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Understanding the Environment, Causes of Pollutions and Activities for Conservation of Environment from a Religious Perspective

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Abstract: ***The environment encompasses everything that influences the life of an organism, ranging from physical impacts to chemical, biological, and anthropogenic factors. The two primary components of the environment are biotic and abiotic. Biotic components consist of living elements such as flora and fauna that interact with one another within an ecosystem. Abiotic components comprise non-living physical and chemical factors, such as earth, sky, air, fire, and water. On Earth, these two sets of components are mutually complementary; any damage sustained by one component inevitably impacts the other. Currently, due to various causes, both of these environmental components are undergoing rapid degradation, thereby precipitating an environmental crisis. The negative repercussions of this environmental crisis impacting human lives and livelihoods on a global scale are undeniable. Among the most pressing issues confronting the world in recent times are environmental degradation and climate change. These pose a threat not only to the current human population but also to non-human life forms and future generations. Today, there is an imperative need to approach environmental conservation from various religious perspectives. Religion occupies a pivotal position within all global communities, and a vast number of people place their faith in it. Consequently, religion can play a significant role in environmental conservation and contribute to the resolution of environmental challenges. This article endeavors to explore the concept of the environment, the causes of pollution, and conservation-related initiatives through the lens of religious perspectives.***

Keywords: Environmental degradation, Environmental challenges, Environmental conservation, Biotic and Abiotic components, Religious perspectives, etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

The word ‘Paryavaran’ (Environment) is derived from two Sanskrit words: 'Pari' + 'Avaran'. Here, 'Pari' signifies ‘all around’, while 'Avaran' denotes a ‘covering’ or ‘enclosure’; thus, the environment is essentially the sphere that encompasses us. In a broader sense, the term ‘environment’ refers to the surroundings in which living beings including humans, animals, and plants exist. This encompasses the natural environment comprising ecosystems, landscapes, air, water, and biodiversity as well as the built environment. The built environment includes human-made structures such as buildings, roads, and cities. The environment encompasses everything that influences the life of an organism ranging from physical impacts to chemical, biological, and anthropogenic factors. Currently, due to various reasons, the environment is undergoing rapid degradation, giving rise to an environmental crisis. One cannot deny the adverse impacts that this environmental crisis is having on the lives and livelihoods of people on a global scale. It is primarily due to the mismanagement of the environment that the world is currently grappling with severe climate change. This situation has compelled environmentalists, governments, and other stakeholders to seek viable strategies to conserve the environment for present and future generations and to mitigate the adverse effects of this crisis. Today, there is an imperative need to approach environmental conservation from various religious perspectives. Religion occupies a significant place within all global communities, and a vast number of people hold deep faith in it. It is often said that “interdisciplinary approaches linking religions and spirituality help us protect the environment and transform human behaviors”. This is because every religion in the world possesses its own values and, in most cases, prescribed attitudes and responsibilities toward the environment. Approximately 84% of the global population is affiliated with some form of religion. Religious beliefs, tenets, and rituals (customs and worship practices) shape individuals' perceptions of right and wrong, integrity, morality, and virtue. Since religion can influence perceptions and attitudes, it serves as a significant medium for fostering positive values regarding environmental conservation and sustainability. Therefore, religion can play a pivotal role in environmental conservation and can contribute significantly toward resolving environmental challenges.

