

## **Environmental Awareness in Ancient India and its Relevance to the Present Context**

**Rita Goswami**

Assistant Professor Department of Philosophy Bongaigaon College

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### **Abstract**

In the present context, 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.

**Keywords:** Environment, Quality, Relevance

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### **Introduction:**

The word ‘Environment’ has been derived from the French word “Environer”. It means to surround or to encircle. Therefore, the word ‘environment’ may be defined as the collective term for the conditions in which an organism lives, both biotic and abiotic. By environment is meant those natural things that surround us the essential to sustain human life, such as the earth’s atmosphere, healthy air and drinkable water together with the nonessentials that help to make life sustainable. It is a system in which various living beings as well as non-living things can exist with proper relationship. Just as environment as a whole influences every aspect of life, similarly the activities of living organism also affect their surrounding environment. Our environment can remain in stable condition when all the parts of the environment are in perfect harmony. It is known to all that everybody tries to get fulfillment or goal or emancipation of own life, such as highest pleasure, equal dignity with surroundings, freedom of will etc. This ethical goal can not be possible without keeping a good environment.

But the most significant challenge of 21<sup>st</sup> century is the environmental crisis because man can now manipulate his surroundings in almost any way he chooses. Man’s struggle towards a better life and a higher standard of living through over consumption of natural resources actually degrading the environmental quality day by day. The earth is a victim of so called materialistic civilization and industrial revolution .Hence Environmental is not a problem of environment. Rather it is a Problem of man with regard to his environment. In nature Herself there is no problem. It is for human beings that there are now environmental problems. Nature has her own law and with the way things are going on it will take its own course. If that course results in extinction of human species, nature herself does not care. We care. 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. To control the act of human beings that are leading to environmental deterioration and ecological imbalances there is an urgent need to develop sensibility and eco environmental awareness among people.

**Objectives:**

Our ancient literature is full of knowledge about all aspect of life. But unfortunately our rich ancient literature has forgotten by our young generations. The main objective of these papers is to -

1. Throw some light on the awareness of our seers about environment.
2. Get rid of the greed, ignorance and disregard in exploiting the natural resources.
3. Preserve the environmental or ecological balance for our future generations.
4. Worship our nature rather than merely consuming and destroying it.

**Methodology:**

The study is based on Secondary Data which have been collected from various books, different journals, articles, Websites Etc

**Environmental Awareness in Ancient India:**

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. "PARYAVARANAM" is a Sanskrit Word for environment that was prevalent in ancient India. This term is coined from pari+ avarana meaning thereby which covers us from all the sides or which encircles us. In the earlier days, education was given by scholars and learned people known as Guru and Acharya. They acted as custodian, counselor, a confident, an advisor a mentor and father figure for all the students. These Gurukul served as centre of learning that helped the students in building their character, in creation of social 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 became a part of their living.

For ancient Indians, the notion of Environment is that it is Transcendental in nature. They worshipped Nature for its sun, Moon, water, air, soil, earth, plants, trees, animals etc. They held these divine and showed their respect through their works of art that highlighted the natural beauties.

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.

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. 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. 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.

#### **Environmental Awareness in Vedas:**

Vedas means “knowledge of all forms”. Vedas are universally accepted to be the most precious Indian Heritage. Indian Philosophy refers to the ‘pure consciousness’ which is otherwise known as ‘ULTIMATE REALITY’. It is responsible for all life forms. Vedas contained several references of environmental conservation, ecological balance, and weather cycle. In ancient India, protection and cleaning up of environment was the essence of Vedic culture in Hindu Philosophy. Forest, trees and wildlife protection held a place of special respect. Man is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that Divinity prevails in all elements including plants and animals. The Vedas were passed on from generation to generation orally, finally to be written down in Sanskrit language. 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 and Environmental Awareness:**

Rig-Veda is considered the most ancient text in Indian context. It says – “May the whole of the mankind be of one Mind, have a common goal and the hearts with united love and the mind and soul be one and the same for all to live a life of happiness. Vedas always related to all biotic and abiotic entities on earth, and did not relate to any particular geographical region”

A 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.”Hindus have worshipped trees, we have tied sacred threads around them, we have taken shelter under them, have held social ceremonies around these, offered this water, milk and sometimes even cow dung. The term pollution did not exist at that time but they call it poisoning of environment. They believe that the Five Great Elements (Space, Air, Fire Water and Earth) that constitute the environment are all derived from Prakrti, the primal energy. 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. The human nose is related to Earth, tongue to water, eyes to Fire, skin to Air and ears to space. This link between our senses and the element is the foundation of our human relationship with the Natural World. Most of the ancient scriptures highlight the divineness, sacredness, richness, life-nurturing, life protecting, and life linking virtues of the Panchamahabhutas.

