
Tomalin has written one of the most provocative books on religion and ecology published in the last couple of years. She differentiates “recognition of bio-divinity” in religious traditions such as Hinduism from “religious environmentalism”. She argues that since the latter is a product of post-materialist environmentalist philosophy emerging from the West after 1960s, the former cannot be assumed to respond to the global ecological problems, given its lack of awareness and adaptability to modern problems. She agrees that the recognition of bio-divinity easily finds support from within Hinduism, but there is an immense difference between the priorities and concerns of the modern environmentalist and the world-views of much earlier Hindu thinkers. She also questions whether Hindus in modern India, whom she had earlier called “environmentally illiterate” (2004) with little or no knowledge of the language and concepts central to contemporary environmentalist thinking, actually share the religious environmentalist’s goal of ecological sustainability. She also argues that the “subaltern” poor of India cannot afford to put the “Earth first” since they depend on nature for their daily survival. This is different from the Western “deep ecology”, which aims to protect the earth from all human interventions.

She then chooses sacred groves as a key-area where religion has entered the environmental debate in India by reviewing related scholarly writings. She notes, “To this day one can find patches of forest all over India that have been protected due to religious custom. These are described as ‘hotspots of biodiversity’ and are claimed to be of ecological significance” (p. 155). She then goes on to describe the continuous depletion of these groves due to ‘the dilution of traditional values, Westernization, and migration’. She also discovers with respect to the Coorg sacred groves in Karnataka that “commercialization of the land has led to a transformation in ‘traditional’ farming practices and has brought changes to the institution of the sacred grove. Before the introduction of coffee into the region by the British in 1854, Coorg was almost completely covered with forest and in its Eastern region with thick jungle” (p. 157).
She describes how the Hindu nationalist movement has shown interest in environmental issues such as the Vrindavan Forest Revival Project, the River Ganges, and the Tehri dam. She argues that the environmentalists in India ought to distance themselves from exclusively Hindu interpretations of ecological issues. This way they can avoid being identified with the Hindu Right. “While the literature on sacred groves does tend to classify sacred grove protection as part of the ‘Hindu’ tradition, it is more correctly to be seen as part of a religio-cultural landscape that pre-dates and exists alongside the pan-Indian elite Brahminical tradition. In fact, the process of ‘Sanskritization’ has had an impact upon the demise of the institution of the sacred grove, as regional deities become identified with the pan-Indian Gods and the groves are cleared to make ways for temples” (p. 175).

I do find some problems with her observations. First, she has resorted to the outdated practice of looking for “great” and “little” traditions within India by separating indigenous traditions from Brahminical. It is now well known that the so-called “great” and “little” Indian traditions cannot be studied as two dichotomous groups of traditions (for instance, Sanford 2005, Smith 2006). Further, she has also unnecessarily brought in the issue of the “Hindu Right” as an obstacle for using traditional religious environmentalism. By this logic, religious environmentalism should be stopped across the world immediately because various “Right-Wing” organizations present in Christianity, Islam, and other religions, might hijack ecological discourses for their own political agendas.

Throughout the book, Tomalin quotes Ramachandra Guha and Amita Baviskar multiple times to support her argument that “the type of ‘environmentalism’ that has emerged largely reflects the interests and values of the wealthy industrialized nations” (p. 9). The problem is that these authors have not equated ‘Western environmentalism’ to be inspired by ‘Western post-materialistic religious values’ as Tomalin does. Unlike Tomalin’s appreciation of Western environmentalism, Guha sharply criticizes the ‘hypocrisy’ of the developed world:

It is, the allegedly civilized, who have decimated forests and the wildlife that previously sustained both tiger and tribal. With rifles and quest for trophies, [they] first hunted wild species to extinction; now [they] disguise [themselves] as conservationists and complain that adivasis are getting in the way. The real ‘population problem’ is in America, where the birth of one
child has the same impact on the global environment as the birth of about seventy Indonesian children. Worse, the birth of an American dog or cat was the ecological equivalent of the birth of a dozen Bangladeshi children. (2006: 149)

Similarly, Tomalin’s observations that ‘poor’ Indians cannot put ‘Earth First’ in their daily survival struggle can also be disputed by recent Green-dex survey conducted by National Geographic Society. The survey concluded that the citizens of Brazil and India are the ‘greenest’ based on their sustainable lifestyles (Handwerk 2009). It can be argued that depending on the environment friendly lifestyles, Indians have indeed put the ‘Earth First’.

Although the book presents a sharp critique of Indian environment and environmentalism, and Bron Taylor endorses it in his foreword, I think, it presents very little evidences from “on the ground” religious environmentalist initiatives currently taking place in India. Much of the material presented is either based on secondary sources or some participatory research conducted by Tomalin about a decade ago. Nevertheless, the book is engaging and informative and will be an important reading for courses in religion and ecology.

References


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