

INDIAN CONSCIOUSNESS & THE ENVIRONMENT**RAJENDRA SINGH***(Translated by R. Thanvi & transcribed by Maulik and Pooja Sisodia)*

*Ishavasyamind Sarvam Yatchinbit Jagatyam Jagat
Tyen Tyakten Ma Gridhakasya Svidd Dhanam .*

- *Isabavasyopanishad*

Translation: (This is the first mantra of the Isahvasya Upanishad.) Whatever we see and feel around us, material or spiritual, belongs to the Divine. This entire universe is pervaded by the Lord, for the reason that it is dependent upon primordial nature, which in its turn is also pervaded by Him. For this reason, enjoy whatever is given to you by Him, and do not seek wealth from any other source. We, as nations or as individuals are the trustees of the possessions that the Lord has given us and must safe guard them as such.

Historical evidence suggests that in ancient India, in the Hindu pantheon, the natural environment was considered a creation of Lord Brahma, the Supreme Creator and a member of the Holy Trinity – Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the annihilator.

The various components of our ecosystem, in their myriad transformations from birth to death mirror the cosmic cycle of creation and destruction. Whenever we humans manufacture any product or commodity we are not actually 'creating' it, we are merely transforming nature from one form to another. Thus, nature is constant and eternal, it is the subcomponents of nature that are born and die. This natural cycle of life and death is imprinted on every Indian's psyche. According to our scriptures this cycle is ceaseless, perpetual, without end.

Time also follows this cycle of birth and death. Each great age dawns, a new civilization flourishes, and then declines. From the ashes of the old rises the new – a phoenix-like regeneration of a new era, a new civilization.

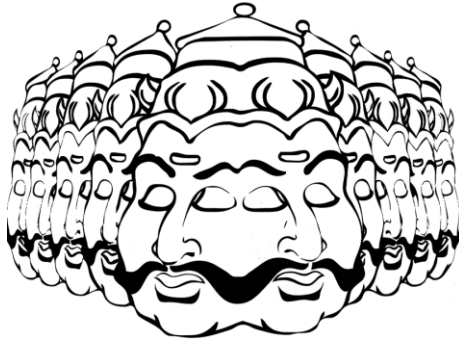
A few words on the mythological Hindu Ages.

The first great cosmic age in Indian mythology was the '*Kritayuga*'. (The era of Truth) It is so named because men and women were closely bound to their creator. It was the age when every man respected the dharmic obligation of doing the work he was assigned. In this age of joy and euphoria, there was no distinction between man and his environment. All creatures of God were treated alike. Human society was not stratified and the vices of greed, avarice, desire and attraction had not yet raised their heads. People's lifestyle was exceedingly simple and their needs were limited. Thus their activities and occupations were also simple as the need to make ends meet had not yet arisen. People were content and blissful. The Vedas had not been written at this stage.

The next cosmic age was called the '*Tretayuga*'. This era was heralded by growing complexities in human society. Human needs grew and with it human failings like greed, selfishness arrogance, desire and deceit appeared. Alongside this complexity in human society, the environment also grew steadily more complex and diverse. The minimal resources that had sustained life in the *Kritayuga* became inadequate to meet these changing needs and there was a general decline in the human standard of living. In contrast to the earlier harmonious co-existence, people began competing for resources. Men had to evolve social etiquettes and norms to ensure smooth interactions and in order to curb the manifestation of vices. Despite these attempts, the situation had deteriorated to such a degree that it necessitated the descent to the earth of the Lord in one of his most revered 'avatars' – the avatar of Lord Rama.

Despite being the King of Ayodhya, Rama made it his life's mission to curtail the degeneration spreading through society. As royalty, he could have enjoyed all worldly pleasures and superficial comforts. Instead, as the Lord in an earthly incarnation, he chose the path of righteousness and virtue. His most memorable achievement was vanquishing the demon king Ravana. In this fight of good against evil, he sought the

partnership of other creatures of God - monkeys, bears, birds and squirrels. In another interpretation, his victory was a victory for nature.



Ravana was a technical expert in the art of war and his force was technologically superior to Rama's army. His years of meditation and penance had enabled him to control natural forces like rain, water, wind, fire and earth. This is indicated by verses in the Ramayana which say that Indra (the deity of rain), Varuna (the deity of water), Vayu (the deity of wind), Agni [the deity of fire] and others were under Ravana's spell and in his captivity. He had appropriated all powers and had become a totalitarian. His dictatorship was also run on principles of centralization such as those we see in today's governmental structures.

