

# **THE CHALLENGES OF THE VALUES OF RELIGION IN THE ANTHROPOCENE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Human crimes are unending. They have been adjudicated on all possible grounds, sometimes convicted and sometimes let free. Human conceived and manipulated society and polity have been big players of the game that have the power of transformation and devastation. Unfortunately, the human tentacles have started to grab and exploit the creator and the preserver Mother Nature that everything is being permanently altered. Now days, months, years, decades and centuries are becoming witnesses of the greatest human crime that is violently disrupting the planet's climate. The changes are becoming apparent now and would continue in the coming times. Is it not a moral and legal duty to prevent the deleterious effects of climate change? Duty to truth and the obligation to avoid those actions that harm others are powerful and irrevocable principles that are firmly rooted in the universal framework of legal and ethical codes. Its time to assess the damage done. The age of the Anthropocene has already begun. Human beings like all other species are vulnerable and bound to perish before time. Temperatures are rising, volcanoes are erupting, earthquakes are ravaging. The Earth's happy years of climatic stability and clemency known as the Holocene have virtually come to an end. The human beings are permanently changing the earth.*

**Keywords:** *Anthropocene, climate, devastation, ecology, human activity*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

It's time to label the human epoch on earth as my mind begins to fill with images of melting glaciers, burning forests, rising seas and other disastrous climatic changes on the one hand, and visualizing the realities of filling the world with waste, converting green pastures into concrete structures, testing unendingly nuclear bomb explosions, speeding up the earth's chemical conveyor belts and preparing the world ruthlessly for a mass extinction of flora and fauna on the other. Everyone can undoubtedly come to a heinous conclusion that all these are tangible consequences of our cumulative impact on the earth. It's time to question, with all seriousness, that have human beings permanently changed the planet? Then, it must compel everyone to self-introspect that what it is to be human in a world that is at once profoundly impacted by us, largely beyond our control, and normally always exceeding our comprehension, and failing to develop a compelling normative template for action.

What devastation have we done and how inhabitable are we making our planet? Scientist have begun to debate whether humanity's wear and tear of the planet qualifies the end of an epoch and beginning of another? A new battle is being visible between the environmentalists and the geologists. The International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS), the professional organization in charge of defining the earth's time scale announced that we

are currently in the Holocene epoch which began almost 11700 years ago after the last major ice age. However, other experts refute the arguments saying that Holocene epoch transition into the Anthropocene has already taken place because it is an epoch of a catastrophic human- led change that threatens earth's future.

The idea that human activities have the power to affect the Earth's system was recognized in the late 1800s by the geologist Antonio Stoppani, who coined the term 'Anthropozoic Era' to highlight the destabilization of key planetary systems. The term 'Anthropocene' was first used by Eugene Stoermer, and subsequently popularized by the atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize laureate Paul Crutzen. Crutzen dates the beginning of the Anthropocene to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when atmospheric concentrations of methane and carbon dioxide began to rise significantly. Few others suggest that the Anthropocene could be dated to as long as 8000 years, driven by clearing of forests and diminishing agriculture. However, the 18<sup>th</sup> century date seems a reasonable compromise, as this date coincides with the invention of the steam engine and the industrial revolution, and also corresponds to increased carbon emissions by humans. But two recent research papers suggested that the Anthropocene epoch could be pinned down to a precise moment on 16 July 1945, the day the world witnessed the first nuclear bomb explosion in Alamogordo in New Mexico. This was soon to be followed by the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs in August 1945, and other bombs detonated at the average rate of one every 9.6 days until 1988, that produced such markers across the globe in the form of radionuclides that can be found in all continents and in the polar ice on both poles.([thehindu.com/sci-tech](http://thehindu.com/sci-tech) January21,2015)