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1) *The Significance of the Environment from a Religious Perspective:* The Psalms state: "The Earth is not ours; it belongs to the Lord, and everything within it belongs to him as well." We dwell amidst the environment upon the Lord's Earth. The environment consists of two primary components: biotic and abiotic. Biotic components comprise living elements such as flora and fauna that interact with one another within an ecosystem. Abiotic components consist of non-living physical and chemical factors, such as earth, sky, air, fire, and water. All these elements exert an influence upon living organisms. According to Indian philosophy and Hindu tenets, the entire cosmos was created from the 'Panchabhuta' that is, the five fundamental elements also referred to as the 'Panchamahabhuta'. These very five elements are referenced in the 'Uttarakand' (the final chapter) of the 'Ramcharitmanas', authored by Goswami Tulsidas: "Chhiti jal pavak gagan samira; Panch rachit ati adham sarira." This translates to: Earth, Water, Fire, Sky, and Air this body, composed of these five elements, is utterly humble and transient. These lines underscore the ephemeral nature of the body and its composition from the five elements a concept also closely associated with the philosophical views of Saint Kabir Das. Within these five fundamental elements (Panchabhuta): Earth encompasses solid matter, soil, and foundation; Water encompasses fluids and liquid; Fire encompasses energy, light, and heat; Air encompasses wind and motion; and Sky encompasses the void, expanse, and space. Collectively, these elements constitute Nature, Life, and all animate and inanimate entities within the universe. In essence, these five elements are 'भगवान' (God). From a literal etymological standpoint, the word 'भगवान' is composed of five distinct letters, arranged as follows: भ + ग + व + अ + न. When these letters are expanded, they correspond to: भ- 'भूमि' (Earth); ग- 'गगन' (Sky); व- 'वायु' (Air); अ- 'अग्नि' (Fire); and न- 'नीर' (Water). This entire universe has been created from these five elements – land, sky, air, fire and water.
2) *Harmony between Biotic and Abiotic components:* The biotic components existing on Earth lack the capacity to generate abiotic components; however, abiotic components possess the inherent capacity to give rise to biotic components. Wherever a proper degree of coordination is established among abiotic components, the process of generating biotic components commences. In other words, the elements of earth, water, fire, space, and air combine to give birth to humans, animals, and vegetation. As long as a balanced and positive relationship is maintained between biotic and abiotic components, environmental equilibrium prevails; conversely, when this relationship becomes unbalanced and negative, a state of environmental disequilibrium arises. Abiotic components, in themselves, do not cause environmental imbalance. Among biotic components, animals and vegetation, too, do not naturally cause environmental imbalance; rather, humans are the sole species that in their pursuit of fulfilling their needs and aspirations ununnaturally creates imbalances within both biotic and abiotic components. As stated in Genesis: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.'" It appears that humans took this directive all too seriously; in their zeal to be fruitful, multiply, subdue everything, and exercise dominion over all, they began to generate environmental imbalance.
3) *Damage to Biotic and Abiotic Components:* From a religious perspective, the elements- earth, water, fire, sky, and air are revered as manifestations of the Divine; However whether knowingly or unknowingly, numerous beliefs, customs, and human activities inflict direct and indirect damage upon the environment. In recent times, environmental degradation and climate change have emerged as two of the most pressing issues confronting the world. These threats endanger not only the current human population but also non-human species and future generations. Recurrent extreme climatic events such as intense heatwaves, unusually low temperatures, and storms along with ecological disturbances such as melting glaciers, rising sea levels, floods, droughts, and wildfires have become matters of grave concern. Furthermore, the pressure to abandon traditional agricultural practices, coupled with deteriorating food and water security, adds to the severity of the situation. These problems have a profound impact on the quality and sustainability of the environment. There are numerous reasons behind this severe impact on the environment. During various religious festivals, following acts of worship, idols crafted from Plaster of Paris and toxic dyes are immersed in rivers, ponds, and other water bodies. The chemical-laden dyes subsequently leach into these water sources. In certain religious traditions where animal sacrifice is practiced, the blood and other remains of the sacrificed animals dissolve into the water. Activities such as bathing livestock in rivers, humans bathing themselves, washing clothes, and the immersion of milk, oil, flowers, plastic bags, and cremated remains as well as the disposal of deceased bodies into the water currents all contribute to an increase in the water's Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD), thereby endangering aquatic life. During certain celebrations such as Holi, weddings, birthdays, or other joyous occasions the use of fireworks releases harmful chemicals into the air. The burning of wooden pyres results in significant carbon emissions. Finally, the use of high-volume loudspeakers during festivals, devotional singing sessions (Bhajan-Kirtan), wedding ceremonies, and similar events constitutes a major source of noise pollution. The improper management of plastic, flowers, and other waste left behind by devotees at

numerous large-scale religious gatherings leads to land pollution. Humans are continuously killing wild animals for their meat, hides, bones, fur, internal organs, medicinal properties, and other uses. Forests are being destroyed to facilitate agricultural and urban expansion, resulting in the loss of natural habitats for wildlife. Furthermore, certain wild animals are being forcibly domesticated, causing damage to biodiversity. Industrial and agricultural activities have accelerated the rate at which many species are becoming extinct. Chemicals, smoke, and waste materials emitted by industries as well as chemical fertilizers and pesticides used in agriculture are responsible for this phenomenon. These chemicals, smoke, waste products, and pesticides are harming biodiversity, either directly or indirectly. In today's technological era, radiation levels have risen significantly, pushing many animal species to the brink of extinction. Vegetation is being harvested beyond sustainable limits to meet demands for food, furniture, paper, construction materials, spices, medicines, decorative items, and other purposes. Land acquisition and deforestation undertaken to facilitate the expansion of cities and villages, the establishment of industries, and similar developments are causing a deterioration of the ecosystem. From the perspective of abiotic components, the atmosphere is becoming polluted by smoke emitted from vehicles and factories. The discharge of industrial chemical waste into rivers and the excessive exploitation of groundwater are rendering water resources both contaminated and scarce. The use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers in agriculture is degrading the quality of the soil. Emissions of greenhouse gases are leading to rising temperatures, melting glaciers, and rising sea levels. These human-induced activities are resulting in an ecological imbalance that poses a grave threat to all forms of life on Earth.

