

Ancient Indian Perspective on Environment

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Abstract

Modern world is experiencing various environmental disasters due to the overexploitation of natural resources to satisfy the zeal of maximizing profit and to keep in tune with the technological advancement. This also resulted in the growing consciousness among a good section of people for the conservation of natural resources and keeping the ecological balance. In this context it is to be mentioned that people in ancient India had a fairly good understanding of ecology and this aspect is reflected in various Indian scriptures and literatures. The Vedas put great importance to the protection of environment and maintenance of purity. Instead of exploiting nature it teaches human beings to live in harmony with nature and also to recognize the divine soul prevailing in all living and non-living elements. Vedic culture and scriptures have profoundly stated about ecosystems and the requirement for maintaining the balance. The practice of “Vanmahotsava” (Tree Plantation Ceremony) is mentioned in the Matsya Puran. Agnipuran states that the plantation of trees and creations of gardens lead to eradication of sin. In Padma Puran (56.40-41) the cutting of a green tree is considered as an offence punishable in hell. Other Vedic scriptures and in the epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* there are several references of protection of environment and maintenance of ecological balance. This paper will investigate this aspect and will explore the possibility of getting a way out of this burning issue of ecological imbalance from the ancient scriptures and literatures.

Keywords: environmental disasters, ecological balance, Indian scriptures, Vedas, Purans, epics

Modern world is experiencing various environmental disasters due to the overexploitation of natural resources to satisfy the zeal of maximizing profit and to keep in tune with the technological advancement. This also resulted in the growing consciousness among a good

section of people for the conservation of natural resources and keeping the ecological balance. Environment activists in various parts of the globe are harnessing people for the cause of the protection of environment so as to avoid any further disaster. In this context it is to be mentioned that people in ancient India had a fairly good understanding of ecology and this aspect is reflected in various Indian scriptures and literatures.

In the *Atharva Veda* (Prithvi Sukta, slok no.12), the Vedic seer talks about the adoring bond between human being and the Earth: “Mata Bhumi Putroham Prithivyah”; meaning “the Earth is my mother, I am her son.” This single statement itself signifies that the Vedic society was the first that talked about Environment and its protection in the history of human civilization. Veda states that everything in the world, whether living or non-living, has life in it. The gods in Vedas are the gods of nature - the worldly gods like Prithvi (Earth), Agni (Fire), Brihaspati (Flora and Fauna) and Soma (Nectar), the atmospheric gods like Indra (King of the gods), Rudra (Eliminator of evil), Maruts (Storm), Vayu (Wind) and Parjanya (Rain) and the extraterrestrial gods like Dyaus (Sky), Varuna (Ocean), Ushas (Dawn) and Asvins (gods of vision). This obviously shows that in ancient India human beings used to live in alliance with nature and environment and this was also integrally connected with their rituals and spiritual life.

All four Vedas - the *Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva* recognize the importance of nature or environment. It is something significant that the Vedic people regarded nature and the environment in a holistic manner and worshiped each of its elements and entities. The Vedic concept of Panch Mahabhutas explains that the five elements - Earth, Air, Space, Water and Fire makes life on earth which are connected with *Adhivoutik, Adhidaivik* and *Adhyamtik* services of human being towards all living and non-living objects of the creation and the objective of it is “Sarvajanahitay Sarvajansukhay”. In this context, *Upanishads* talks about the interdependence of these five elements in relation to *Brahman* or *Paramatman*, from which they arise: “From Brahman arises space, from space arises air, from air arises fire, from fire arises water, and from water arises earth” (Jain, 2011). These Five Mahabhutas are cosmic elements which create, nurture and sustain all forms of life, and after death or decay they absorb what was created

earlier; thus they play an important role in preserving and sustaining the environment. (Dwivedi, 2001)

Vedas are the great sources of knowledge in Ancient India. The great sage Krishnadwaipayana Vedavyasa codified and put the *Vedas* into writing after the great Kurukshetra war. Initially these were in the form of *Shruti* (oral) which include: *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, and *Atharva Veda* which used to pass on from master to disciple. Originally the *Shruti Vedas* consisted of four collections of *mantras* (*Samhitas*), but gradually with each of these *Samhitas*, three more texts were attached: the *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, and *Upanishads*. In some of these *Aranyakas* (*aranya* in Sanskrit means forest) and the *Brhadaranyaka* (Great Forest) *Upanishad* we find the reference of ecology and concern for environment.