Natural resources were considered precious during that era. For his own personal amusement Ravana had created the 'Ashok

Vatika' (the grove of Ashoka), which was akin to our present-day zoos and nature sanctuaries. It was home to a variety of birds and animal species but entry was restricted to only those of a certain social rank. This mirrors the present-day tendency of 'eco-tourism' to let only the rich enjoy pristine natural splendour and the inclination to raise animals in captivity as a source of entertainment. However, as mentioned in the epic Ramayana, a point to note is that while Ravana used nature for his own enjoyment, he also had a tremendous respect for it.

Lord Hanuman [the leader of a group of primates who had pledged his allegiance to Lord Rama] was one of the most important characters in the Ramayana. Lord Hanuman's forced entry into this sanctuary is actually a metaphor for how those who are one with nature, have the right to utilize natural resources to emerge triumphant over unnatural forces that deny them. His setting fire to the sanctuary before he took flight from there has a parallel in today's regime in the form of the dissatisfaction of forest-dwelling communities. These communities resent the stranglehold of the forest department over their resources and often engage in destructive activities only because they feel alienated from their home. In effect, Hanuman's destruction of Lanka is symbolic of nature triumphing. Thus, according to Indian tradition, the Gods always smite civilizations that seek to control resources and deny them to others.

Contrary to popular wisdom, it is my belief that these events were actually set in motion deliberately by a woman with great foresight – Rama's stepmother Kaikeyi – who probably created the situation of Rama's exile in the knowledge that only Rama had the strength of character to put an end to Ravana's reign of terror. Just like crime, cheating, violence and exploitation characterize today's world, Lanka too was a theatre for such negative phenomena. Human depravity in Lanka is exemplified by Ravana's abduction of Rama's wife Sita, by tempting her with a gilded deer. It is ironic then, that the very same Kaikeyi, who was responsible for the destruction of this evil at the hands of virtue, is the subject of universal condemnation. In this respect, that society has parallels with ours, where those who are responsible for changes that reaffirm moral values are subject to ostracism and ridicule.

The battle between Rama and Ravana was in a sense, a war between the love of nature and the love of ostentation and power. This theme is apparent through the course of the entire epic. The peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence of nature and man is also exemplified in Rama's bridge building efforts. Rama was never once let down by the creatures (the monkeys, birds and animals whose help he had sought) he put faith in, while the opposing forces from Lanka were riddled with factious behaviour and deceit. Ravana's defeat also stands testament to the fact that no amount of technology or scientific advancement can save a deviant society from the wrath of nature.

While one cannot vouch for the historical authenticity of the epic Ramayana, personally I do have faith in this work as a reliable representation of those times. The very fact that the author of this epic Valmiki (and later its most celebrated translator Tulsidas) expressed these sentiments, and that the lesson preached in this story has been accepted by millions of Indians, make it self-evident that the story's message resonates within the Indian psyche. What better evidence can there be of the accuracy of the work than its widespread acceptance over many centuries? In my personal opinion, this epic is even more accurate than any contemporary historian's account, since the latter may only be based on scant archaeological evidence.

After Lanka perished, taking with it its degenerate lifestyle, Rama anointed the nature-loving Vibhishana as the new king of Lanka, assigning him the task of rebuilding a strong, moralistic society in harmony with nature. Normalcy returned to Ayodhya as well, and civilization carried on. This was the start of the '*Dwapar Yug*'. More scriptures were written during this period, and most Indians regard the *Dwapar Yuga* as the dawn of history. Society prospered, the arts and sciences were patronized, new crafts and occupations arose and once again complexities emerged in social interaction. In order to deal with this growing complexity and to allocate labour to different activities, social stratification occurred and the caste system came into being. Concurrently, this age once again saw the rise of ills like envy, jealousy, bigotry and prejudice. Moral values that are essential for the sustenance of a righteous society diminished and once again tensions started to grow. The rulers stopped mingling with the common man and started dressing in regal attire. The world started slowly veering towards a great catastrophe, just as it is today.

