

Ancient Wisdom for Modern Environmental Problem

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ABSTRACT

Mountains occupy 24 per cent of the global land surface area and are home to 12 per cent of the world's population. About 10 per cent of the world's population depends directly on the use of mountain resources for their livelihoods and wellbeing, and an estimated 40 per cent depends indirectly on them for water, hydroelectricity, timber, biodiversity and niche products, mineral resources, recreation, and flood control. Climate and environmental changes in mountain are clearly visualizes in terms of increasing natural disasters (land slides, flesh floods), food and energy crises, depopulation, water scarcity and desertification, loss of biodiversity, degradation of ecosystems and migration. Contrary to the anthropocentric thought, the ancient Indian wisdom sees the earth and its creatures in a holistic way. However, the classical European thought has authenticated man's superiority over nature and therefore justified its exploitation. This anthropocentric idea of man's superiority has engulfed the world and, therefore, has resulted in the present environmental crisis. Global warming, floods, ozone depletion, etc are the consequences of treating the earth with disrespect. Due to the present ecological crises, problems concerning human-nature relationship have become of prime importance. Eco criticism is a recent concern in the circle of Indian academicians. However, the ecological wisdom and environmental ethics are not unfamiliar to the people of India. The idea of cosmic harmony or *Rtha*, conceived by the ancients, was the main motive behind ecological awareness. The preferred way of living according to the Indian ethos is to live in harmony with nature. The ancient Hindu Philosophy treated the whole world as a single family i.e. *Vasudeva Kutumbhkam*. The five great elements i.e. *Panchabhutas* (air, water, earth, fire and space) are revered in the *Samkhya* tradition. Therefore, to cope up with the anthropocentric attitude towards nature, there is need to reawaken the spirit of ancient philosophy in the present times. The call for environmental conservation was given in the late twentieth century in the West but the environmentalism has always been part of the ancient Indian wisdom

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The Earth is hailed as mother in the *Athrava Veda*. The living and non-living beings together constitutes the totality. The earth was worshipped and loved by the ancient people to reach this wholeness of earth's existence. The ancient seers were also aware of the fact that the divine earth not only nurtures and preserves us also but also shows her wrath when she is treated with disrespect. The Vedic texts are the oldest texts, which expresses and worships the magnificence and splendour of nature. Vedic verses contain the truth of all sciences. Moreover, the origin of almost all the disciplines is found in the Vedic texts. The complementary nature of the Vedas and the

modern science suggests the relevance of Vedic literature even in the contemporary world. In recent years, many disciplines have emerged which are primarily for the study of environment. N.J.Lockyer has opined in *The Dawn of Astronomy*: "The Vedas, in fact, is the oldest book in which we can study the first beginnings of our language and of everything which is embodied in all the languages under the sun" (6). The knowledge of everything is embodied in the *Vedas*.

Vedas embodies the cultural as well as the religious tradition of India. The environment is an integral part of human lives during the Vedic age. The Vedic age has

always revered the environment. The earth was given the status of mother and it is very apparent in the Vedanta. Various hymns written for nature deities were the foundation for inspiring the environmental consciousness. It conceals various valuable counsels and tactics for maintaining the balance and harmony in the environment. The idea of cosmic harmony or *Rtha*, conceived by the Vedic science, was the main motive behind ecological awareness. The spiritual inclination is needed in the present world to alter and restore the new ways of living where, development means inequality, reason means self-centredness, and individualism means greed. The modern age is coming up with the idea of environment preservation due to the ecological crises. In *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Ignorance* (1994), Swami B. V. Tripurari opines that. Our present environmental crisis is in essence a spiritual crisis. We need only to look back to medieval Europe and the psychic revolution that vaulted Christianity to victory over paganism to find the spirit of the environmental crisis. Inhibitions to the exploitation of nature vanished as the Church took the “spirits” out of the trees, mountains, and seas. Christianity’s ghost-busting theology made it possible for man to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. It made nature man’s monopoly. This materialist paradigm has dominated the modern world for last few centuries.

