

# Environmental Discourses in Vedic Period

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**Abstract:** We are indeed guided by our ancient Indian treaties and manuscripts and ponder how these ancient, traditional values can through light in caring our nature. The environmental philosophy contained in Vedic literature has spiritual and aesthetic appeal to all generations. The Veda deals with the knowledge of allsorts from physical to spiritual. Hymns are basically given as statement an idea which contains knowledge of basic science. Holistic and comprehensive approach is taken by Vedic seers. We need to re establish the broken link between nature and materialistic modern man. Today climatic change is virtually challenging the existence of human kind and all living creatures.

Indian society right from the beginning is founded on Vedic philosophical tradition and have establishment itself in tuned with the nature and surroundings. Ancient saints, sages gave importance to protection to floras and fauna and emphasised on protecting *panchmahabhuts*, emphasised on performing *Yajnas* and enacting rules related to environment.

The purpose of this paper is to identify and classify the environmental issues that are depicted in Vedic text and to examine the relevance of philosophies in the contemporary world. The basic purpose is to identify and determine the extent of awareness prevailed in ancient India. It is also intended to find out to what extent the teachings of Vedic manuscripts can be applied in contemporary scenario.

**Keywords:** Indian Treaties, Aesthetic appeal, Seers, Environment.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Jain, Vedic and Buddhist traditions have establishment the principles of ecological harmony centuries ago. Every effort was made towards synthesing spiritual and physical symbiosis in the form of ethical and moral responsibilities. In ancient India universe was integrated whole and all the natural phenomenon had a divine origin. Every development was related to divine development. Every effort was made to have right balance in man and environment interaction.

As a distinct discipline, environmental science and ecology are studied and establishment in 19<sup>th</sup> century but their origin can be traced long back in the Vedic and ancient Sanskrit literature. The *atharv Veda vritavrita*, *abhivarah*, *avritah parivrita* is used for the word *PARYAVARAN*. Upanishads mentioned that the universe consist of five elements- viz. *Earth, water, land, air and ether*. Our existence on planet earth blossom due to blessing of mother earth, she is the goddess of nature according to Hindu mythology. She is the Supreme elixir of our existence on earth.

She continuously plays her role from our being to perishing on this planet she sustains our life cycle in her own accordance. But our acts are not complimentary to her sustenance, thus by abusing the earth we are endangering our own existence. Increasing natural hazards are the result of our atrocious acts of exploiting our earth. Ancient Indian texts reveal the concern for environmental issues in form of mythology and tradition. This paper examines some of the beliefs and practices underlying traditional Hindu religions' attitude towards nature and its strategic extension as a tool for Environmental conservation. It is high time we turn to our ancestral roots because by protecting environment we shall protect the entire humanity, let us pass on the rich Vedic heritage and its teachings to our future generations and make this earth a better place for them to live in.

## 2. VEDIC APPROACH TO ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

The Vedic people minutely observed that the natural phenomenon like flood earthquakes, cyclones, volcanic eruptions, etc. They came to realise that these developments are beyond human control and power. They started adoring them and gradually started giving them divine affiliations. Several hymns were addressed to deities (Devata). In their view the world consists of *agni* i.e. fire or heat and *soma* i.e. water, *surya* considered to be the soul of all. Indra being the most powerful who kills *vritra* the symbol of cloud to free water. *aditi* is praised as *devmata* the mother of all natural energies and symbolic of nature. *Rita* has been special force that maintained cosmic order. In Vedas *varuna* is depicted as the lord of *Rita*, the universal natural order. He is regarded as the lord of water and oceans and empowered to control world order.

Vedic literature has made tripartite division of universe into three regions i.e. *prithvi*, *antarichha* and *dyau*. These divisions are still holding good in modern day science.

## 3. ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

In ancient India, the universe was regarded as integrated whole. And all the natural phenomenon was given a divine origin. Right from childhood students were provided with natural environment as learning was done in gurukulas, a dwelling place of teachers, guides, mentors, etc. These gurukulas helped students in building character, inculcation of societal awareness. All the learning's were done with living a life integrated with nature. They learn to conserve natural surroundings. Firsthand experience was given to them in most diversified but purest form of nature.

