

# A Devotee is an Environmentalist

By Dayananda das

- Every devotee is an environmentalist.
- Overconsumption of natural resources is the major problem.
- Vaishnava life has four things to combat overconsumption:
  1. All souls are equal
  2. Celebration of *līlā* and *nāma*
  3. Agrarian economy (*varṇa*)
  4. The joy of austerity (*āśrama*)
- Changing social values and adopting those four aspects will save the world
- Environmental destruction cannot be averted only through technologies, laws, and international treaties

## Every devotee is an environmentalist.

There are many scientific, political, and ideological discussions about environmental issues. Most leaders and intellectuals understand that humans must be restricted from overexploiting and destroying nature. However, they generally do not want to change materialistic society too much.

In contrast, devotees listen to Krishna's instructions and work daily to give up material life and embrace their higher nature. The topics below explain how devotees, not materialists, are the true environmentalists.

In other words, above all else, materialism is causing most environmental problems. Read on.

## Overconsumption

Overconsumption of natural resources is the major problem.<sup>1</sup> The media tend to focus on climate change, ocean pollution, soil degradation, and deforestation of the Amazon. Those are valid problems; however, mass overconsumption is at the root along with the waste and pollution accompanying it.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, consuming too many natural resources causes climate change, ocean pollution, soil degradation, Amazon deforestation, and many other issues.

Environmental scientists attempt to solve the problem of overconsumption by determining the maximum amount nature can produce to sustain humanity's needs. Then they urge politicians and other leaders to pass laws and establish values to cut overconsumption back to that optimum level.<sup>3</sup>

The devotee view is different. The *Isopanisad* urges devotees to accept the minimum required, not the maximum that nature can produce.

In verse 2.62 of the *Bhagavad-gita*, Krishna explains the mechanics of lust. He says contemplation of the sense objects provokes attachment to them (*saṅga*). From that attachment, lust (*kāma*) develops. Such lust may develop into anger and greed. Anger can be dissipated, but greed is all-devouring.<sup>4</sup>

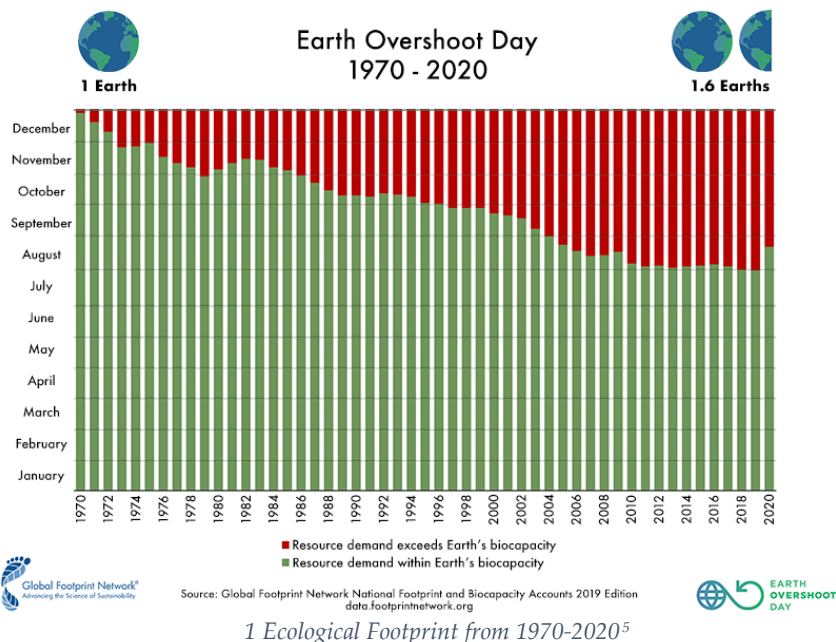
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<sup>1</sup> *Srimad Bhagavatam* (SB) 7.15.20: "Urges like hunger and thirst may be satisfied by food and water. Anger is dissipated by its expression and reaction. However, greed is different. Even if a greedy person conquers the world, he will not be satisfied."

<sup>2</sup> Almost all environmentalists agree that humans consume far too many natural resources. That concept appears over and over in the science literature. Here is one website that tracks consumption, calculated per capita, by country, and by year: <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/>. (Also reference [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological\\_footprint](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_footprint).) According to the data acquired by the Global Footprint Network, humans consume 1.6 times more than the earth can sustainably produce, meaning they currently need 1.6 earths to sustain their greed. Moreover, if all humans were to consume on the level of Americans, they would need five earths, or the biocapacity of five earths.