The current deplorable environmental crisis demands a spiritual response. A fundamental reorientation of human consciousness, accompanied by action that is born out of inner commitment, is very much needed. One of the measures that could help a great deal to fulfil this need is to regenerate and rejuvenate basic values of Hindu culture and propagate them (*A Tribute to Hinduism* 442).

Thomas Carlye in *Signs of the Times* observes that: “We war with rude nature; and by our restless engines, come off victorious and loaded with spoils” (*The Selected Works of Thomas Carlyle* 13). The call for environmental conservation was given in the late twentieth century in the West but the environmentalism has always been part of the ancient wisdom. The Oriental wisdom of environment is what is now called Deep Ecology. The ancient ecological philosophy also constitutes the main features of Deep Ecology, a concept given by the West. Just like ecological Indian wisdom, deep ecology also advocates- Interconnectedness and interrelationship of man and nature, inseparability of man and environment and respecting, revering and loving the Earth, The worldwide acceptance of ancient Hindu philosophy as a

treasure of the laws of ecological awareness and conservation reflects the environment friendly consciousness of the ancients. The flora and fauna were revered and special steps were taken to safeguard and conserve them. Afforestation, environmental cleanliness and purity, ecological balance and habitat protection have been given great importance. The preferred way of living according to the Indian ethos is to live in harmony with nature. The ancient Hindu Philosophy treated the whole world as a single family *i.e. Vasudeva Kutumbhkam*. The five great elements *i.e. Panchabhutas* (air, water, earth, fire and space) are revered in the *Samkhaya* tradition. Mountains, rivers, trees, birds and animals are exalted and are also the part of various rituals and sacred ceremonies. Moreover, the welfare of all living and non-living beings is the moral standard. In *Artharva Veda*, the Earth is associated with ‘mother’ and should, therefore, be worshipped, loved and protected. Preserving the ecological harmony was thus part of the Indian ethos. There are number of Vedic hymns that instruct people how to maintain ecological harmony. Some of the Vedic hymns are: Do not cut trees, because they remove pollution (*Rig Veda*, 6:48:17). *Maata bhoomi putro aham prithivyah* (*Atharva Veda* 12:1:12)

One should protect the habitation (*Rig Veda* 6:71:13). According to anthropocentric view, nature and culture are binaries. Culture is more refined and civilized and is therefore seen as opposed to the forces of nature. Humans associate nature with wildness and wilderness and therefore the culture is seen as superior and disciplined. Ecology means the study of the natural network of life and therefore it points to the fact that humans are only a part in the natural network of life. By analysing *Atharva Veda*, M. Vannucci notes. Nature is to be understood as a friend, revered as mother, obeyed as father and nurtured as a beloved child. Nature is sacred because man depends entirely on it and because of this everything is sanctified, including man and the terrifying aspects of nature itself such as glaciers, earthquakes and storms (75).

Humans are part of nature. Human bodies are constituted by various elements that can also be found in the environment. In this world, everything is interconnected. One creature is dependent on the other for its existence and survival and therefore one life cycle affects the other life cycle. According to Vedic ethos, the cosmic harmony or *rtha* is a regulating law on earth. Both the biotic and abiotic components together constitute

life on earth. They are dependent on each other. The whole system will become imbalanced if any one of the components or units is damaged. Human beings are part of the nature in Vedas. Rather than considering humans as supreme, they are given the responsibility of protector and conservator. Earth, considered as pious and sacred, supports various animate and inanimate beings. Humans, by following various duties and laws assigned to them, helps in maintaining the cosmic order. H.W. Wallis in *The Cosmology of the Rigveda* (1999) opines that:

The principle of the order of the world, of the regularity of cosmic phenomena, was conceived by the Rishis to have existed as a principle before the manifestation of any phenomena. The phenomena of the world are shifting and changeable, but the principle regulating the periodical recurrence of phenomena is constant; fresh phenomena are continually reproduced, but the principle of order remains the same; the principle, therefore, existed already when the earliest phenomena appeared (94-95).