The Vedic hymns to the earth, the *prithvisukta* in *atharvaveda* is the oldest manifestation of environmental concern "*matabhumih putroham Prithivyah*" (earth is my mother and I am herself) speaks in volume regarding allegiance of Vedic people towards nature.

## 4. ETHICS AND VALUES IN ENVIRONMENT

It is the attitude towards environment and nature that decides our perception towards them. Much depends upon how values and ethics are inculcated since generations. The ancient Indian people have deep sense of respect and were guided by environmental ethics and values to the extent that merely every facet of nature was given divine place and were worshiped.

*mātā bhūmih putruhan prithivyā:*" This Vedic prayer invokes and postulates divine intervention to bliss and protect the nature environment. To protect environment the Rig Veda says "*madhu vātāḥ ritāyate madhu kṣaranti sindhavaḥ mādvih naḥ santuśadhi. madhu naktamutusāsu madhumaṭpārthiva rajah madhu kṣorastu suryah mādhirgābo bhavantu naḥ*" (Rigveda, 1/90/6,7,8) It means Environment provides bliss to people leading their life perfectly. Rivers bless us with sacred water and provide us health, night, morning, vegetation. Sun bless us with peaceful life. Our cows provide us milk.

The plant ecology has a great importance to keep the environment in balance. The Rig-Vedic people exploited nature in a very judicious way, making full use of the Indian psyche, the compared trees to human beings, Gods etc. They prayed to Indra (God) not to separate trees from the forests and the sons from their fathers (Rig-veda, 8/1/13)

The *Ṛkṣāyurveda* says that planting a tree is equally beneficial as having ten son-- "*dasakūpa sama vāpi dasa vāpi sama hradaḥ dasahrada samah putro dasaputra sama drumah*" (Ṛkṣayurvedah-5). Tulshi, Pippala and Vataṛkṣa have great importance in our culture. About the importance of Tulshi, Vataṛkṣa there are many slokas are found in the Vedic literature. Some of them are--- "*jābadināni tulashi rūpitāpi jad grihe grihe. tābadvarṣha sahasrāni vaikunthe sa mahīyate*" (Ṛkṣāyurveda-9). It means one 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 Pippala and Vataṛkṣa, *Atharvaveda* says,--- "*aśwathu devasadanastriyashamityo divi. tatramritayasyo śakhan deva kushthamavanwat*" (*Atharvaveda*, 5/4/3). (It was prohibited to cut Vataṛkṣa because gods live in this tree and no disease where this tree is situated.).

The *Oṣodhi* sukta of Rig-Veda addresses to plants and vegetables as mother, 'O mother! Hundreds are your birth places and thousand are your shoots. "*śatan bu ambā dhāmoni sahasramutta tu ruhaḥ*" (Rig-veda, 10/97/2). Similarly the Hindus have worshipped the Bilva, Kadamba, Rudrāksha, Champaka, Bakula etc. In the *Maitrāyani Samhitā*, the earth

has been described as "devajayani", adorable by deities and aushadhinam mulam, the source of all kinds of medicinal plants. So the Indian sages, like Manu suggested punishment for him who cuts down such valuable trees. During the Vedic age yajnas were conducted for purification of the environment. Perfumed haven material and ghee were used during these yajnas. The Vedic sages also know that mountains cause rains and fresh air and also provide medicines "parvatesu bhesajam" (Rig-veda-8/20/25). Therefore they gave importance to save mountain and said that it is better to live in the forests or mountains than the villages.

The fire and Sun play the most significant role in the purification of environment. Animals and birds are part of nature and environment. The Vedic seers have mentioned about their characteristics and activities and have desired their welfare. Rig-Vedic seers classifies them in three groups sky animals like birds, forest animals and animals in human habitation— "tasmat yajnat sarvahutah samvrtan prsadaajyan pasuntansakre vayabyanaranyan grāmyasca ye." (Rigveda,10/90/8)

There is a general feeling the Vedic texts that animals should be safe, protected and healthy— "bhūrbhūvah svaḥ suprajabhiḥ svasthya subese viraiḥ suposah posaiḥ nārya prajan me pāhi sacchya paśunme pahartharya pitum me pāhi tubhyamanyah paśabo mṛgavane hita haṅsa suparnah śakuna vayansi tava yakṣa paśupate apsantastubyan kṣaranti divya abo vṛdhe" (Yajurveda, 3/37)

Protection of birds, animals is a norm of Hindu religion. The Hindu mythology believes cobra is worshipped on the eve of Nagpanchami and cows are offered adoration on the occasion of the Balabhadrapuja. Killing of certain animals and birds who acted as scavengers by feeding on carcasses and filth was religiously banned according to the Veda.