It was at this juncture in history that the earth prayed to Lord Vishnu to once again come to its rescue and redeem society. This time the Lord descended in a dual avatar – Lord Krishna and Balarama – and once again there occurred a clash between moral and material powers. As is the case in every great age, it was morality that triumphed over materialism. This clash came in the form of the greatest battle ever, the Mahabharata and may be interpreted as a clash between two opposing ideologies; one that wanted to capture and control the earth and all its resources versus one that sought to protect the earth from this assault by re-establishing the rule of virtue and dharma. (The Kauravas represented the former and the Pandavas the latter.)

The Kauravas relied on advanced technologies, technical skill and limitless wealth to fuel the conflict. The Pandavas relied on righteousness and devotion to God. They were led by the Cowherd Krishna, and this army's ranks were made up of farmers, shepherds, cowherds and forest-dwellers. The five Pandavas – Yudhishthira the virtuous, Arjuna the valiant, Bhima the Powerful, Nakul and Sahdev who loved nature deeply and who could understand the voices of all living creatures – spearheaded the forces of good against evil.

The Bhagavad Gita is Lord Krishna's divine sermon to Arjuna in his moment of self-doubt as he steps onto the battlefield. It is the touchstone upon which all Hindus evaluate their actions. One of the Gita's verses is important for our discussion here. Lord Krishna says that in our greed and lethargy, we avoid hard labour and thereby endanger all natural cycles. Greed propels us towards accumulation of wealth, and towards exploiting nature beyond all limits. Thus the natural cycle breaks and the environment collapses under this burden. These words must be recalled by us in today's times and become the foundations of Indian dharma once again. Diversity in nature complements itself, i.e. every component complements another. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "There is enough for every man's need, but not every man's greed." Nature has created enough to meet the requirements of every living creature, but there is an essential element of give-and-take that we cannot forget. We must remember that in reality, sacrifice and enjoyment are two sides of the same coin. Today however we have erroneously set our sights on enjoyment alone and avoid any form of giving-back. Enjoying benefits without contributing back to the environment is tantamount to theft. This is explicitly mentioned in Chapter 3, verse 2 of the Gita, where Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna that the Gods will shower Arjuna with worldly pleasures and luxuries if he is industrious. His labour will be richly rewarded. The Lord clarifies that it was possible to enjoy the same benefits without using one's labour but then it would cease to be a reward and thus doing so would be nothing short of theft.

This spirit of give-and-take is also underscored in a verse from the *Ishavasyopanishad* that mandates that only after contributing productively should one seek gratification. This is actually the most fundamental tenet of environmental conservation. However, the Mahabharata was the last phase of true environmental preservation and soon after that the nature-loving Yadavas, along with their king Lord Krishna, perished. An era of environmental destruction began anew and this started the final dark age called the '*Kalyuga*', which continues into the present day.

The chronology of events I have detailed in the preceding pages is based on myths, legends and great Indian epics. It is more of a theological division of time. Yet, even if we trace the history of Indian environmental consciousness through the timelines preferred by contemporary historians, we will see the same trend.



The Indus Valley Civilization began prior to the Vedic era, almost five thousand years ago in the years 3000 BC. This civilization, also called the Harappan civilization (after one of its most significant centres) was highly advanced and urbanized. It was nevertheless a nature-loving civilization that worshipped the Peepul tree (*Ficus Religiosa*) as evidenced by the many seals found at excavation sites. This tree was considered the giver of life, and the Gods were depicted as

protectors of this tree, wearing crowns made of its leaves. Gods were depicted as warding off demons that wanted to devour these trees. Legend has it that only once were the demons successful in gaining control over the trees, but even that once, the Gods joined ranks and fought valiantly till the Peepul was theirs again. This is indicative that the Indus Valley Civilization considered nature a form of divinity.

There are descriptions of how all interactions between Gods, kings, warriors and scholars used to take place only around the Peepul tree. It was central to all social activities. Divine spirits were the designated caretakers of this tree and their illustrations are of even greater interest in our present context, as they have been depicted as having human heads with bodies of various animals. Sometime even the various limbs of these spirits were those of different creatures. Thus these spirits were shown as having the wisdom of man, the speed of a gazelle, the valour of a lion, the poisonous sting of a cobra etc. On the seal, the Peepul has been shown as being protected by a Rhinoceros. The same seal shows the bull Nandi, warding off a demon. Nandi has also been shown on many seals as protecting the Acacia tree. A few seals even show the Cobra baring its fangs to deter any attack on the trees.