<sup>3</sup> For many reasons, it is difficult for scientists and politicians to address overconsumption. Foremost is that most of the world's population desire to overconsume. They constantly want more. And facilitating that desire is that the global economy is largely based on consumption. The concept of developed and developing countries is based on consumption. Industries and technologies encourage and enhance consumption.

<sup>4</sup> SB 7.15.20 purport



1 Ecological Footprint from 1970-2020<sup>5</sup>

To combat that greed or overconsumption, Krishna urges sense control to achieve the (*prasāda*) mercy of the Supreme.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, materialistic greed should be substituted by greed (*laulyam*) for Krishna consciousness (*kṛṣṇa-bhakti-rasa*).<sup>7</sup>

Those concepts from the *Gītā*, *Bhagavatam*, and *Caitanya-caritamṛta* are at the heart of *yoga* and Vedanta philosophy. Thus, most Vaishnavas are aware of them and follow them according to their own discipline in life. Some may not be familiar with chapter and verse. However, the basic concept of detachment from excessive material consumption and the attachment to glorifying Vishnu or Krishna pervades the Vaishnava culture.

Nearly all Vaishnavas practice some restraint. Thus, nearly all are environmentalists.

In contrast, modern society is not based on values that encourage detachment. In general, most people are not environmentalists. Some try to live sustainably. However, they usually attempt to do so by determining the maximum amount of sense gratification nature will sustainably allow. Their goal is not detachment. Instead, their goal is to enjoy their senses as much as nature will allow.

They are not on the level of environmentalism practiced by devotees.

### Vaishnava Life Combats Overconsumption:

For millennia, the Vaishnava community, as a collective whole, currently 750 million people,<sup>8</sup> has sought harmony with nature. Here are four essential ways:

<sup>5</sup> Global Footprint Network: <https://data.footprintnetwork.org/#/> Used according to Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

<sup>6</sup> *Bhagavad-gita* (BG) 2.64-65.

<sup>7</sup> *Caitanya-caritamṛta* (CC) Madhya 8.70

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, Todd M; Grim, Brian J (2013). *The World's Religions in Figures: An Introduction to International Religious Demography*. John Wiley & Sons. p. 400. "67.6% of Hindus identify as Vaishnavas." As of

## All Souls are Equal

Vaishnavas and other followers of Vedanta know that every living being has a soul, and all are equal. The *Gītā* (5.18) gives the example of the sage who sees the soul equally in a high-class person, low-class person, sacred cow, great elephant, and lowly, unclean dog.<sup>9</sup> In verse 18.54 of the *Gītā*, Krishna explains that an advanced devotee is equally disposed to all beings.

Those injunctions mean that all living beings have the right to live. At a minimum, devotees should not kill other beings, especially animals.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, not all 750 million Vaishnavas are advanced enough to treat all souls equally. However, most know that every life or living entity is a soul. Most know that killing even lowly entities is not ideal.

That mentality, which is part of Vaishnava culture, creates a barrier against human exploitation of nature.

## Celebration of *līlā* and *nāma*

As stated above, addiction to consumption is the problem. The solution is to celebrate the *līlās* and *nāmas* of Vishnu, Krishna, or Rama. Among Gauḍīya Vaishnavas, such celebration is called *saṅkīrtana*. However, *saṅkīrtana*, or glorification of Vishnu, does not belong solely to Gauḍīyas; it pervades all Vaishnava culture. Throughout the culture, one sees Vishnu glorified through festivals, temple and home worship, simple greetings like “*jai ram-ji ki*,” art, drama, architecture, etc.

In practical terms, the *saṅkīrtana* solution to overconsumption acts in two fundamental ways: *saṅkīrtana* enjoyment and *saṅkīrtana* economy:

### *Saṅkīrtana*

Srila Prabhupāda describes the promulgation of *kṛṣṇa-upadeśa* in two ways: 1) the *Bhagavad-gīta* contains the instructions of Krishna (*kṛṣṇasya-upadeśa*) and 2) *Srimad Bhagavatam* contains His glories (*kṛṣṇa-viṣayā-upadeśa*).

Thus, *saṅkīrtana* is of two types: that which spreads the knowledge of Krishna and that which glorifies Him. Furthermore, glorification may be divided into His *līlās* and names, which are almost synonymous. As mentioned above, glorification of His *līlās* and names pervades Vaishnava culture—roughly 750 million people. Caitanya Mahāprabhu especially exemplified that glorification; however, His devotees do not overlook His preaching and strategizing to establish Krishna’s instructions.

Again, the celebration of *līlās* and *nāmas* is a central feature of the art, sculpture, drama, dance, architecture, home and temple worship, and festivals of the entire Vaishnava community of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and beyond. In a broad sense, that may be called *saṅkīrtana*.