The *Rita* has been defined as cosmic order, which maintains order and balance in nature. *Varuna* is the God of *Rita* in Vedas. He rules the cosmos and is behind every existence, movement or change in nature. Though he is the God of water, but he sustains and controls the world and also maintains the balance among natural forces in nature.

The *Samkhya* tradition adores the *Panchmahabhutas* i.e. five great elements. The Universe is made up of five elements- space or ether, air, fire, water and earth or land, according to Upanishads. A balance has been maintained by the nature among these *Panchbhutas*. An imbalance in any of the constituents will bring disaster to the living organisms. The human body is interconnected with these five elements; the five senses are connected with the five elements. the relation of senses with elements i.e. nose with land or earth, tongue with water, eyes with fire, skin with air and ears with ether or space reflects the deeper link between human and nature. The nature is not external; it is an internal part of human beings. Ranchor Prime in his book *Hinduism and Ecology: Seeds of Truth* points out:

The Vedic scriptures describe how each element was created and how they are all related, one to another. They show how the senses of hearing, touching, seeing, tasting and smelling are each related to a particular element and how all are woven together to form a living world where all the parts depend on each other. If a

disturbance is made in one part of this web its balance will be upset and a disturbance will be caused somewhere else. This disturbance may not just be in the outside world, but also in the internal health of our own body and senses. This kind of effect can be seen in the twentieth century in the damage done to nature and to our own health by the continued industrial exploitation of the environment (25). Kapil Deva Dwivedi in “Ecological Thoughts in the Vedas” states that according to *Vedas*, “earth, water, fire and air together run the human life. When the balance between these forces is disturbed, the process of destruction begins” (*Ecology and Religion*, 7).

One of the greatest *Dharmas* of the ancients is non-violence i.e. *ahimsa*. By preaching and practising non-violence or *ahimsa* towards the biotic as well as abiotic components of the earth, one is helping one’s karma. *Ahimsa*, tenet of Hinduism, persists on the idea that each form of life is holy. Animals and plants have souls. The consumption of flesh is a part of *himsa*, according to *Mahabhartas*. The killing of animals and then consumption of them as food are considered as a violent act: The purchaser of flesh performs *himsa* by his wealth; he who eats flesh does so by enjoying its taste; the killer does *himsa* by actually tying and killing the animal. Thus, there are three forms of killing. He who brings flesh or sends for it, he who cuts off the limbs of an animal, and he who purchases, sells or cooks flesh and eats it (*Mahabhartas*, 115:40).

The Vedic seers have attributed divinity to the natural forces which are beyond man’s control. They worshipped the natural forces which are behind creation, destruction, growth, vitality, movement and change in nature. In *Rigveda*, many hymns are addressed to deities who are symbolised as natural forces. The hymns are written for air, water, rain, wind, sunrise or dawn, sun, etc the natural energies and phenomenon like fire, violent storms, thunderbolts and dawn are incarnated as *Devatas*. S.R.N. Murthy, geologist opines in *Vedic View of the Earth* (1997) that, “the natural geological aspects have been described as Indra, Agni, Vayu, Varun, Usas etc.” (87). According to Vedic tradition, the divine is present everywhere i.e. omnipresent, and manifests itself through many forms.

One should revere the culture and environment in which one lives. The Vedic culture of Ancient India rests on the idea of *Dharma* and *Karma*. One of the *dharmas* in the Vedas is to preserve ecological harmony by safeguarding and conserving our environment and natural

resources. Misuse and exploitation of natural resources and environment for material and personal benefits is a sin in the vedic culture.

Like humans, every species has its rights and therefore humans are barred from encroaching over their rights, liberties and privileges. Nobody is above nature, be it humans or any other species. Ancients advocated that humans should not perform any kind of *Ahimsa* or non-violence against nature. Vandhana Shiva, an environmental activist notes that Earth Democracy means “the recognition of and respect for the life of all species and all people” (167). She quotes *Isho Upanishad*: The universe is the creation of the Supreme Power meant for the benefits of [all] creation. Each individual life form must, therefore, learn to enjoy its benefits by forming a part of the system in close relation with other species. Let not any one species encroach upon other rights ... A selfish man overutilizing the resources of nature to satisfy his own ever-increasing needs is nothing but a thief, because using resources beyond one’s needs would result in the utilization of resources over which others have a right (*Hope beneath Our Feet* 167-68).

