

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN ANCIENT INDIA

Ms. Rajani Rao U

Research Scholar, Department of Studies in Philosophy,
University of Mysore, Manasagangotri, Mysore, Karnataka, India

Abstract: There is an urgent need for environmental awareness in order to re-establish the broken link between modern man and nature. The belief that nature can be exploited indiscriminately can be shattered only when man realizes that the price he is paying for manipulating nature is in fact making man reach the end of his 'carrying capacity'. The impact of climate change is having a drastic effect on life on earth leading to global warming, green house effect, natural and manmade disasters. Global environmental awareness is of recent origin. But in India, evidence of this awareness can be found even in the pre-Vedic Aryan period.

The aim and objective of this study is to showcase the rich ancient Indian tradition of taking care of the environment. Whether it was due to awe and wonder or love and respect for the nature, the ancient Indian societies founded on the Vedic philosophical traditions had established a way of living that was in tune with nature and its surroundings. These ancient Indian thoughts throw light upon the protection of flora and fauna, about the importance given to panchamahabhutas, fundamental principles of ecology, about the importance of performing yajnas and providing administrative rules on environmental issues.

In this paper, an effort is made to understand the environmental awareness that was prevalent in ancient India and to bring out its relevance to the present scenario. Nature can take care of itself provided man is aware of the repercussions of his actions on the environment.

Keywords: Ancient, Awareness, Environment, Panchamahabhuta, Vedic period

I. INTRODUCTION

Environment is taken from the French word "environ" meaning "that which surrounds" or "surrounding circumstances". Hence Environment in simple terms implies all that of which surrounds a person, animal, plant that lives or is operational. It implies both physical (non-living) and biological (living) surroundings. Each living or non-living thing has its own environment in which it is existing. Environment can said to be the summation of all the circumstances that influence the life and development of various living and non-living beings on earth. Nature and its several components are all of complex nature and any intervention made reflects in their way of functioning. Due to tension and high negative energy created by man, the environment is slowly losing its capabilities in discharging the functions in its predefined way.

The awareness worldwide for the urgent need in protecting the environment is reflected from the past 50 yrs or so only after man realized the price he was paying for indiscriminate manipulation of nature. Nature was no longer the reservoir of natural resources. Its air and water got polluted, many species became extinct and many more still are facing extinction. There is major depletion in forest wealth leading to drastic climatic changes because of greenhouse effect. All this is occurring at such a fast phase and to such an extent that the very notion of progress and development has become a paradox. The world

scenario is not only restricted to the economically weaker nations or developing nations but its effect is being felt by the developed nations also.

Against this scenario, we look for guidance from our ancient Indian treatises and ponder on how these ancient traditional values can throw light in caring for our earth and all its life-sustaining resources. An alternate search for sustaining lifestyle can be had from the ancient scriptures whose environmental philosophy has an ethical, spiritual and aesthetic appeal to all generations.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN ANCIENT INDIA

“**Paryavaranam**” is a Sanskrit word for environment that was prevalent in ancient India, thousands of years before the advent of modern science. Indian civilization has always been an eco-friendly civilization from its ancient days. In Indian consideration, environment is not a physical and lifeless being but a very living and active mechanism and human beings are just one among the various other creatures that inhabit the earth.

For the ancient Indians, the Universe was integrated whole and all natural phenomena had a divine origin. There was an all round intense awareness for the need for having the right balance in man-environment interaction. They had great respect for nature and related all things happening in the environment to divinity. They were aware of the fragility of living in the environment if it was not protected. They laid emphasis on adapting to the environment and not changing it. Many principles and guidelines were formulated for an easy interaction between human beings and environment.