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2022, there are estimated to be 1.2 billion Hindus; 67.6% is 811 million Vaishnavas. In other words, 750 million is a conservative number.

<sup>9</sup> In ancient society the dog was an example of a lowly animal. Thus, Krishna appears to have used the dog to indicate that a sacred animal like the cow is equal in essence to the lowly dog—from one extreme to another.

<sup>10</sup> Jains, Buddhists, and followers of Vedanta all follow the basic principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence). <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahimsa>.

### *Saṅkīrtana Enjoyment*

Consumption is a social addiction. Those who suffer from addiction are often urged to find non-destructive enjoyment. Thus, regarding overexploitation of nature, modern society must find non-exploitative enjoyment.

Krishna explains that concept (*Gītā* 2.59): One may struggle to surmount material attachments, but it can be done by experiencing a higher taste. And Sri Caitanya Mahāprabhu explains that *saṅkīrtana* (Siksastaka 1) provides such enjoyment and increases it unlimitedly (*ānandāmbudhi-varadhanam*).

Many times, Prabhupāda explained that a child can be distracted from a dangerous plaything by substituting something harmless. Like children, the people of the world may avert their dangerous addiction by substituting non-exploitative *saṅkīrtana* enjoyment in place of their selfish exploitation of nature.

### *Saṅkīrtana Economy*

In several places in his purports and lectures, Srila Prabhupāda mentions giving 50% of wealth to *saṅkīrtana-yajña*. Especially in *Bhagavatam* 1.17, we learn that Kali resides in meat consumption, illicit sex, gambling, and intoxication. And the fifth place he resides is accumulated wealth.

One can observe how the wealthy, so-called advanced countries have gradually established economies over the last two hundred years that overexploit and destroy nature.<sup>11</sup> That is undoubtedly misuse of wealth. Such destruction is in the mode of ignorance.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, employing surplus funds for *saṅkīrtana-yajña* is non-destructive.

Note that redirecting money from overconsumption to *saṅkīrtana* is the practical, observable effect of *saṅkīrtana*. In other words, devotees are not just chanting mantras and praying for an improvement in the environment. They are taking money away from the cause of the destruction and engaging it properly.

Although some devotees are more advanced, all participate in a culture that has been treating nature gently for millennia. In comparison, modern, global culture, sometimes called Western culture, is guilty of ecocide.<sup>13</sup>

### *Indebtedness*

Prabhupāda explains that our natural resources come from the demigods. Thus, humanity is indebted to nature and its controllers.<sup>14</sup> It must acknowledge and repay that debt. However, most people in modern society attack nature and ignore the demigods. Those who oppose the demigods

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<sup>11</sup> Many environmentalists point out that the wealthy countries or so-called developed countries are the ones responsible for most of the environmental issues. However, politicians and others refuse to cut back on the wasteful and destructive standard of living in those countries. In fact, due to material attachment of the public, such restrictions seem impossible.

<sup>12</sup> SB 10.24.22: “The causes of creation, maintenance, and destruction are goodness, passion, and ignorance.”

<sup>13</sup> Ecocide is an internationally recognized legal term meaning “destruction of the natural environment by deliberate or negligent human action.”

<sup>14</sup> SB 6.5.37 purport: “Everyone is indebted to the demigods, to living entities in general, to his family, to the pitās and so on, but if one fully surrenders to Kṛṣṇa, Mukunda, who can give one liberation, even if one performs no *yajñas*, one is freed from all debts.”

are called *asuras*.<sup>15</sup> They either build defenses against the onslaught of nature or go on the offense by overexploiting nature.

Vaishnavas are demigods.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the demigods are our god-brothers and sisters. There is no conflict. Nevertheless, Vaishnavas do not directly worship (propitiate) the demigods; they honor them by performing *saṅkīrtana*.<sup>17</sup>

### Agrarian economy

The agrarian economy is the heart of Vaishnava culture. And for millennia, the heart of the agrarian economy has been *yajña*. Thus, the agrarian economy is entwined with *saṅkīrtana-yajña*.

In some countries, agriculture still contributes significantly to the economy. However, traditional rural life is gone. In that life, cottage industry and farm production supply the local villages and cities. Now, the six-hundred-year-old European Commercial Revolution has nearly wiped out the traditional economy.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the rise in socialism from the 19<sup>th</sup> century has vilified social classes.

