultural activities and their appreciation continue, if the biodiversity to which they refer disappears?

India, I think, faces the same issues in conserving biodiversity that America does. We both have rapidly growing populations—in India due to high birthrates, in America due to high immigration rates. We both need to ask ourselves what part of a valuable landscape we will set aside for wild nature. Of course, India is more densely populated and has less money to buy and manage wild lands. Yet Americans' gluttonous appetites for raw materials also make it difficult for us to preserve wild lands, as shown in our current debate about whether to preserve or drill in the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge.

Along with the visit to Bharatpur Preserve, two further highlights deserve mention. The first was a visit with Dr. Karan Singh, former Maharajah of Jammu and Kashmir, in New Delhi. Singh was a minister in Indira Gandhi's cabinet for ten years and head of Project Tiger's steering committee during the 1970s. We discussed Project Tiger's ups and downs over the years. While he agreed that current efforts to involve locals in the program were valuable and necessary to its long-term success, he also thought that earlier efforts to secure tiger habitat were essential. "What about arguments that it was wrong to move villages and restrict local access to fuel and fodder?" I asked. "No habitat, no tigers," was his answer. He didn't think that anyone could call him or herself a conservationist, who could accept the extinction of India's tigers.

Currently, Dr. Singh is working on faith-based approaches to environmentalism, which he thinks are particularly important in the Indian context (this point was also made to me by several other Indian environmentalists, for example, by Raghuvansh Saxena, head of Planning and Strategy for the World Wide Fund for Nature – India). He has written several books grounding environmental protection in a reformed Hinduism, and has also helped organize several ecumenical conferences on religion and the environment. Singh also emphasized the importance of population for India's environmental future. Indeed,

everyone I spoke to in India, from environmentalists and government officials, to taxi drivers and schoolteachers, agreed that population growth needs to be halted, if India is to protect its environment and improve the quality of life for all its people.

Another highlight was a day-long visit with the President of the All-India Bioethics Association (AIBA), Dr. Jayapaul Azariah, in Chennai (formerly Madras). Jay, a marine zoologist, took several group members on a fascinating tour of the city, focused on water issues. He explained the efforts he and his graduate students have made, over the years, to get residents to see their rivers as resources and to convince government officials to clean them up. While Jay is personally sympathetic to “intrinsic value” arguments, he believes that in India, just getting people to a rationally self-interested “resourcism” would often represent progress. We learned more about India’s urban environmental issues in those few hours with Jay, than we would have in a month of poring over scholarly articles and government reports. It was inspiring to hear about his persistent efforts to keep pressing for a better environmental future. Jay is a great resource for environmental ethicists interested in Indian issues; his email is (jazariah@yahoo.com).

In the end, this was the most important message I took back from India: In the face of grave environmental problems, environmental scholars in India and America must work for practical change. We have no right to get discouraged and give up, there is real work to do and future generations are depending on us to do it!