Ancient Indians learnt to be in symphony with their environmental surroundings right from their formative years. The learning system was in natural surroundings called as Gurukulas which was the dwelling place of teachers or gurus. ‘Guru’ is a combination of two words – Gu which means ‘darkness’ and – Ru which implies ‘to dispel’. Thus the Vedic guru was a dispeller of darkness of both the worlds – that which is inside of man and that which is outside. The student who was accepted in the Gurukula had to stay there through the entire period of his study. In the earlier days, education was given by scholars and learned people known as Gurus and Acharayas. They acted as custodian, counselor, a confidante, an advisor a mentor and father figure for all the students. These Gurukulas served as centres of learning that helped the students in building their character, in creation of societal awareness, in developing a discerning mind to choose the correct values in life, in learning the Vedas. All these were done with living a life integrated with nature and surroundings. As they all lived in the natural environment, conservation and preservation of natural surroundings became a part of their living. The Gurukulas were located in forests and the students experienced environment in its purest yet diversified forms.

III. ANCIENT INDIAN’S PERSPECTIVE OF NATURE

For ancient Indians, the notion of environment is that it is transcendental in nature. Indian philosophical texts proclaim that all of creation does occupy the same gamut of existence and they are different in comparison to their level of consciousness. This concept of oneness is what is seen in the ancient textual references. They worshipped Nature for its sun, water, air, soil, earth, plants, trees, animals. They held these divine and showed their respect through their works of art that highlighted the natural beauties. These moral values that displayed genuine love for nature instilled the ancients to exploit nature for only those resources that is needed for living and not otherwise. This notion was given so much importance so that doing otherwise was akin to having committed a grave and unpardonable sin.

Ancient environmental awareness can be said to have existed even in the pre-vedic man of the Indus valley civilization which flourished in northern India about 5,000 years ago. This is evident from the archaeological evidence gathered from Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro which were the chief cities of that civilization. They had acute awareness about hygiene and sanitation as evident from their construction of ventilated houses, orderly streets, numerous wells, bathrooms, public baths and covered underground drains. Several tablets found at the site show their love for trees as a form of worshipping tree goddesses.

The continuation of environmental awareness can be seen in the Aryan civilization where the ecological awareness can be seen in their notion of ‘**Aranyani**’, meaning ‘**queen of forests**’ as envisaged by the Vedic seers. This can be likened to

the idea of tree goddesses of the Indus civilization. There are several descriptions in the Vedas regarding praise to Aranyani, the spirit of the forest which guides and protects the plants and wild animals. The Aryans observed nature in all its true aspects. They realized that the humans and other living creatures on earth had limited life span when compared to that of the sun, moon and stars. Sun gave prime life and energy to the mortal beings on earth.

IV. ANCIENT INDIAN'S PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE OF NATURE

Vedas means 'knowledge in all forms'. The Vedas were passed on from generation to generation orally, finally to be written down in Sanskrit language. This ancient literature encompasses a holistic attitude of the cosmic vision in a poetic way. Unique in its style and rendering, they enshrine a cheerful and blissful assertion of life and nature. Vedas has been nurtured and preserved through oral tradition in a systematic and traditional way. Ancient Indians concept of ecology is found depicted in the various verses in the Vedas. All plants and trees were seen as living and animate beings and each and every verse speaks of their importance and how they should be protected and not harmed.

Rig Veda mentions '**Vanaspathi**', tree having thousand branches and as the tree-lord of the forest. Worshipping this tree is akin to worshipping the entire creation. This is one of reason why most of the Indian temples have sacred trees planted in their premises, and people circumambulate and worship them.

Atharvana veda mentions the medicinal qualities of various herbs. Plants like Tulsi are still considered sacred today. Trees such as parijata, banyan, pipal (asvattha in Sanskrit) find a special mention. Bumi Sukta from Atharvana veda depicts the importance given by our ancients to the panchamahabhutas (five great elements). We get food from our earth and agni (fire or energy) is what is present in each and every living and nonliving being, thus the entire creation is conscious.