Regarding the protection of environment the great seer of *Rig Veda* says:

“madhu vātāḥ ṛitāyate madhu kṣaranti sindhavaḥ
mādvih naḥ santuṣadhi.
madhu naktamutusāsu madhumatpārthiva rajah
madhu kṣorastu suryah
mādhirgābo bhavantu naḥ”

(*Rigveda*,1/90/6,7,8)

(Environment provides bliss to people leading their life perfectly. Rivers bless us with sacred water and provide us health, night, morning, vegetation. Sun blesses us with peaceful life. Our cows provide us milk)

Striking the same cord, the *Yajur Veda* says:

Yantu Nadayo Varshantu Parjanyaah, Supippalaa Oshadhayo Bhavantu,
Annavataam Odanavataam Amikshyavataam, Eshaam Raaja Bhuuyaasam
Odanmudbruvate. Parameshtii Vaa Eshah Yadodanah.
Paramaamevainam Shriyam Gamayati.

(May the rivers flow and the clouds give rain. May the plants yield good harvest. May I become the king of all those having plenty of food, boiled rice, curd and milk. Food is

praiseworthy. This food is verily Brahma the creator. This will lead to the greatest prosperity in the form of health and wealth.)

This mantra tells us of the importance of environment in human life, the role of nature and people who produce the food. It equates the process of food production by farmers with the act of God's creation of the universe; it is the God who created the water, the plants, and the farmers who produce food for us. The Vedic seer is profoundly telling the humanity to respect God's creation of nature which will bring peace and prosperity.

In ancient Indian scriptures all the elements of nature are considered as divine and humankind was expected to respect and protect them. In Kshama Prarthana sloka (seeking forgiveness) which is mentioned in Nandikeshvara's *Abhinaya Darpanam* (a 2nd century AD text on stage craft), the forgiveness of the Earth is sought before touching it.

Samudra-Vasane Devi Parvata-Stana-Mannddale |

Vissnu-Patni Namas-Tubhyam Paada-Sparsham Kssamasva-Me ||

(Oh Mother Earth) The Devi who is having ocean as Her garments and mountains as Her bosom, who is the consort of Sri Vishnu, I bow to you; please forgive me for touching you with my feet.

Environment was considered as an affable abode in the Vedic literature. In Prithvi Sukta of *Atharva Veda*, the Vedic seer is seeking the forgiveness of the Mother Earth for any kind of unintentional action leading to her excessive exploitation, "Whatever I dig from thee, O Earth, may that have quick recovery again. O purifier, may we not injure thy vitals or thy heart", (Hymn No-12, Sloka No-34). The Vedas put great importance to the protection of environment and maintenance of purity. Instead of exploiting nature it teaches human beings to live in harmony with nature and also to recognize the divine soul prevailing in all living and non-living elements. A verse from *Rig Veda* Says, "the sky is like father, the earth like mother and the space as their son. The universe consisting of the three is like a family and any kind of damage done to any one of the three throws the universe out of balance."

Vedic culture and scriptures have profoundly stated about ecosystems and the requirement for maintaining the balance. Another verse from *Rig Veda* says “Thousands and hundreds of years if you want to enjoy the fruits and happiness of life, then take up systematic planting of trees.” The *Yajur Veda* too mentions about nature-man relationship, “No persons should kill animals helpful to all” (13.37). “O King you should never kill animals like bullocks useful in agriculture or like cows which gives us milk and all other helpful animals and must punish those who kill or do harm to such animals” (13.49). “The oceans are treasure of wealth, protect them” (38.22); “Don’t poison (pollute) water and do not harm or cut the trees (6.33); “Do not disturb the sky and do not poison the atmosphere” (5.43).