Strikingly, many seals show railings and enclosures around the Peepul and Acacia tree – the very techniques used in modern-day India. There are also illustrations of that in quintessential village institutions, like the Chabutra (a circular parapet built around the tree trunk, for village elders to sit and discuss matters of great importance or for evening village gatherings). The seals discovered from excavation sites show single trees as well as groups of trees, thickets and forests being worshipped, thus setting back the clock several thousands of years on the question of when ritual worship began. It is clear that worshipping nature has been part of the Indian psyche since the dawn of civilization. The fact that the tree was the centre of all social interaction, indicates that the Harappans were great nature-lovers, and their lives were one with nature. Not only was the environment considered the source of all food and nourishment, they also recognized it as being a repository of all medicinal herbs and therapies and the singular source of all human happiness. In the Indus Valley Civilization, people used trees and plants for their food as well as for materials to make arts and crafts and even items of clothing. Evidently, the people recognized that human civilization could not possibly exist without the natural environment. If historical indications are to be believed, then even the Gods perceived this interdependence. People seemed to have internalized the knowledge that if any harm befalls a living tree or plant, it could have dangerous consequences for human society too.

Thus, the Indus Valley Civilization was structured around trees. It was only towards the end of this civilization that people started living in 'pukka' or burnt-brick houses, constructed drainage systems and started using brass coins. Even at this advanced stage, the illustrations on the coins and seals continued to depict that society's traditional proximity to nature.



After the Harappan culture came to its abrupt end, the Vedic age started. There are detailed descriptions of this age in our scriptures and mythological stories. The Vedic civilization sprang up on the banks of the Ganges. Primarily a civilization based on hunting-gathering, it also saw for the first time certain groups becoming artisans or ascetics who lived in the forests. These ascetics followed a strictly natural lifestyle and have left us with valuable accounts of life in those years. Even the artisans used only natural materials to make simple tools. Early man, at this stage, did not moan at the destruction wrought by natural forces as disasters. On the contrary, these were considered a blessing from the Gods and accepted with due humility.

However with time, a gradual distance grew between man and his environment. The human mind is inherently hedonistic and seeks ever greater happiness and pleasures. These desires slowly resulted in man indiscriminately hunting animals, fishing in the rivers beyond the water's natural regenerative capacities, and also in the manufacture of different types of weapons. The utensils, tools, spinning wheels, handlooms, furniture and weaponry that have been found by archaeologists help us reconstruct the lifestyle during this era. The gulf between man and his environs started widening as a result of this growing social complexity. It is difficult to understand how this happened, yet it is essential we do so as this understanding can guide our future policy decisions.

It is likely that with the growing social complexity and the emergence of many new occupations, trade was born. People started bartering their accumulated resources in exchange for those collected by others. It follows that the emergence of the first class system happened contemporaneously. While this did lead to

division of labour and boosted investment and production, it also enabled a few privileged classes to gain a monopoly over natural resources. They exploited nature to serve their own ends and centralized all power structures. Thus began Indian feudalism, which has left its impact on every phase of Indian history thereafter. Man began spending less time in prayer and devotion though as yet, had not lost respect for nature altogether. Their respect, however was based more on the material values of these animals for example, the cow was respected for its milk-giving properties not for its intrinsic religious connotation (Krishna and the Cowherd). Despite technological progress man still did not have the temerity to think he could control nature. Man still feared storms, floods and earthquakes. While man's dependence on nature was decreasing, the Vedic society still gave natural beings a significant place in its tradition and theology.

The later-Vedic age saw a gradual change from men being hunter-gatherers to becoming agriculturists. This external change also wrought many internal changes in human nature. Nature was not feared any longer although it was worshipped as a source of prosperity during sowing, reaping and harvesting seasons. Unlike earlier times when men prayed to the gods for preservation and safety, they now started praying for greater accumulation of wealth. According to *Bernal J.D.*, a commentator, the influence of the natural environment, animals, birds and the five elements was different in the previous hunting-gathering civilization and different in the new agrarian society. While nature was previously considered a force to fear, in later times (due to the dependence of agriculture on rain and sunshine) it became synonymous with good fortune and a source of wealth. People correlated the fertility of a woman giving birth to children, to the earth giving birth to living beings.