4) *Conservation of Biotic and Abiotic Components:* There exists a profound connection between religion and the environment, and the perspective of all religions toward nature has consistently been positive. In Hinduism, nature occupies a place of great significance, and its various manifestations are revered as embodiments of deities. The Earth itself is regarded as a manifestation of the Goddess. Its various constituents such as mountains, rivers, forests, ponds, trees, animals, and birds are all viewed through the lens of divine narratives and the Puranas. Each of these elements is accorded respect or worshipped in one form or another. Verse of the ‘Manusmriti’ states: "No individual should urinate, defecate, or spit into water." Furthermore, no object contaminated with impure substances such as blood or poison should ever be cast into water. Highlighting the importance of trees, Verse 172.39 of the ‘Varaha Purana’ declares: "A person who plants one Peepal tree, one Neem tree, one Banyan tree, ten flowering plants or vines, two pomegranate trees, two orange trees, and five mango trees shall not be consigned to Hell." In the ‘Bhagavad Gita’, it is affirmed in numerous passages that God is omnipresent and resides within all living beings in various forms; therefore, individuals are duty-bound to protect all forms of life. An illustrative example regarding sanitation and hygiene states: "An individual who discarded the carcass or skeleton of an animal such as a cat, dog, mongoose, or snake within the confines of a city was penalized with a fine of three ‘panas’; A fine of fifty ‘panas’ was imposed upon anyone who discarded the carcass of a donkey, camel, or mule, or a human skeleton”. In Hinduism, it is a fundamental belief that an individual reaps the consequences of their actions (Karma). Moreover, an individual's actions exert an influence not only upon themselves but also upon nature. Consequently, humanity is obligated to protect nature and the diverse array of living beings within it. In accordance with this principle, the form in which an individual is reborn on Earth after death as any specific living creature is entirely contingent upon their past actions. Thus, the practice of ‘Ahimsa’ (non-violence) toward all living beings stands as a cardinal principle of Hinduism.

According to other religions, such as Islam, God is the true owner of the Earth, and the role of human beings here is that of ‘Khalifa’ that is, God's trustee. Consequently, the duty of humans is to protect the Earth and its various constituent elements. According to its holy scripture, the Quran, creation originated from water, and the wasteful use of water is considered a sin. Furthermore, the wasteful utilization of any natural resource is strictly prohibited in Islam. Additionally, Islam designates certain environmentally protected zones known as ‘Haram’; these areas are considered sacrosanct and off-limits. Of the more than 6,000 verses in the Quran, over 500 relate to natural phenomena. These verses predominantly discuss elements such as the Earth, the Sun, the Moon, plants, and water. Islam places a strong emphasis on the prudent and limited use of water resources. Christianity posits that all living beings are manifestations of God's love, and that humans possess no right to destroy biodiversity or God's creation. According to Christian doctrine, too, humanity has been entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the other living beings within creation. Moreover, it advocates for the judicious use of resources and their conservation. Buddhism is founded entirely upon the principles of love, harmony, and non-violence (Ahimsa). According to the Buddhist concept of ‘Pratītyasamutpāda’ (Dependent Origination), every action inevitably produces a consequence. Buddhism promotes a simple lifestyle a prerequisite for sustainable development and strictly forbids the overexploitation of natural resources. This religion affirms a belief in the mutual interdependence of all natural entities, encompassing all living creatures, flora, rivers, mountains, forests, and other elements. In Jainism, the principle of non-violence (Ahinsa) is accorded the highest significance, and causing harm to any living creature, plant,

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or natural entity is strictly prohibited. Adherents of Jainism observe the 'Panch Mahavrat' (Five Great Vows)- Truthfulness (Satya), Non-violence (Ahinsa), Non-stealing (Asteya), Non-possession (Aparigraha), and Celibacy (Brahmacharya) in every aspect of their lives. Thus, for the followers of Jainism, nature and all its living beings are regarded as equal; consequently, their conservation and treating them with equality constitute the fundamental teachings of this religion. According to Sikhism, everything in the world functions in accordance with God's will, and God acts as their protector. The teachings of Sikhism prohibit expenditure incurred merely for the sake of ostentation. As per the religion's Holy Scripture, the 'Guru Granth Sahib', all living beings including animals, trees, rivers, mountains, and oceans are regarded as manifestations of God. The Hebrew Bible, or 'Torah', sets forth numerous ethical obligations regarding the conservation of nature. According to the Torah- "When God created Adam, He showed him the Garden of Eden and said, 'Behold My works how beautiful are they? Everything I have created is for your sake. You must protect it; for if you destroy it, there will be no one left to repair it after you.'" Thus, environmental conservation is accorded significant importance within Judaism as well.