In another paper in the 'Anthropocene Review', scientists suggested unprecedented global shifts that resulted in average global surface temperature increase by nearly 0.9 degree Celsius with atmospheric concentrations of three greenhouse gases, namely, carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane. Their increasing levels are such alarmingly dangerous that may lead to a biodiversity loss approaching mass extinction rates. The entire story is beginning to moralize that the risk of destabilizing the global environment is obviously also increasing the risks for human well-being. However, the self-evident truth is that the Anthropocene may soon become an official epoch, since a proposal to formalize it had already been made to the Stratigraphy Commission of the Geological Society of London in 2008. The decision may be announced in 2016 itself.([abc.net.au/religion/articles](http://abc.net.au/religion/articles))

But whatever the debate, as Whitney Autin, a stratigrapher at the SUNY college of Brockport says that 'Anthropocene is more about pop culture than hard science', it is definitely a strong reminder to the general public that we are now having undeniable impacts on the environment at the scale of the planet as a whole, so much so that a new geological epoch has begun. The human-nature relationship is in need of a transformation so as to endure sustainable future development. However, our biggest shortcoming is rested on the reality that we do not have enough data and comprehensive understanding of the resilience and stability in the biophysical system.

If we move step by step, we will realize that climate change has the potential to affect every aspect of our economy and society. Suggestions had started coming in decades back that the Earth is conveying enough warnings for its residents to react and act. Hurricanes, heat waves, droughts, tsunamis, cloud-bursts and the et.al. are bound to increase in number, intensity and frequency. Predicting the impacts is difficult as the likely effects are not uniform in either location or direction. The devastation is manifest in-

- Ozone depletion
- Atmospheric aerosol loading

- Ocean acidification
- Receding global fresh water
- Land system changes
- Loss of bio-diversity
- Chemical disasters
- River pollution via industrial wastes and sewerage flows.

Needless to say, humans are having significant effects at a global scale, and the magnitude of these effects is sufficient to suggest that we have entered a new geological epoch, ANTHROPOCENE.

However, as we assess Anthropocene only as an environmental issue, the arguments would not rest here as religious endeavours of human beings must also bear the burden of guilt for the contemporary environmental crisis. Going by the words of Iranian-American philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ‘the environmental crisis of values and that religions being a primary source of values in any culture, are thus implicated in the decisions humans make regarding the environment.’ There is a strong tradition of nature worship interwoven with the basic fabric of the Indian society. However, man’s reckless pursuit has led to so many disruptions like pollutions, alterations and depletions of natural ecosystems.

## II. THE HIMALAYAN PILGRIMAGE: A CASE STUDY

Let us take the case of religious journeys in the Himalayas. The Himalayas undoubtedly constitute a remarkably unique geographical and geological system comprising a diverse environmental entity. Being the youngest mountain chain on earth, it is believed that the Himalayan range is still evolving, and is yet to fully stabilize from a geomorphological and geological point of view. Any alteration in the environment, therefore, is likely to have cascading effects not only for the region but also for the other areas downstream. The special vulnerabilities of this ecologically fragile region have been widely recognized, as have its rich and unique natural resources in terms of forests, biodiversity and the potential for tourism. The region, often described as the “Abode of Gods”, is facing severe environmental degradation on account of continuous human movement. Being a home of saints, seekers of peace and enlightenment and a favoured destination of pilgrimage since times immemorial as it hosts a number of religious/sacred sites across the region, each year, millions of pilgrims visit these sites. That include Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri- Yamnotri and Hemkund Sahib, Jwala Devi, Chintpurni, Naina Devi, Vaishnav Devi, Amarnath and the et.al. However, the misfortune is that most of these places lack adequate facilities of transport, accommodation, waste disposal and other amenities for the ever growing number of pilgrims that visit them every year. Also, there is a gross lack of regulatory mechanism for infrastructure creation, management, and for controlling the tourist inflow in such sites. As a result the sensitive ecosystems and cultural values of these areas are facing pressures far beyond their carrying capacities. Rampant constructions in the last three to four decades near the river banks have also accentuated the problem. The situation is becoming dangerously fragile and out of control. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop and implement guidelines for sustainable pilgrimage in the region encompassing the concept of carrying capacity of the area. Who can dare to forget the fury of the floods in Uttarakhand in 2013, that also cautioned humanity against indiscriminate use of the region. The Environmentalists also blamed the volume of the disaster on the

dams, indiscriminate construction in an effort to urbanize the facilities, uncontrolled tourism and total ignorance of ecology.