Environment sustainability has been given prime importance in the Vedas. People have been aware of the value of environment for the humanity. For maintaining the moral relationship with environment, the humans are subjected to follow the *Dharma*. In *Rigveda*, humans were warned against spreading pollution in the atmosphere. The environment can be conserved if humans maintain the harmony with it. In one of the verses, it is suggested:

Graze not the sky. Harm not mid-air. Be in accordance with the earth. For this well-sharpened axe hath led thee forth to great felicity. Hence, with a hundred branches, God, Lord of the Forest, grow thou up. May we grow spreading with a hundred branches (*Rigveda* 5.43).

Various references are found in the Vedic texts about the value of the flora. The Flora represents the feminine in nature. It includes forests, various plants, trees and herbs. Forest symbolises life which nurtures, protects and conserves life. It provides shelter and food to other lives. It is the main source of fertility in the Vedic times. Sages and seers who have written the Vedic texts often retreat to forest and live with nature. Nature is worshipped as it is responsible for the preservation and protection of life on earth: “So may rich Mountains and the liberal Waters, so may all Herbs that grow on ground, and Heaven,/And

Earth accordant with the Forest-Sovrans, and both the World-halves round about protect us” (*Rig Veda*, VII.34.23).

Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, a discourse on administration and economy, shows ecological awareness. Several penalties were framed for disturbing or harming the biotic as well as abiotic components. *Arthashastra* also gives great importance to environment protection like safeguarding plants, animals and environment, maintaining proper sanitation and cleanliness. Special care was given to the environment. The development of Forest sanctuaries (*Abhayarana*) and Animal sanctuaries (*Abhayavana*) was part of the administration. The plants and the animals were given protection in these sanctuaries. The Superintendent was also appointed to look after these sanctuaries. The act of damaging or harming the plants and animals was a crime. In the Vedic times, it was everybody’s duty to maintain cleanliness and various penalties were set for polluting or disturbing the environment.

The author of *The Genius of India*, Guy Sorman opines: “The Indian tradition, on the other hand, is that men submit to nature and form part of it, there nature preserves its sacredness, lost in the West since the Industrial Revolution” (197). Moreover, he further argues that the concept of ecology came into forefront due to the 1968 movement, as a result of the congregation between the West and India (197). He further states that:

There is hardly anything in European thought to predispose the West to reject virility, the respect for authority, the mastery over nature. India too has a warrior (khatritya) tradition of virility as exemplified in the Mahabharata, only it is secondary. First, comes the veneration of thousands of goddesses - for the Indians, India is above all Mother India. India’s femininity and sexual ambiguity, is the very antithesis of Western virility. For example, when the British scaled earth’s highest peak, the exploit was widely hailed as the “conquest of the Everest.” It was not realized and is often not realized still, that the word “conquest” was totally out of place in the context of the peak which is considered an object of reverence by many. One does not “conquer” nature. Nature humours at times, man’s curiosity. Conquest is, therefore, an irreverent word (197).

Mahatma Gandhi also observes that: “I bow my head in reverence to our ancestors for their sense of the beautiful in nature and for their foresight in investing beautiful manifestations of Nature with a religious

significance” (*The Glimpses of Indian Culture* 106).

Today, there is a need for the humans to search for new ways of sustaining amidst ecological crisis that is threatening all the living as well as non-living components of the planet. The planet is bearing assaults through pollution, depletion of natural resources and extinction of species. In addition to this, the ecological crisis is aggravated by nuclear production, new technology, industrialisation and the increasing population. The *panchamahabhutas* that supports life are in danger. Humans have to realise that they are part of the life cycles of ecosystem. The present ecological crisis is not only through socio- economic and political factors but also due to lack of spiritual and ethical values.

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