The Vedic seers were believed to be ‘Trikalagnos’ (one who can see past, present and future) and this made them to create an awareness regarding the importance of water and its conservation which is one of the most important components of environment. The Vedic seer in *Rig Veda* says: “the water from heaven, the water from the spring, the bright pure water which tends to the sea, may these divine waters protect us here.” (7: 49: 2) They had the knowledge of the ecosystem and it is perceived in the following Sloka of *Atharva Veda* which talks about the water cycle: “Waters from the ocean to the sky they carry up, they who pour from the sky upon the earth...” (4:27:4). The *Chandogya*, one of the principal Upanishads says: “The rivers - all discharge their waters into the sea. They lead from sea to sea; the clouds raise them to the sky as vapour and release them in the form of rain.....” (Bhattacharya, 2008) These aforesaid two slokas are probably the oldest reference of hydrological cycle. In *Ishopanishad*, another prominent Upanishads, the concepts of sustainable development and conservation of environment were stated:

“īśhāvāṣhyamidān sarvaṅ yatkinchān jagatyaṅ jagat
tena tyaktena bhūnjithā mā gṛidhaḥ kashyacidghanam” (Ishopanisad-1)

(All in this manifested world consisting of moving and non-moving are covered by the lord. Use its resources with restraint. Do not grab the property of others- distant and yet to come.”)

The Vedic seer's importance given to water which is the source of life for all living beings including plants later developed a cultural tradition of pilgrimage on the banks of rivers which has given the status of goddess. An important part of the beginning of any ritual or visiting a temple in Hinduism is the purification of the entire body. It not only purifies one's body but also the mind. Such purification bathing is done in the sacred waters of some great rivers of India like Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati etc. and this is considered to be auspicious. The following Shloka talks about this particular aspect which is also connected with man's integral connection with the environment:

“Gange cha Yamune chaiva Godavari Saraswati |
Narmade Sindhu Kaveri jalesmin sannidhim kuru ||”

(In this water, I invoke the presence of holy waters from the rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri.)

The seer in the *Rig Veda* compares trees to human beings, Gods etc. They prayed to *Indra* (The King of gods) not to separate trees from the forests and the sons from their fathers (8/1/13). In the *Vṛkṣāyurveda*, planting a tree is considered to be equally beneficial as having ten sons:

“dasakūpa sama vāpi dasa vāpi sama hradah
dasahrada samah putro dasaputra sama drumah”

(*Vṛksayurvedah-5*)

Atharva Veda states that trees provide us the life and thus save us. It categorically says that trees eliminate pollution.

virudho vaisavadevih ugrah purusajivanih (6.7.4)

ugra ya visadhiusanih osadhTh (6.7.10)

Both the *Rig Veda* and the *Yajur Veda* mention that tree, like a mother, saves our earth and give us milk in the form of *pranavayu*. They give man, life and also destroy the pollution of atmosphere. Tree is mentioned as:

osadhTriti matarah (YV 12.761), (RV. 10.97.4)

virudhah parayisnavah (YV 12.771), (RV.10.97.3)

Sukla Yajur Veda also says the same: '*Osadyaste mulam ma himsisam*' (1.25) Even if it becomes necessary to cut a tree, *Yajur Veda* advises to request the tree so that the ecological balance is not disturbed: “*dyam ma abhilekhih /antariksam ma himsih /prthivyam sambhava*”

More such references of preservation of environment are found in the Vedas, viz. “Do not cut trees, because they remove pollution.” (*Rig Veda*, 6:48:17) “Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere.” (*Yajur Veda*, 5:43)

Tulshi, Pippala and Vataṛkṣa have great importance in the Vedic period and there are many *slokas* on the importance of these trees:

“jābadināni tulashi rūpitāpi jad grihe grihe.

tābadvarṣha sahasrāni vaikunthe sa mahīyate” (*Vṛkṣhāyurveda-9*)

(He will live in Heaven for so many years as the *Tulsi* Plant will be in his house for the equal numbers of days).