The impact of tourism on mountain ecosystems and biological resources are of great concern because of the high biodiversity and environmental sensitivity of the Himalayas. Pilgrimage as a form of travel provides opportunities for people to visit sacred places and is a feature common to almost all societies. The key elements of pilgrimage are motivation, destination and journey. Traditionally speaking, the devout pilgrim, driven by a strong religious or spiritual motivation, is expected to accomplish the journey on foot, a long journey that is reinforced by a sense of renunciation of worldly matters. Once at the sacred site (temples or sacred objects), the pilgrim generally performs rituals in fulfillment of the purpose for which such travel is taken, 'seeing and being seen' by the God (or the sacred) being one of the important acts. Though pilgrimage is primarily an individually motivated journey, it also is a mass movement when viewed in terms of magnitude and frequency of such travel (Stoddard, 1997). Vehicular traffic has also phenomenally increased in the past few decades due to increased accessibility and improvement in transport infrastructure. Surprisingly, they are not just religious journeys, but are turning out to be family vacation time as people of all ages are seen enroute to these sacred spots (Gladstone, 2005; Rinschede, 1992). The scholarly discussion on discerning similarities and differences between the two forms of travel, pilgrimage and tourism, that has dominated the literature (Cohen, 1992; Graburn, 2001; Smith, 1992; Smith & Brent, 2001),

The environmental issues are more significant in the Indian context, where more than 100 million Indians embark on pilgrimages each year (Times of India, 2001), thereby contributing largely also to domestic tourism (Aramberri, 2004; Gladstone, 2005; Richter, 1989). These impacts typically include short-term peak demands exerting stress on basic services, accumulation of huge quantities of residuals (wastes), high levels of pollution and clearing of land (and forests in many places) for creating temporary accommodation facilities and amenities for pilgrims.

Owing to the periodic and occasional nature of traditional pilgrimage, such environmental impacts are most likely to peak and then dissipate overtime in and around the pilgrimage centres. This is illustrated in the example of Hemkunt Sahib, a Sikh pilgrimage centre situated in the mountainous region of Himalayas in north India that attracts more than 150,000 pilgrims during a period of four months in a year. During this time, problems such as accumulation of huge amount of non-biodegradable waste (plastic and glass cups, polythene etc.), water pollution (due to inadequate sewerage facilities), deforestation due to harvesting of firewood, and destruction of flora and fauna are reported (SHSST, 1999). Another problem relates to overcrowding, congestion and stampedes which usually get a lot of media attention.

In the contemporary context, however, many of the short term problems accumulate and intensify with a constant influx of visitors. The complex repercussions that this has on the environment are determined by two factors.

First, the magnitude and pattern of visitation and the nature of activities undertaken by the visitors.

Second, frequent visitation generates a lot of economic opportunities in establishment of services such as hotels, restaurants, religious paraphernalia and souvenir shops, travel agencies and other businesses that cater primarily to visitors. Such demand for services leads to rapid urbanization of the place (Mohanty, 1995; Rinschede, 1997). Since many pilgrimage centers have traditionally been small towns (Turner, 1973), rapid

urbanization brings in its own environmental pressures such as high stress on infrastructure by burgeoning population, loss of forests to real estate development, depletion of water supply, increasing traffic congestion and so on.

Gopal Krishna, an executive from an NGO Toxics Watch Alliance, rigidly and sternly commented that all ongoing development projects in the mountains need to be reviewed, and the footfall revisited. All those who wish to urbanise nature must comprehend the geological reality also. He declared, 'This is not development, it is vandalism. The government and agencies are being myopic.'([newsbharati.com/Encyc/2013](http://newsbharati.com/Encyc/2013)).It's time we understand that eco-sensitive zones like the Himalayas need to be preserved for the survival of humanity itself. Construction of dams, roads and townships has gone beyond the carrying capacity of our huge savior who regulates our climate and thereby our lives.

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