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Mahatma Gandhi once said in regards to Earth's resources, "There is enough for everyone's need, but not for their greed." The truth of this adage has become alarmingly apparent as global warming and the depletion of natural resources increases with each passing year. According to current statistics, the United States contributes approximately 18% of worldwide carbon dioxide pollution, second to only China. India follows in third place with an annual contribution of approximately six percent. In spite of their large output of toxic waste, neither the United States nor India is among the top ten nations looking to combat pollution through the use of renewable energy.¹ In fact, many Indian companies have been found guilty of abusing the international system of 'carbon credits' to increase their toxic output instead of trying to limit it. While such methods of cutting corners may yield short-term economic results, the long-term effects on the world environment are devastating. A recent study conducted by MIT concluded that if world pollution emission continues to grow at its current rate, global surface temperature could be expected to rise approximately five degrees centigrade by 2095.² The melting of polar ice caps that will inevitably result from a temperature increase of that magnitude will render a significant portion of global landmass inhospitable, as it will be under sea level. Such statistics are especially disheartening considering how honoring and respecting the environment are integral parts of the Hindu teachings in sacred books such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Puranas*, *Vedas*, and *Upanishads*.

Hinduism promotes belief in an omnipotent force known as Brahman. All Hindu deities are essentially manifestations of Brahman, as is everything else in the world. Therefore, Hindus must worship and respect all aspects of the earth- people, animals, as well as the environment. The Ganges River for example, is worshipped as a goddess. More specifically, Hindus worship Devi, known as the goddess of the Earth. Hindus often offer food to Devi to show their appreciation to mother nature for providing for human sustenance.³ The *Bhagavata Purana*, the most significant of the *Puranas*, describes the presence of Brahman as "The air is his breath, the trees are the hairs of his body...the rivers are the veins of the Cosmic Person, His movements are the passing of ages." Accordingly, Hindus believe that there is divinity in everything and that man's relationship with the natural world is necessary in order for the species to prosper.

This feeling of interconnectedness between a human, nature and the divine is also very important to the foundation of the Hindu principles of *karma* and *dharma*. Karma is akin to Newton's third law of motion. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Any good or

bad deeds done by a being will yield either karmic advantage or retribution either during life or the afterlife. Such sentiment is best illustrated by a quote from the religious text of the *Upanishads*, "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." Violating the environment will result in negative karmic vibes. The concept of reincarnation also plays an important role in Hindu treatment of the environment. Hindus believe that prior to attaining *moksha*, man must be reincarnated into many lives. The form in which man may reincarnate however, is dependent on a man's karma. Harming another creature that one may be reincarnated into in the future can weigh heavily on one's consciousness. Therefore, there is an inevitable connection between humans and other organisms on Earth.

Satisfying dharma, or duty, aids in man's quest for positive karma and attaining moksha, or enlightenment. Preserving and respecting the environment are examples of duties expected of a Hindu. This can be seen in the Hindu practice of touching the ground before and after leaving bed in order to pay respect to mother earth. In fact, prior to dancing, a dancer performs namaskar in part to thank the earth for providing a stage. The Hindu practice of vegetarianism is another way to perform dharma. *Ahimsa*, or nonviolence, is a critical way to perform *dharma*. Hindus revere all animals, especially the cow, which they hold sacred. This sentiment is reiterated in the *Bhagavad Gita* where it states, "Every living creature is the son of the supreme Lord, and He does not tolerate even ants being killed." Restraining from hurting or ingesting animals can subsequently improve one's karma and better one's path towards enlightenment. Vegetarianism has also been scientifically proven to be beneficial to the environment, as the cultivation of animals requires the release of a significant amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Reducing meat consumption has the same overall effect as reducing the number of cars driving on the highway. In fact, the United Nations has asserted that a global shift to veganism or vegetarianism would be more effective in battling global warming than switching to hybrid cars would be.⁴

Given the deep respect with which the Hindu religion regards the environment, the global effort to preserve the environment by Hindus is unsurprising. Temples all over India have adopted conservation tactics as part of The Nine Year Plan, which is a collaborative effort between thirty different religions.⁵ As part of this plan, houses of worship aim to both initiate positive environmental actions while simultaneously educating followers to become more aware

of their ecological impact. Some of their current projects include promoting the use of cruelty-free animal products, using recycled paper, as well as reducing and reusing non-biodegradable products such as plastic. Another example of environmental initiative being taken is the effort to clean the Ganges River. Despite being one of Hinduism's most sacred rivers, the river has long been contaminated from industrial waste. Now, a campaign encouraging the young adults in the area to help clean the river is being implemented. Organic farming is yet another method being introduced in rural India to reduce the amount of pesticides contaminating the soil. The consumption of pesticides through food is also harmful for human beings, making this initiative even more beneficial. One of the most successful environmental campaigns in recent years has been "Project Greenhands," which supports the planting of trees – the campaign is responsible for the planting of over seven million trees in the southern region of India.⁶

The success of such projects abroad should only inspire our efforts here at home. As Hindus, we must remember the basic teachings of Hinduism and work to live our lives with these teachings in mind. We can utilize the strong spiritual bonds we already share and work as a community to reach out and promote respect for the environment. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Rama, the seventh reincarnation of Vishnu, says to Arjuna "one who does not follow in human life the cycle of sacrifice thus established by the Vedas certainly lives a life full of sin. Living only for the satisfaction of the senses, such a person lives in vain." By sacrificing for a better cause, we can achieve an inner peace of mind and heart because we are not just reading or discussing how to better the world, we are playing an active role in actually doing so. The Bhumi Project here in the United States gives Hindus the opportunity to do just that- interested Hindus can work through this organization to participate in environmental activism as well as educate other Hindus on how to do the same.⁷ Instead of using our free time to engage in unproductive activities such as watching T.V., we can instead use that time to go do something positive – and help make this world a better place to live for our children and ourselves.

It is deceptively easy to get caught up in our daily lives and forget that all of our material possessions and aspirations are possible because the environment provides for us. Being environmentally conscious and conserving is the least we can do to show gratitude and give back to the Earth. After all, as an ancient Hindu saying goes, "The Earth is our mother and we are all her children."