Thus although the basis of respect for the environment and its manifestation had changed, people in later-Vedic times still recognized that the environment was integral to their survival and prosperity. Human existence was still inextricably linked to the environment and people always surrounded themselves with nature. Yet the emergence of trade continued to proliferate and it was only a matter of time before degeneration set in. Ostentation and opulence began to be manifest.

The ruling class and other powerful people started devoting much more of their time to outer appearances, expensive attire and fine living than they did to prayer and meditation. Thus this new age is also termed the 'Arya' era, after the noblemen. Even in this age, society did not altogether divorce itself from the Supreme Being. Gods were prayed to in times of need. For example, when enemies attacked or the armies of neighbouring kingdoms invaded the Arya lands, they sought help from the Gods. It was then that the practice of praying to Indra (the God of War) started.

There are descriptions from that era of the armies of the Gods. Varuna, the deity of water, was the Commander-in-Chief, who was the one responsible for raising the skies so high and creating this unbridgeable distance between earth and the heavens above. He was also the one whose powers prevented the oceans from spilling over and flooding the earth, despite the ever increasing quantities of water that would flow into the oceans from all the rivers and streams. The Rig Veda has described Varuna as the supreme God who is responsible for charting out the earth's future and steering it along a predetermined path. One of its verses states that Varuna created the beauty in our forests, made the rocks strong so that we could build our hoes with them. Varuna's powers extended from making human beings righteous, to miracles like placing the burning sun in the sky to provide us a source of energy and sustenance.

Similarly, the Arya civilization also revered Agni, the deity of fire. Other deities whom they worshipped included the Sun God and the Goddess of Dawn and Dusk.

With time, the idea emerged that all Gods were a mere embodiment of one single Supreme Being.

By the end of the Vedic era, there was a growing knowledge that the Universe is one immense entity and that all the unknown forces in the Universe are actually different aspects of the same Cosmic force. The scripture interpreted this as all the smaller deities obeying the command of one Supreme Being. This resulted in a fall in the status of the minor-Gods. In fact, with time, most of the Vedic Gods were forgotten and their worship ceased. Most people forgot what powers such individual deities were vested with. For example Indra, who was the Deity of Lighting and Thunder was also revered for having the power to destroy cities in storms, protect cattle and even bless mankind with a bountiful harvest. But towards the end of the Vedic era, Indra was relegated to being merely the God of War and thus merely the deity of the Kshatriyas, the warrior class. Nevertheless the practice of praying to God and seeking his blessings persisted and exists in some form till today.

The Vedas are the best source of knowledge of ancient civilizations and they are replete with instances of how learned men in those times devoted their lives to understand the bond between nature and man. The very last volumes and annexures of the Vedas, which are also known as the *Upanishads* or *Aaranyakas*, also stress the

importance of prayer. For instance, the *Mundakopanishad* states that meditation and deep thinking expands the human consciousness which increases our productive capabilities. Thus we have foods that keep our minds healthy, we live in harmony with the five elements and we preserve our culture and our values. It implies that by adhering to these dharmic principles, we uphold virtue and move closer to immortality. The *Brihadaranyopanishad* describes the creation of the cosmos. It says: "In the beginning, there was water everywhere. It is from this water that Life originated. Lord Brahma guided all creation and appointed Prajapati, the King of all Gods. It was this Prajapati who then created the other gods, who in turn moulded the Life force into various shapes, colours and textures." This description is carried on in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, where the verse states that Universal Consciousness created the sky, the natural environment and Man, and that this one singular soul was imbibed by every single creature created. Thus we are all one. But perhaps the most significant verse, for the purposes of our present discussion, is one from the *Brihadaranyopanishad* that clarifies that this Universal Consciousness that is responsible for all creations, is none other than nature. The age of the Upanishads was followed by the age of 'Brahmanas', texts which elucidated aspects of human nature like the thirst for knowledge, wisdom, respect for others, gratitude and other conducts within human society. Once again people began directing all their energies towards social intercourse and the pursuit of happiness and became far removed from their natural surroundings. But the more people pursued pleasures, the more society was afflicted with violence, unhappiness, hurt, pain and general degradation. Power-structures fell into the hands of people who had no respect for nature and saw it merely as a source of personal riches. People, entrapped by greed and arrogance, began competing for these resources. Thus the age-old conflicts were reborn.

