

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND SUSTAINABILITY IN VEDIC LITERATURE

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Abstract:

In present world scenario, mankind is facing crises at many levels. Many of the crises are human generated. Man has made use of the natural resources in an extravagant manner and hence the environmental imbalance is playing havoc on this globe. Global warming and its impact are making lives miserable. The reasons are obvious. But to control the worsening situation, even COP summits are struggling very hard. The solution lies in changing not only lifestyle but mindset too. As our ancient Indian seers had considered the earth and Nature as the Mother, the attitude of considering every atom as apart of larger consciousness can transform the way of life and perspective towards the environment. This paper tackles the issue in the light of the knowledge which has been treasured in our ancient texts and shows the path towards solving the issues related to Global warming, climate justice and protecting environment.

Key Words:

Full Research Paper:

Hinduism is not only one of the major religions of the world but also a way of life. However, like any other religion, Hinduism is complex and not even obscuring. The fundamentals of Hinduism are based on nature and scientific truth.

The way of life and different shades of Hinduism as attached with religious fervour are usually manifested in the environmental context.

Nature has been an important part of the Hindu belief system and Human beings are a part and parcel of nature, hence the responsibility of protecting nature is laid upon human beings. Belief in the Vedic karmakand or rituals, dharma in its vast context, the ritual of offering flowers and fruits and other samagri to a deity through yajna, eating fruits while observing fast, yoga, offerings to snakes and feeding other animals like cow and dogs and birds, etc is some of the practices which one identifies with Hinduism. This paper attempts to explore the practices which are generally understood as religious practices but have scientific and cosmic significance.

The Western misconception is that India lacked in scientific advancements in her past, and her literature provides no or very little clues to substantiate her claim of scientific and technological discoveries. This is in spite of the appreciating words of many Asian as well as European travellers in past, that they have undermined the glory and achievements of Indian seers who knew the mechanism of cosmos thousands of years ago and had a very strong foothold on astrology, astronomy, Āyurveda, chemistry, natural sciences, physics, surgery, and so on.

Here we will see how the seers had been the masters of cosmology and knew how the man has to play a role in preserving nature. While there are a numerous of ancient scripts dealing with the importance of Nature and the way the man is supposed to deal with Nature, the purpose of this

paper will be restricted to the exploration of those aspects Vedic texts that are describing the relation of Man with the Mother Earth and with the environment. Finally, this paper also explores how some of the ancient practices have created a place for themselves in contemporary times and how they are affecting the lives of the people at large in present scenario.

Indian Knowledge System has its own glorious history and promising Future. If the scriptures including four vedas and other texts like Samhitas, Brahman granth, Aranyak, etc are taken into consideration, the future of this globe will be better definitely. Surprisingly, our seers had been observing the earth and the universe with their open eyes and sharp minds. They not only knew how the earth was born but also knew what will happen to this earth if we do not take care of it.

The basic Hindu thought was do not exploit the resources, try to use them in minimum and preserve them for the next generation. But as the man started to consume every natural resource in an extravagant manner, the crisis started. The most relevant forever is increasing necessity for sustainability. For the clues of all environmental issues, the way of life which was prescribed by Vedas and other ancient texts are best sources to follow to save mankind from the hazards of perishing the earth. It is high time to understand and improve our efforts to enhance human welfare through wisdom of the past.

Therefore, there is a need to analyse the nature and history of the Indian Knowledge, philosophy and values related to the welfare of mankind. All ancient Indian texts discuss the issues related to the welfare and sustainability of life and human wellbeing. Modern Sciences, medicine, mathematics, philosophy, religion, and astronomy all trace their roots to India. India is often referred to be "the cradle of human civilization," "the mother of speech," "the grandmother of stories and customs." and similar titles.

What is Environment?

The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 defines the environment as follows: 'Environment includes water air and land and the inter-relationship which exists among and between water, air and land and human beings, other living creatures, plants, micro-organisms and property'

The environment consists of two components namely biotic (living organisms) and abiotic (non-living materials) factors. The living organisms can be grouped into three types - those living mainly are found on land, in water and in the air. The non-living materials of the environment are land, air, water, property etc.