Nevertheless, many Vaishnavas, especially the followers of Srila Prabhupāda, struggle to reestablish that traditional rural economy along with the *varṇa* or class system that Krishna has established.<sup>19</sup>

Based on the attempts of ISKCON devotees and others, one may practically observe that the *saṅkīrtana-yajña* economy is easier to implement than an agrarian economy. Fortunately, that aspect of the Vaishnava economy is still possible. And with a flourishing *saṅkīrtana* economy,<sup>20</sup> which naturally produces funds and youthful energy, rural communities must be developed for the long-term basis of the *saṅkīrtana* movement.<sup>21</sup>

*Daiva-varṇāśrama dharma* establishes the fertile field in which the seeds of bhakti grow.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The demigods are called *suras*. Those who ignore or oppose them are *asuras*.

<sup>16</sup> SB 8.5.24, translation and purport

<sup>17</sup> CC Madhya 22.141 – translation and purport

<sup>18</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commercial\\_Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commercial_Revolution)

<sup>19</sup> BG 4.13 – *catur varṇyam*, four classes

<sup>20</sup> As of this writing, such a flourishing *saṅkīrtana* economy does not exist. In the U.S., a mid-size company has revenue of \$40 million to \$1 billion. *Saṅkīrtana* revenue in the U.S., the richest country in the world, remains on the level of a small company. In comparison to such revenue, which is only a few million, the book distribution revenue of the Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) is \$70-\$100 million. Note, however, that such comparison is not a criticism of devotee leadership. It is meant to illustrate that we devotees must all work together to increase *saṅkīrtana*. And that can be done through environmental preaching. Devotees must preach that *saṅkīrtana* is the social and economic revolution that will solve environmental issues. In other words, *saṅkīrtana* must replace modern economies and penetrate the heart of society. That is the revolution Prabhupāda envisioned.

<sup>21</sup> Rabindranatha Dasa Adhikari, *Questions and Answers on Varnasrama and Other Aspects of Vedic Knowledge*, CreateSpace, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> The seed of devotional service (*bhakti-lata-bija*, CC Madhya 19.151-152) must be watered and cultivated through *śravaṇa* and *kīrtana* (hearing and chanting). Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakur comments that such cultivation is facilitated through association (*saṅga*) that he describes as the field in which the seed is planted. That *saṅga* may certainly be a small group, but a fertile field may be implemented in society on a larger scale by establishing *daiva-varṇāśrama*.

## Joy of austerity

Farming and local commerce sustain Vaishnava communities. Those communities are predominantly organized according to the functions of the *varṇas*.

The *āśramas* are mostly designed to reduce attachment to material life and direct society toward service to Krishna.

*Brahmacārīs*, *vānaprasthas*, and *sannyāsīs* practice and teach austerity.<sup>23</sup> They also offer an example to householders, who are allowed regulated sense gratification. Austerity is a critical component of Vedic and Vaishnava society; it is an essential part of any worthy endeavor.

However, Prabhupāda uses the example of Visvamitra to emphasize that austerity cannot be forced.<sup>24</sup> Transcendental enjoyment is the basis of austerity. Such enjoyment replaces the attachment to material enjoyment.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it roots out the very seed of material desire. Thus, every society is responsible for establishing vehicles that teach and maintain austerity.

Vaishnava society, through the *āśramas*, is structured to encourage austerity, tolerance of duality,<sup>26</sup> and detachment from material life.

In contrast, modern society abhors austerity. Nobody enjoys it. The youth are not taught its virtues. And the old are encouraged to satisfy their failing senses until death, like drawing blood from a turnip. Those are observable facts.

## Changing values

Dharma establishes the values or principles of proper living.<sup>27</sup> The world's great religions establish religious principles that curb greed and lust for material life.<sup>28</sup> However, modern societies have abandoned them. Democracy, science, socialism, humanism, and capitalism are not adequate doctrines to control greed and overconsumption. Some of them provide justice in human society. Still, they have not been successful in averting the current overexploitation of nature.

This point cannot be emphasized enough. Common people, including some devotees, think that socialists, liberals, scientists, or politicians have reasonable solutions. They do not. None of them has a solution to greed. Only religions have addressed greed, and most in modern, global culture have put aside religions or their restrictions.<sup>29</sup>

And it is too late for new technologies, laws, and international treaties. Those all may be successful on a limited basis, but their solutions are superficial.

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<sup>23</sup> BG 18.5. Austerity must never be given up.

<sup>24</sup> Prabhupāda lecture on BG 4.1, Montreal, 1968.

<sup>25</sup> BG 2.59

<sup>26</sup> BG 2.15

<sup>27</sup> Prabhupāda often calls them religious principles, in general, meaning the principles of *varnāśrama dharma* or Aryan civilization.