Once more, God came to the rescue of the Earth in the form of Lord Buddha and Lord Mahavira. Lord Buddha spread the message of peace, non violence, universal brotherhood and reminded people of the righteous path that they should follow to attain enlightenment. Lord Mahavira spread the same message and wrote, in one of his books entitled 'Ayaro', that mountains, trees, rocks, flowers, rain, soil and man are all made up of the same constituents. We share the same sprit and must, therefore, treat all other living creatures like we treat ourselves. He wrote that humans must be kind to all other residents of this miraculous planet and preached true non-violence. This great book contains the essence of all modern environmentalism, yet even those who proclaim themselves 'nature lovers' today do not adhere to the principles enshrined within this tome. For a time, perhaps only the Jain community upheld Lord Mahavira's ideals, but with time even this community has developed factions and sub-sects, thereby diluting its tenets.

As was the case with all the other avatars, the period that followed these holy men briefly saw a reinstatement of human values and virtue in society. People once more regarded nature as a powerful and eternal force. This was the period of the 'Saankhya' culture, which believed that nature is the source of all progress, and which has ushered man from one great age to another. This philosophy instructed man through its twenty-five tenets that all knowledge and prosperity is the product of nature, 'just as cream is the product of milk'. An ascetic named Kanaad Rishi studied atoms and molecules and wrote down how it is these very building blocks that created every single component of the earth. He said that everything on earth is made up of combinations of water, fire, air, sky, spirit, time, space, soul and mind. He demonstrated that atoms are not stable, and that matter cannot be created, nor destroyed. His attempt at dividing all materials substances into an elementary table preceded Mendeleev by many centuries. His divisions were simplistic, yet they demonstrate how ancient Indian culture possessed rich traditions of scientific scholarship. What is central to our analysis here is that he included the human soul in his list of the nine all-pervasive elements, and thereby laid a theoretical foundation for the intrinsic relation between man and his environment.

The age of Kautilya (Chankya) (370 BC–283 BC) saw the development of ideas of justice and law which have been written down in the seminal book the *Arthashastra*. Despite the *Arthashastra's* emphasis on material wealth and societal relations, it also mentions the five elements, water, fire, earth, wind and sky. The *Arthashastra* stressed that it was these natural elements that made up the entire cosmos, and that it was natural processes, not God which were responsible for life on earth. Towards the end of his life however, Kautilya did modify his views and make room for the role of the creator.

The Indian tradition of yoga also accords immense importance to the natural world around us. The essence of yoga is to concentrate and meditate on certain shlokas or prayers that help purify the mind, body and spirit. Over the years, yoga has emerged the most powerful mode of disciplining one's body and adhering to a natural lifestyle.

Conclusion

It is clear that Indian consciousness has always recognized the power and supremacy of nature. While things have changed for the worse over time and contemporary society is far removed from the environment, ancient India is a splendid contrast. Ancient civilization respected nature as reflected both in their lifestyles and the complex web of mythology and legends that have been passed down to us from those times. This love for nature coexisted with a deep reverence for God. At regular intervals in history, societies grew more complex and less intimate with nature. Yet each time that humankind forgot the power of nature, it was only divine intervention that prevented certain apocalypse. Today's society, unfortunately, is neither nature loving nor God-fearing. We worship only material wealth, and think nothing of exploiting our natural surroundings in order to increase this material wealth. Today we are standing on the verge of another great cataclysm but it feels unlikely that God will intervene this time to rescue a people who have forgotten him and have discarded their traditions so completely. It is the need of the hour that we look back into our past and adopt the rich traditions that will enable us to live in harmony with nature. We must rediscover our roots, value morality and strength of character more than we value money and we must strive to follow the ancients' path of virtue and righteousness, which will lead us to God.



Rajendra Singh is a well known water conservationist from Alwar district, Rajasthan in India. Also known as the "**Waterman of India**", he won the Ramon Magsaysay Award for community leadership in 2001 for his pioneering work in community-based efforts in water harvesting and water management. Using traditional wisdom, he has helped revive 7 extinct rivers in desert Rajasthan. In 2008, **The Guardian** named him amongst its list of "**50 people who could save the planet**".

<http://tarunbharatsangh.in>