It is need of the day to follow in the root steps of the ancient period-- "kincideva tu vipryāya dadyadasthimatan vadhe. Anasthanancaiva himsayah pranayamena śudhyati." (Manu -samhita-11/142)

The Vedic sages realized that the pure water, air etc. are the roots of to good health and happiness and hence they considered all these as gods. The Vedic people desired to live a life of hundred years- "taccakṣurdevahitan purastacchukamuccarat pasyema śaradah śatan jivema saradah śatan śṛnyam śaradah śatan prabravam śaradah śatamadinah śyāma śaradah śatan bhuyahca śaradah śatāt." (Yajurveda-36/24)

But about 3000 years ago, the sages recited the following verse-- "dyauḥ śāntirantarīkṣan śanti prithivī śāntirāpaḥ śāntirośadhayaḥ vanaspatayaḥ śāntiviswadevah śāntibrahma śāntiḥ sarva śāntiḥ śāntireva śāntiḥ sā mā śntiredhī" (Sukla yajurveda 36-17) "Let there be balance in the space ! Let there be balance in the sky ! Let there be peace on the earth ! Let there be calmness Let there be ! Let there be growth in the plants ! Let there be growth in the tree ! Let there be grace in the Gods ! Let there be bliss in the Brahman ! Let there be balance in everything ! Let there be peace and peace ! Let such peace be with everyone of us !" The knowledge of Vedic sciences is meant to save the human beings from falling into an utter darkness of ignorance.

The unity in diversity is the message of Vedic physical and metaphysical sciences essence of the environmental studies in the Vedas can be put here by quoting a partial mantra of the Ishavasyopanishad 'One should enjoy with renouncing or giving up others part' – "īśhāvāśhyamidā sarvaṁ yatkinchan jagatyan jagat tena tyaktena bhūnjithā mā gridhaḥ kashyacid dhanam" (Ishopanishad-1). From this Vedic message it is clear that environment belongs to all living beings, so it needs protection by all, for the welfare of all.

Vedanta is the topmost scientific and philosophical treatise of the spiritual and cultural heritage of India. It is a composite Sanskrit word, combining two words - Veda and anta. Veda means knowledge and anta means end. Vedanta means the end of knowledge or the Ultimate knowledge of truth. In Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.1 it is rightly said that

*Girayaste Parvata Himavattoaranaya Te Prathivisyonamastu | Babhrum Krashnam Rehinim Viswarupam Dhruvam Prathivimindraguptam | Ajitoahato Akshatoadhyashtham Prathivimaham ||*

**Meaning:** O Earth! Pleasant by the hills, snow-clad mountains and forests; O Numerous colored, firm and protected Earth! On this earth I stand, undefeated, unslain, and unhurt.

*Yat te madhyam prathivi yacca nabhyam yasta urja tanvah sambabhuvuh/ Tasu no tehyabhi nah pavasva mata bhumiḥ putro aha prathivyah | Parjanyaḥ pitah sa nah pipartu ||* (The treasure of minerals and of other elements that provide

vigour indwells in your naval part (central core). Offer these to us. Your land and the cloud showering upon it nurture us like a mother and father. May the shelter of these purify and strengthen us).

*Vanaspatim van asthapyadhvam, Nisu dadidhvam akhanant utsam* / (It is in the interest of mankind to plant more and more plants and trees as these safeguard the water resources)

## 5. CONCLUSION

India has a rich ancient literature and a long cultural tradition of thousands of years. The Vedas are the oldest monumental scriptures and represent vistas of wisdom and knowledge. Since the dawn of human civilization, man has been modifying and interfering nature but never with an intention of destroying it completely as is evident now a days. It is a true 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. It is a fine illustration of their position and usefulness in life and their affiliation with humanity. 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. The need of the hour is to bring the "environment" back into focus and that "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.

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