V. PANCHAMAHABHUTAS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

The ancient Indian's perception is that "life" is present in all biotic and non-biotic things. The ancients believed the whole world to be made up of the basic five elements which are earth (shristi), water (apah), fire (teja), air (vayu) and space (vyoma). Thus all the creation on earth is made up of these five elements. Not only the plants and animals but also human beings are created from these essential elements. It assumes that man is made up of five basic elements present in nature and hence on death, 'body' is nothing but these five basic elements dissolving and disintegrating back to nature. Most of the ancient scriptures highlight the divineness, sacredness, richness, life-nurturing, life protecting, and life linking virtues of the panchamahabhutas.

(i) Water: Even the very earliest human civilization realized the importance and significance of water as they settled near a water body. Water was needed not only for personal use such as cooking, for maintaining personal cleanliness and hygiene, irrigation of crops but also it was a major mode of transport. Pure water is known as 'divyajal' as it has such properties like it is cold to touch (sheetam), has minerals and other useful elements (shivam) and is clean (suchihi), is transparent (istham) and its acid base not exceed the basic limits (vimalam lahu shadgunam). Some quotations:

- 1) The clouds come in their colourful chariots
With tremendous speed,
And of them, the brilliant ones shed the rains. (RigVeda 8.7.28)
- 2) Waters contain
All diseases-dispelling medicaments,
Useful for the upkeep of our body,
So that we may live long
To enjoy the bright sun. (RigVeda.1.23.2)
- 3) That there is ambrosia in waters,
There is healing balm in them,
And there are medicinal herbs,

Know this all,

And by their proper use become wiser.(RigVeda 1.23.19)

- 4) The mother earth receives water from the father, the sky,
Who nourishes all living beings. (RigVeda.7.101.3)

(ii) Fire: The ancients revered sun as they realized that without the fire and energy, light and heat, the earth would be inhabitable. The solar energy helps in regulating the flow of energy in the food chain, provides needed energy for the different nutrient cycles and is overall in charge of the earth's ecosystem. The Aryans looked at fire in its three principal forms as fire on earth i.e., prthviagni; fire in the middle region which was the main reason behind the formation of rainfall and all atmospheric phenomena; and as heavenly Sun God. They linked the celestial happenings with the earthly atmosphere and understood its significance to their subsistence on earth. Few quotations:

- 1) Kindled and established on the earth,
The Fire Divine rises and spreads over all created worlds.
May the Fire Divine, the invoker and purifier, eternal, all-wise and adorable,
Establish our relations with Nature's forces. (RigVeda.2.3.1)
- 2) May the sun
Promptly favour us
With its protection.
May the river, the clouds
And herbs and vegetation
Give us happiness.
May we earnestly
Invoke the Fire Divine To be a Father to us. (RigVeda.6.52.6)

(iii) Earth: Prakrti is the supreme mother and all creations her children. Even today, planet earth is fondly referred to as DhartiMata, a Sanskrit name for Mother Earth. The Prthvi sukta in the Atharvana Veda showcases a beautiful hymn which is full of praise for the Mother Earth. It shows the ancients' reverence given to nature with a remarkable foresight. Quotations given below:

- 1) The ever true principles of cosmic order alone sustain the balance of Mother Earth. (AtharvaVeda 14.1.1)
- 2) Sweet be the herbs to us and waters, and for us the mid-air be full of sweetness....(Rig Veda 4.57.3)
- 3) Countless are the resources of Mother Earth, from whom flow the rivers of wealth in hundreds of streams,
Worship Motherland as you worship God.
From time eternal,
the Mother Earth is giving life to her children – you owe debt to Her. (Atharva Veda12.1.45)

VI. ANCIENT SCRIPTURES and YAJNA

(i) Manusmriti: It can be said to be the world's first ethical collection of laws presented by Maharishi Manu. It has direct and indirect references about conserving plants and animals with punishments specified for disobeying and harming the trees and animals. It also gives a distinctive taxonomy of plants while stating that some of the plants have consciousness, and experience pleasure and pain. The ancient Indians were conscious enough of the various environmental aspects and had framed laws to protect the environment. All of these laws are educative and need to be taken from the context of present day crisis and how effectively can they be implemented as these laws were formulated and followed by society at an age when there was abundance of natural resources and no extreme pollution to speak of.