<sup>28</sup> Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Luke); Quran.

<sup>29</sup> This concept is difficult for many to accept. Liberals, politicians, and technologists cannot control overconsumption. They may try, but ultimately, they cannot. In my book, discussed on the last page, I explain more fully. Only religions can be successful in controlling greed. And even they have difficulty doing so. The Vaishnava culture, with its essential components discussed above, is the best chance for humanity. It is the superior dharma.

Society's values must change. Dharma is the only way society may be truly regulated.<sup>30</sup> Dharma provides proper guidance to uplift the animal nature of human culture. That dharma is *daiva-varṇāśrama*, which establishes a fertile field and directs humanity toward *para-dharma* or bhakti.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Devotees strive to become detached from material life, which includes excessive consumption. When they chant *japa*, they try to avoid the tenth offense, which is maintaining attachment to material life. Devotees respect those who are examples of austerity, like *brahmacārīs* and *sannyāsīs*.

At a minimum, devotees restrict themselves from the activities that fan the fire of materialism—meat-eating, illicit sex, intoxication, and gambling.

Devotees participate in glorifying Krishna through temple and home worship, public and private festivals, chanting, dancing, art, drama, architecture, music, propagation of Krishna's instructions and glories, and much more. All those processes of bhakti are components of *yajña*. *Yajña*, at the heart of a healthy society, is meant to transform material attachment into spiritual attachment.<sup>32</sup>

Pure service to Krishna does not exploit nature. Not all devotees are pure. Some exploitation is inevitable; however, one's identity as a devotee of Krishna, even an imperfect one, includes identification as an environmentalist.

*Saṅkīrtana* is not just a personal choice or a private religion. *Saṅkīrtana* involves social revolution; it is designed to change society.<sup>33</sup> The observable feature of such change is harmony with nature. The subtle feature is advancement in Krishna consciousness for the entire society.

Preaching Vaishnava environmentalism communicates pure Krishna consciousness. It places the core philosophy in the language of a crisis that will continue forever. That crisis is the desire of humans to sink to the level of animals and discard dharma. The result of such crisis, which is essentially attraction to *māyā* and the desire to exploit her, is chaos. Today and tomorrow, it is called environmental destruction.

And *saṅkīrtana* is the solution.

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<sup>30</sup> Prabhupāda often quotes the *Hitopadesa* (25) *āhāra-nidrā-bhaya-maithunam ca sāmānyam etat paśubhir narāṇām dharmo hi teṣhāmadhiko viśheṣho dharmeṇa hīnāḥ paśubhiḥ samānāḥ*, meaning "Humans and animals eat, sleep, mate, and defend. However, *dharmo* is unique to humans and without it, they are animals." This same concept is also in the Mahabharata.

<sup>31</sup> SB 1.2.6

<sup>32</sup> BG 3.9; SB 7.14.14, 4.7.41, and 4.27.10.

<sup>33</sup> SB 1.5.11: "On the other hand, that literature which is full with descriptions of the transcendental glories of the name, fame, form and pastimes of the unlimited Supreme Lord is a transcendental creation meant to bring about a revolution in the impious life of a misdirected civilization. Such transcendental literatures, even though irregularly composed, are heard, sung and accepted by purified men who are thoroughly honest."



## The Environmental Solution by Michael Wright (Dayananda)

### What it is

This is a textbook on Vaishnava environmentalism. The above article contains the essence of the book. However, the book develops the concepts here and presents many scientific arguments in favor of implementing Vaishnava culture.

### Who it is for

The audience is intended to be young people concerned about the environment. It is a text that can be used in schools, especially colleges. It can also be used to teach young Vaishnavas. Most important, it can be studied by devotee preachers who wish to understand how to convince others about the social relevance of Krishna consciousness.

### What it contains

The book is divided into three sections: 1) Theory of Knowledge, which shows the superiority of Vaishnava (Vedanta) thought and the inadequacy of modern systems like empirical science, democracy, socialism, and humanism. 2) World cultures, which examines the major cultures and their relationship with nature, Vaishnava culture being the most harmonious. 3) Environmental science, which is a typical entry-level course on the science with Vaishnava-Vedanta commentary.

### Why

The book forms the basis of environmental preaching/teaching for any devotee. It can also be transformed into a revolutionary social manifesto.

*The Environmental Solution* may be downloaded by permission from [info2@gita108.com](mailto:info2@gita108.com). Copies are currently available to qualified teachers, preachers, environmentalists, reviewers, and academics.

Also, address any general questions or comments to [info2@gita108.com](mailto:info2@gita108.com).