About the Vataṛkṣa, *Atharvaveda* says:

“aśwatthu devasadanastriyashamityo divi.

tatramṛitayasyo śakhan deva kushthamavanwat” (*Atharvaveda,5/4/3*)

(It is prohibited to cut Vataṛkṣa because gods live in this tree and no disease will come where this tree is planted)

The *Oṣodhi Sukta* of *Rig Veda* addresses tree as mother: ‘O mother! Hundreds are your birth places and thousand are your shoots’: “*śatan bu ambā dhāmoni sahashramutta tu ruhaḥ*” (*Rig Veda,10/97/2*)

In *The Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna says that he accepts the offerings in the forms of objects of nature from his devotee: “Patram Pushpam Phalam Toyam, Yo Mey Bhaktya Prayachchati Tadaham Bhakt Yupahrutam Asnaami Prayataatmanaha” (9.26) (I Accept A Leaf, Flower, Fruit Or Water Or Whatever Is Offered With Devotion).

The practice of “Vanmahotsava” (Tree Plantation Ceremony) is mentioned in the *Matsya Puran*. *Agnipurān* states that the plantation of trees and creations of gardens lead to eradication of sin. In *Padma Puran* (56.40-41) the cutting of a green tree is considered as an offence punishable in hell.

“Vṛkshamschitvā pasun hatvā kṛtvā
Rudhira kurdamam
Yaddeva gamyate svargam narakam kena
Gamayate?”

(By cutting the trees and killing the animals, if someone aspires to go to the heaven, which is the way to hell?)

Manusmriti also speaks about the protection of environment: “Do not excrete into water, do not spit or throw dirty substances, blood or poison into water”. The statement itself gives importance to the conservation of water resources. “In spite of the difficulty imposed upon self one must walk after seeing the path meticulously, to protect the smaller creatures like ants etc.” (6.68) The eighth chapter of *Manusmriti* gives an account of various amounts of fines to be imposed for killing different types of animals.

Yajnavalkya, the last Vedic seer and the grand disciple of Krishnadwaipayana Vedavyasa, recommended penalties for the intentional damage to vegetation. In the Vyavahara – adhyaya of his classic work *Yajnavalkya Samhita*, he prescribes the various levels of fines to be imposed for harming animals and vegetation (verse 225-229). The verse no. 226 states:

“Lingasya chedane mṛtoyu madhyamo
Mulyameva ca!
Mahapasunameteshu sthāneshu
Dviguno damaó!!”

(Cutting the genitals of or killing the small animals will attract 500 panas and the value of the animals to be reimbursed to its owner by the offender. In case for bigger animals like cow, horse, elephant etc the penalty will be 1000 panas.)

Now a day various efforts are there to avoid any further disaster the mankind is already witnessing in the form of global warming, uneven rainfall, depletion of ozone layer and other environment calamities. Different countries of the world have also enacted various environment protection laws for the preservation of environment. The powerful countries of the world are also partners of different international treaties for the protection of the environment. The Earth

Summits of different countries are trying to address this burning issue. The concept of sustainable development by keeping the equilibrium of the environment has become the economic agenda of the world. In this context, the possibility of getting a way out of this burning issue of ecological imbalance can be found in the ancient Indian scriptures and literatures which give this message to humanity thousands of years ago:

“Om dyauh shanti rantariksham shantih
Prithvi shantirapah shantih
Oshadhayah shantih Vanaspatayah shantih
Vishvedevaah shantih Brahma shantih
Sarvam shantih Shantireva shantih
Saamaa shantiredhih
Om shaantih, shaantih, shaantih!”

(*Yajur Veda* 36:17)

(May peace radiate there in the whole sky as well as in the vast ethereal space everywhere. May peace reign all over this earth, in water and in all herbs, trees and creepers. May peace flow over the whole universe. May peace be in the Supreme Being Brahman. And may there always exist in all peace and peace alone. Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti to us and all beings!)

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