Vedic View of Environment

Vedic view on environment is well-defined in one verse of the Atharvaveda where three coverings of our surroundings are referred as Chandamsi : ()

'Wise utilize three elements variously which are varied, visible and full of qualities. These are water, air and plants or herbs. They exist in the world from the very beginning. They are called as Chandansi meaning 'coverings available everywhere.'

In the Vedas, the order of the Universe is called 'Rita.' Rita reduces chaos to cosmos, and gives order and integration to matter. It also gives symmetry and harmony in the environment.

It is controlling and sustaining power. It sustains sun in the sky. Rita as Universal Law governs everything in the cosmos. The whole of the manifested universe is working under Rita.

The Vedic Aryans were children of nature. They studied nature's drama very minutely. Sand-storm and cyclone, intense lightening, terrific thunderclaps, the heavy rush of rain in monsoon, the swift flood in the stream that comes down from the hills, the scorching heat of the sun, the cracking red flames of the fire, all witness to power beyond man's power. The Vedic sages felt the greatness of these forces. They adored these activities. They appreciated these forces. They worshiped and prayed them due to regard, surprise and fear.

It is well known that the Vedas are the oldest surviving literary works in the whole world. The experiences of the *Rishis* (sages) poured out in the form of poetry came to be known as *Mantras*, which make up the content of the Vedas.

Veda means 'knowledge'. 'Veda' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'vid'. As knowledge Veda is one. Vedas are called 'Apaurusheya, which means not created by men. These are revelations of different *Rishis* (Sages-Whom we can refer to as subjective scientists) to students.

The oldest and simplest form of Nature-worship finds expression in Vedic texts.

समुद्रवसने देवि पर्वतस्तनमण्डले ।

विष्णुपत्नि नमस्तुभ्यं पादस्पर्शं क्षमस्वमे ॥

Everyday Morning Prayer of Every Hindu which apologizes for touching feet on earth.

Relation of Man with Nature

The Five elements Constitute Our Very Bodies and every living and non- living beings.

The Vedas stress the need for protection and development of forests and other natural resources. Human Beings have to safeguard the trees, rivers, mountains and other living beings.

It is amazing that the people in Vedic times regarded nature and the environment in a holistic manner and revered each of its constituents and entities by carefully preserving them.

“Do Not Harm The Environment; Do Not Harm The Water And The Flora; Earth Is My Mother, I Am Her Son; May The Waters Remain Fresh, Do Not Harm The Waters”.“Do Not Cut Trees, Because They Remove Pollution.” (*Rig Veda*, 6:48:17)“

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It proves the depth of knowledge of Vedic seers about the basic elements of the environment.

Rita- The Order of The Universe

In the Vedas, the order of the Universe is called 'Rita.' Rita reduces chaos to cosmos, and gives order and integration to matter. It also gives symmetry and harmony in the environment. Hence the conception of Rita has an aesthetic as well as scientific content too; it implies splendour and beauty to the life on the earth. It is for this reason that the Vedic gods, upholding Rita, are all lawful, and beautiful and good. Their beauty is a significance attribute to the whole Universe. The cycle of seasons was a part of this order, due to which the earlier humans could understand and decide about their residence and protection.

What is Earth?

विश्वंभरा वसुधानी प्रतिष्ठा हिरण्यवक्षा जगतो निवेशनी ।

वैश्वानरं विभ्रती भूमिरग्नीमिन्द्रऋषभा द्रविणे नो दधातु ।

The Earth is Vishvambhara (All bearing) vasudha (producer of wealth. She is hiranyvaksha – (golden bosom) and dwelling place for all (living beings) on this world.

She holds Vaishvanar (universal Fire) within her. Which empowers Indra and Rishabh, May mother earth bestow on us the splendor of that fire to make us stronger.