(ii) Kautilya Arthashastra: It is a treatise that enumerates on jurisprudence of various aspects with regards to administration and governance. Nature and other non-living beings exist hand in hand with the human beings. This feeling of mutual co-

existence has been shown in various state policies as framed by Kautilya. It is interesting to note on how our ancients viewed environment and imposed laws that helped in preserving and conserving nature. Environmental guidelines had to be followed even in the affairs of the state. Special importance was attached to the animal sanctuaries called as abhayaranya or abhayavna which implies 'forest that is free from fear'. This was so that the animals and trees could live without fear of slaughter. Even trees and other plants that were grown in the municipal area deserved protection and fine was imposed for causing harm to them.

(iii)Yajna: Ancient Indians draw a parallel between the systematic functioning of the celestial bodies and the atmospheric happenings on earth and drew a conclusion that this played a prominent role for their existence and sustenance on earth. Performance of Yajna can be attributed to few of the following reasons:

- 1) The celestial bodies such as the sun, stars and planets need constant food from an heavenly source. This helped in maintaining their brightness and immortal status. Thus feeding of fire with food gave rise to the concept of yajna.
- 2) There was a constant loss during the creation of the solar system including earth. Thus whatever is lost is given back to the atmosphere through performing yajnas. Hence there is a reciprocal principle which forms a part of the yajna cycle.
- 3) The sun's radiation along with incidence of various seasons and rainfall made life possible on earth. Thus according to the reciprocal principle of give and take, the yajna rituals were performed.

These theories are ample proof of environmental conservation that is seen in the ancient Indians and thus performing yajnas for them was a means of giving back to the atmosphere what is taken from them. Even the modus operandi of the rainfall was conceived to be a yajna that occurred in the atmosphere which was the main reason for life happening on earth. Yajna performance was given high importance also because of the fact that rainfall is needed for producing food and nutrition to all living creatures on earth.

The mixture of ghee, firewood, specific dried herbs that is added while performing yajnas also helps in clearing the pollution from the atmospheric region by making the air clean and perfumed which is appropriate for all living creatures to breathe. Performing yajnas with sincere spirit and in the open air is advised by the ancient Indians. Maybe various rituals were institutionalized by the ancients to drive home the point of giving importance to different components of our environment as these rituals ensured the balance and harmony that would be maintained among all creations in the world.

VII. ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND VALUES

Attitude towards nature and natural environment has evolved because of the utilitarian and exploiting world view held by humans thereby discrediting the intrinsic values that exist in nature and other living and non-living beings within it. Human's attitude towards nature and environment is the fundamental reason which determines our treatment of the natural environment. The attitude is formed and fashioned by the ethical and moral values we embrace. There has been a tremendous shift in the human attitude towards nature and environment through the ages.

The ancient Indians had embraced and adopted a set of ethical and moral values which truly respected nature. They followed ethical principles while using land, water and air. For ex: since the land is the part of the earth, and they looked upon earth as the benign mother, land needs protection from all kinds of pollution, environmental hazards and exploitation for egoistic reasons. But now, sanctity and divinity is not found in the ethical principles as they are no longer deemed important. As such, land has become a commodity to be played with. The same is true when we look at the other resources.