#### **Atharveda and Environmental Awareness:**

The Vedic Hymn to the Earth, the PrithviSukta in Atharva Veda, is unquestionably the oldest and the most evocative environmental invocation. It is an earnest prayer to the mother earth to bestow all kinds of prosperity on the human beings. In it, the Vedic seer solemnly declares the enduring filial allegiance of humankind to Mother Earth: ‘Mata Bhumi Putroham Prithivyah’- Earth is my mother, I am her son. Mother Earth is celebrated for all her natural bounties and particularly for her gifts of

herbs and vegetation. Her blessings are sought for prosperity in all endeavors and fulfillment of all righteous aspirations.

Atharva Veda (1500-1000 B.C.) warns the forthcoming disasters in the name of environmental and natural pollutions. 'Food like raw/ cooked rice, fruits water, milk and clothes, vessels, living space are liable to be contaminated due to their contact with three types of poisons.' Sushruta in his Sushruta Samhita, refers to three types poisons:

1. herbo-mineral origin – related to plants and minerals
2. animal origin- related to insects, flies, mosquitoes, rats etc, and
3. artificial – that is man mad

Sushruta had discussed the above in context of community health problems due to contact with the poisons explained. Health problems can be due to environmental water, soil or air poisoning. So, one should take appropriate measures to prevent such health disasters due to environmental pollution. COW URIN said to have innumerable medicinal qualities. It is evident from the following hymn. 'O go arka (cow urine), you are the destroyer of all germs and toxins. You wage war against hereditary diseases. You are the giver of long life' this is known as 'PANACEA'. Recent researches confirmed that all cow related products promote good health.

Atharva Veda mentions the medicinal qualities of various herbs. Plants like Tulsi are still considered sacred today. Trees such as Parijata, banyan, Pipal Bargad, find a special mention. Bumi Sukta from Atharva Veda depicts the importance given by our ancients to the panchamahabhutas. 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.

### **Environmental Awareness in Ancient Scriptures:**

#### **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 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 contest 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.

#### **Kautilya's Arthashastra:**

Kautilya's Arthashastra, an ancient Indian Treatise on administration, Economic policy, Taxation, Diplomacy, planning and other dimensions of statecraft, remains very much relevant in today's world as well. It provides lot of knowledge about environment and its conservation. It describes the maintenance of public sanitation and preservation of environment, forest and wild life. Kautilya suggests the need to develop Abhayaranya or Abhayavana, forest and animal sanctuaries, where trees and animals would both reside free from the fear of slaughter. Kautilya also prescribed the post of a forest superintendent and penalties for poaching and causing damage to forests. The superintendent be responsible for maintaining the health of the forest, protecting forests

to assist wildlife, to satisfy economic needs products such as sissu, arjuna, sal bamboo, firewood, fruits, flowers etc for medicine.

He emphasized on efficient water management and the detailed instructions on how to do it. He recommended practices for the conservation of Natural resources, especially living resources. He was aware that the future productivity of natural resources is linked to their appropriate conservation. He also recommends kindness towards animals. Arthashastra reveals the attention focused on wildlife in the mauryan period: certain forests were declared protected and called Abhayaranya like the present day 'Sanctuary'. Heavy penalties, including capital punishment, were prescribed for offenders who entrapped, killed or otherwise molested elephants, deer, bison, birds, or fish, amongst other animals.

### **Rayamana, Mahabharata and Bhagvad Gita:**

The epic 'Ramayana' states about the importance of protecting the plant diversity. During the war between Rama and Ravana, Rama's brother, Lakshmana, falls unconscious and faints due to the impact of weapons and about to die by sun rise. By the advice of one Sushena, the mighty Hanuman brings the 'Sanjeevani' herb to bring back Lakshmana to conscious state. Though the above is a mythological story, it has a great message in it. Himalayan range is well known for the life saving medicinal herbs from where Sanjeevani kind of herbs can be obtained. Without maintaining an ecological balance, by not protecting the plant biodiversity and natural resources, we will lose the invaluable plant wealth forever.

In the words of the ancient Immemorial Indian poet, kalidasa: "The Himalaya is a great Devatma, a great Spiritual presence, stretching from the west to the eastern sea like a measuring rod to Gauge the world's greatness."