Thus, the concept of earth bearing all living and non living beings and having the fire inside her, made it venerable and worthy to worship.

ॐ ईशावास्यं इदं सर्वं यत् किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।

तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जिथाः मा गृधः कस्य स्विद् धनम् ॥

“Everything - whatever seen in this world/ universe is pervaded by the Almighty. so use everything without attachment, do not wish to snatch off other's possessions.” (Isha Upanishad-V.1)

This concept of detachment is at the core of the Indian thought. It teaches us not to crave for material wealth and possessions. It explicitly says that the creator has created everything for everyone, i.e. every living being and man should not exploit but in fact relish by renouncing the things and giving it to others.

Earth as a Mother

सा नो भूमिर्वि सृजतां माता पुत्राय मे पयः ॥”

Mother earth, like mother to a son, (10.3:) May she pour forth her milk (with kindness) as a mother does to her son.

- यत्ते भूमे विखनामि क्षिप्रं तदपि रोहतु।
- मां ते मर्म विमृग्वरी या ते हृदयमर्पितम्॥ (१२.१.11- अथर्ववेद)
- अर्थात्, हे भूमि माता! मैं जो तुम्हें हानि पहुंचाता हूं, शीघ्र ही उसकी क्षतिपूर्ति हो

जाय। मैं तुम्हारे मर्मको (चराचर जगत्को) और हृदयको आहत करने वाला ना बनू ॥

- गिर्यस्ते पर्वता हिम्वन्तोरण्यं ते पृथ्वी स्योन्मस्तु I
- बभ्रुं कृष्णा रोहिणी विश्वरूपा ध्रुवा भूमि पृथिवीमिन्द्रगुप्तां I
- अजितो हतो अक्षतो ध्येष्ठां पृथिविमहं II (१२. १. ३५ -अथर्ववेद)

अर्थात्, हे पृथ्वी देवी, तुम्हारे पर्वत और जङ्गल कल्याणकारी हो I हे सुन्दर भिन्न, भिन्न
रङ्गोवाली और स्थिर एवं रक्षित पृथ्वी, जिस पर मैं अजेय, अनाहत, अक्षर होकर रहा।

May the mountains be your hills and the forests be your earth I

Babhrum, Krishna, Rohini, Visvarooopa, Dhruva, Bhumi, Prithivi, Indragupta I on this beautiful and protected earth, I reside unconquered, unharmed and imperishable.

Trees Worshipped as God

नमो हरिकेशेभ्यो नाम्स्तारय / वृक्षो वै शिवाः (शुक्ल यजुर्वेद १६-४०)

आदित्यवर्णे तपसोधि जातो I (श्री सूक्त-६)

In Shree Suktam Bilv Vruksh is worshipped as God. In Bharat, Pipal and Bynyan trees are also worshipped. Taitariy Samhita also talks about trees as living beings.

अंतः संजा भवन्तेते सुखदुःखसमन्विताः इति मनुना प्रोक्तं I (मनुस्मृति १)

These trees have the inner senses, accompanied by pleasure and pain. So the discoveries that Scientist Jagdish Chandra Bose had stated after scientific experiments, it was already stated in Manu Smruti.

वृक्षो महद ब्रह्मःI (अथर्व वेद -१ -३२- १)

वृक्षेदने ब्रह्मछेदनं इति अभिलषती मनुः I इति इन्धनार्थम् अशुष्कनाम् द्रुमाणामवपातम् I

(मनुस्मृति)

मा काकम्बीरमुद वृहो वनस्पतिमशस्तिर्विहि निनशः I (रुग्वेद -६-४८-१७)

In Rugveda, trees are shown as destructor of pollution.

In Himadri -1trees are considered equivalent to 10 sons.

दशकुपसमावापी, दशवापी समो ह्रुदःI

दशह्रुदसमः पुत्रो दश पुत्रसमो द्रुमःII (हिमाद्री-१)

The sloka emphasizes the significance of trees and their importance in comparison to other entities like wells, ponds, and even children.