Earlier natural resources were looked at not only from the perspective of their usefulness to humans but also largely from the view of their being a home for the millions and millions of animals and birds and other living and non-living entities. Plants and trees had their own life which not only sustained humans but was sanctuaries to other creatures. But now, environment and its pollution, is looked only from the human point of view and biodiversity that is also a part of this earth is grossly forgotten.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Since the dawn of human civilization, man has been modifying nature but never with an intention of destroying it completely as is evident today. It is a very true fact that environment has been, is and will be man's permanent teacher. Better understanding of the environment is vital and an indispensable knowledge to share. The environmental education had by the ancient Indians from their formative years helped in instilling in them awe, respect, wonder, gratitude and a sense of belonging and awareness of living life in harmonious balance with natural surroundings.

In ancient scriptures, the Vedic scholars have not only explained the usefulness of trees and plants but also depicted their beauty and charm in their writings. It is a fine illustration of their position and usefulness in life and their affiliation with humanity. It was evident to the ancients that only an earth that is filled with trees and forests and hills can harbor and nurture the human race. Hence ample evidence can be seen in the ancient scriptures pointing out to the need for protection of environment that helps in maintaining the ecological balance which in turn has an overall benefit to the society.

In the present scenario, globalization has changed the very nature and quality of the environment. The world has become a global village - an efficiently information oriented but environmentally value deficient society. There is better lifestyle in the form of power and status all at the expenses of destroying the only livable planet, i.e., Mother earth. Nature was the vortex around which the people went about doing their jobs in ancient India. But now the environment has become one among the different tangents of the vortex. The need of the hour is to bring the "environment" back into focus and that's where the environmental awareness of ancient India helps. Habitually ignored environmental traditions of ancient Indians should be invigorated to give the modern man much needed direction to care for nature.

REFERENCES

- [1]. A.S. Ramanathan, Weather Science in Ancient India. Jaipur: Rajasthan Patrika Ltd., 1993.
- [2]. Biba Jasmine Kaur, "Protected Areas to Combat Climate change", Scientific Reporter, June 2012, pp. 46-48.
- [3]. D.B.N. Murthy, Environmental Awareness & Protection: A Basic Book on Evs. New Delhi: Deep and Deep publications Pvt. Ltd., 2004.
- [4]. Dr. Anirban Ganguly, (Associate Fellow, VIF), Man and Environment in India: Past Traditions and Present Challenges <<http://www.vifindia.org/article/2012/july/26/man-and-environment-in-india-past-traditions-and-present-challenges>>
- [5]. Dr Nitish Priyadarshi, Concept of environment in ancient Indian Philosophy, <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/36015552/Environmental-Concept-in-Indian-Thoughts>>
- [6]. Erach Bharucha, Textbook of Environmental Studies for UG courses. Hyderabad: Universities Press (India) Pvt. Ltd., 2010.
- [7]. F. Max Muller (Ed.), The Sacred Books of the East. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988.
- [8]. G.S. Monga, Environment and Development. New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2003.
- [9]. Jaimini Sarkar, "Indian Science through the Ages". Scientific Reporter, August 2011, pp: 8-14.
- [10]. Pandit Satyakam Vidyalkar, The Holy Veda - a Golden Treasury. New Delhi: Clarion Books, 1996.

- [11]. Raimudo Panikkar (Ed.&Tr), The Vedic Experience – Mantramanjari. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass,1994.
- [12]. R. Rajagopalan, Environmental Studies: From Crisis to Cure. New Delhi: Oxford, 2005.
- [13]. R, Renugadevi, Environmental ethics in the Hindu Vedas and Puranas in India.<[http:// www.academicjournals.org/ajhc/PDF/pdf2012/Jan/Renugadevi.pdf](http://www.academicjournals.org/ajhc/PDF/pdf2012/Jan/Renugadevi.pdf)>
- [14]. R. Shamasastri, (Tr), Kautilya’s Arthashastra < <http://educonnectu.yolasite.com/resources/Arthashastra-of-Chanakya-English.pdf>.>
- [15]. Sachidananda Padhy, Santosh K Dash and Ratnaprava Mohapatra, Environmental Laws of Manu: A Concise Review © Kamla-Raj 2006, J. Hum. Ecol., 19(1): 1-12.