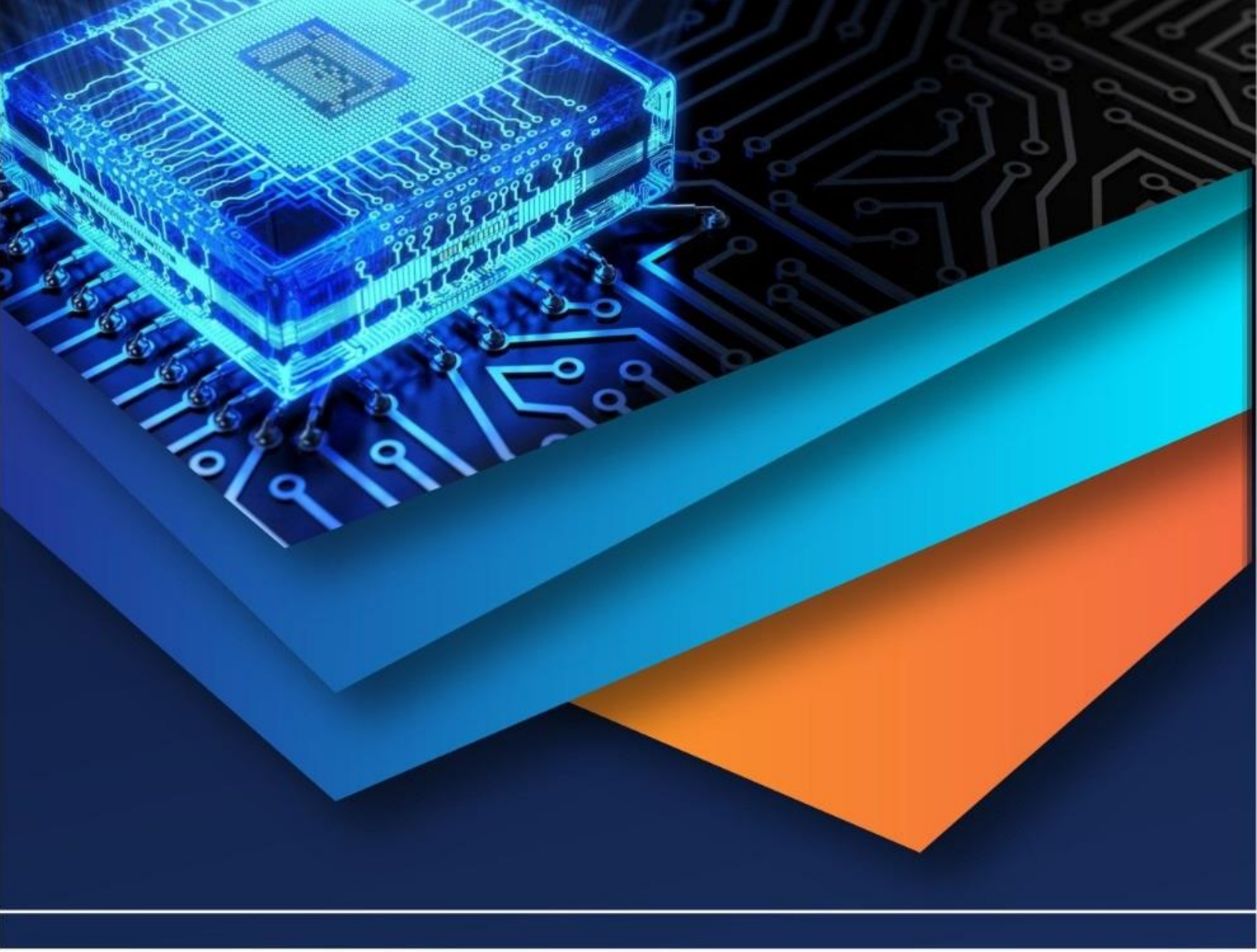
II. CONCUSION

Environmental mismanagement plays a significant role in the ecological imbalance we face today. The state of environmental mismanagement has prompted environmentalists, governments, and other stakeholders to seek viable methods for conserving the environment and mitigating the adverse effects of such mismanagement for the benefit of both current and future generations. Today, there is a pressing need to approach environmental conservation from various religious perspectives. To promote environmental protection, World Environment Day is observed annually on June 5th. This initiative was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1972 during the Stockholm Conference. Its primary objective is to raise awareness among individuals, governments, and industries regarding critical issues such as rising pollution, deforestation, and global warming. It aims to encourage people to protect the environment from harm by planting trees, conserving water, and minimizing the wastage of natural resources. Furthermore, it seeks to foster cooperation not merely at the individual level, but globally among nations, communities, and organizations, thereby enabling the implementation of concrete measures to safeguard the environment. The goal is to strike a balance between nature and development that ensures the Earth remains a safe and habitable place for our future generations. This day serves as a reminder that, without a healthy environment, the existence of both human life and the planet itself would be impossible.

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