The Mahabharata hints that the basic elements of Nature constitute the cosmic Being – The Mountains his bones, the Earth His flesh, the Sea His blood, The sky His abdomen, The air his Breath and Agni His Energy. The whole emphasis of the ancient Hindu scriptures is that human beings cannot separate themselves from Natural surroundings and Earth has the same relationship with Man as the mother with her child. In the story, brahminicide (the sin one incurs by killing a brahmana) got attached to the king of the deities – Indra when he killed Vrittasura. When he approached Brahma, the creator God, asking for a way to get rid of it, Brahma asked the fire, water, forest and apsaras to take on oneself one quarter of Indra's sin. When they asked how he would get rid of the sin themselves, following answers were given: It was told to fire that if anyone would not put oblation to sacrificial fire in the morning the sin of fire would get attached to that person, to water it was told that if anyone polluted the water by excreta or phlegm then water's sin would get attached to him; to the trees it was said that if anybody cut the forest without genuine reason or need, the tree's sin would get attached to that person. The point being tried to be made in the paper is that, during the time when Mahabharata was written, the men did cut trees without reason and did pollute the water. Today we have the same problem of deforestation and water pollution, but man cannot be sacred off from acting in such a manner by being told sins.

### **Environmental Awareness through Yajna:**

Feeding of fire with food gave rise to the concept of Yajna. There is a constant loss during the creation of solar system including earth. Thus whatever is lost is given back to the atmosphere through performing Yajna. 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. The mixture of ghee, firewood, specific dried herbs that is added while performing Yajna 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 Yajna with sincere spirit and in the open air is advised by the ancient Indians.

**Relevance to the Present Context:**

Today we have forgotten the values of our scriptures has given from time immemorial. The result is imbalance in nature, we have find tsunami, cloud bursting, earthquakes, tornados, melting of glaciers, global warming, ecological imbalance, pollution of all kinds, floods, droughts etc.

If we look back in to our ancient literature, it provides a good deal of knowledge about each and every aspect of life. We have rich literature inherited by our ancestors. In case of environment Dr. Abdul Kalam's words: "Ancient India was a knowledge society that contributed a great deal to civilization. We need to recover the status and become a knowledge power. Spirituality must be integrated with education. We should ignite our dormant inner energy and let it guide our lives. The radiance of such minds embarked on constructive endeavor will bring peace, prosperity, and bliss to the nation."

M.K. Gandhi in the truest sense of the term was one of the first global citizens though deeply rooted in Indian tradition. He was not directly written on environment but his experience as a global citizen stood him in good stead to for see the problems which the world would experience as the fruits of industrialization, economic growth, service along with pollution of air, water, land, desertification, deforestation toxic wastes, urbanization etc. The influence of Isha Upanishad, Patanjali Yoga Sutra and the Bhagavad Gita as well as Ruskin's 'Unto the Last' gave base to formation of his thought process. The influence of Patanjali Yoga sutras can be seen on Gandhi when he practices the yamas and niyamas as the ethical code of conduct (Rajyoga) in all sincerity. The yamas are the ethical precepts, essentially a set of rules of don'ts. The five yamas are (i) nonviolence towards all animate and inanimate creation,(ii) truth,(iii) asteya-avoiding the use of materials obtained by illegitimate means and avoiding destruction,(iv) celibacy (brahmacharya) to keep check on the growing population and demand of resources(v) aparigraha - not amassing wealth beyond requirement.

The niyamas or the set of rules of dos were put into practiced by him. The niyamas relate to cleanliness of surroundings and of the self too. Practicing of shaucha (purification) removes impurities both of our external environment and our internal body which adversely affect our state of mind, and prevent the attainment of real wisdom and spiritual liberation. Samtosha (contentment) is not craving for what we do not have as well as not coveting the possessions of others. It is the realization that happiness gained through materialism is only temporary. We must also consciously work at surrounding ourselves with a pure environment (including food, drink, friends, entertainment, home furnishing and transportation) to not add any external impurities back into our bodies or minds. Other Niyamas are austerity (tapas), contemplation of one's life (svadhyaya) and devotion to God (Isvara Pranidhana). We find that in the practice of Yamas and Niyamas by Gandhi there is a deep sense of respect for the environment.

### **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. There are philosophers as well as common men trying to find answer in the traditional or primitive, tribal way of living. There is no denying that primitive/ tribal way of living is more eco-friendly than the way of life of the modern man. But along with it, we cannot deny that modern man has evolved from the primitive/tribal man. It is a way of life man has left behind and as such the question arises of the viability and possibility of going back to the tribal/primitive way of living. Is it really possible for the modern man to go back to the primitive way of living in its totality? At best human beings can try to pick up certain behavior pattern from such way of living. But his beliefs have changed for good with scientific knowledge, inventions and discoveries. If we take for example the Hindu's behavior towards the river Ganges, the people still take bath in the river to get rid of their sins. But having lost the reverence for the river, the people feel no scruples to pollute it. Moreover, today's man if he goes back to a primitive way of living, which he was living earlier, will in all probability come again to the same situation to face the same problems as we are facing today- only after some time. Thus, such a going back may at best somewhat postpone what seems to be the inevitable – total destruction of man and his environment. 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. Man alone has capabilities to transcend the authority of nature, and in this he even harms the nature, So man alone is responsible for the imbalance in nature and we must realize the importance of ecology before it is too late.

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