- **दशकूपसमा वापी=** A well (बावड़ी) is equal to ten wells (कुओं).
- **दशवापीसमो ह्रद =** A pond (तालाब or ह्रद) is equal to ten wells (बावड़ियों).
- **दशह्रदसमः पुत्रो =** A son (पुत्र) is equal to ten ponds (तालाबों or ह्रदों).
- **दशपुत्रसमो द्रुमः =** A tree (वृक्ष) is equal to ten sons (पुत्रों).

The merit of digging a pond is worth the merit of digging ten wells. The merit of digging a deep lake is worth the merit of digging ten ponds. The merit of rearing a child is worth the merit of maintaining ten deep lakes. The merit of planting and bringing up a tree is worth the merit of rearing ten children. This is my moral responsibility laid down only for the welfare of the world only.

Use of medicinal plants to cure diseases is also acknowledged in our ancient texts.

औषधि प्रतिमो दध्वं पुष्पावती:I

Yajna as Saviour of Life on Earth

Yajnas, or Vedic rituals involving offerings into fire, are believed to play a role in maintaining environmental balance by purifying the air and potentially mitigating pollution. The aromatic substances released during the ritual are thought to protect plant life and may have beneficial effects on human health, including reducing certain pollutants and promoting a positive energy in the environment.

Yajna Contributes to Environmental Balance:

Yajna was a practice in ancient India. For any auspicious occasions Yajnas were performed as it was not only believed that yajnas were the means to please Gods so that they may shower blessings in the form of grains and water.

यज्ञेन अस्य विश्वस्य पालनं भवति ।

ओजन्स्तरस्य वृद्धिम करोति ।

Reduces Air Purification: The burning of specific materials during Yagya (like mango wood and herbs as well as pure ghee) is believed to purify the air by reducing particulate matter, harmful gases, and microorganisms. The aromatic substances released during the ritual are thought to protect plants, animals and humans from harmful agents and particles.

Yajnas are believed to create a positive and harmonious environment by charging the atmosphere with prana (vital energy) and promoting a sense of well-being.

In the CHANDOGYA UPNISHAD, Yajna has been described as the best means of resolving environment pollution. It is said that Yajna removes all impurities and pollution and makes the

air pure. The Havan Samagri used in the Yajna is burnt in fire and is spread everywhere with the help of air, the fume removes contaminated air and creates a fragrant environment.

In the modern era, it has become clear from the researches on Yajna that the number of harmful matters for human body, responsible for lungs and heart diseases are decreased by sacrificing some special wood like mango etc. It was observed that after performance of Yajna there was a significant decrease in the indoor EMR (Electromagnetic Radiation) level.

Yajna helps in minimizing air pollution, in increasing crop yield, in protecting plants from various diseases, as well as in providing a disease-free (nirogi), pure (Shudhdh) and energized (urjayukt) environment for all, offering peace and happiness to all humans and harmony in society. Moreover, *Yajna* serves as a bridge between desire and fulfilment of the wishes.

न इदं ममः

Five thousand years ago, the sages of the Atharva Veda said, "The earth's attributes are for everybody and no single group or nation has special authority over it". (अथर्ववेद XII.1.18). The hymn also describes the earth as the mother of all species living on it. "Let the whole of humanity speak the language of peace and harmony and let all living beings live in accord with each other". (अथर्ववेद XII.1.16).

Clues For Present Day Crisis

It is now very much required that we make a sustainable use of natural resources. Following are the steps that can be followed to save ourselves from further grievous crisis.

1. Take only what you need and no more: Being a rational animal only human beings can use their brains and can curb their waste. Now a days, in the mall culture, everybody is purchasing unnecessary things and instead of making its optimum use, people throw away products without giving a second thought. Before throwing any food items, clothes or any other consumable product, you can give it away to the needy people.
2. Consumerism - the root cause of climate change and Global Warming is the extravagancy in life. Capitalistic attitudes and living life in a bohemian style has caused many uninvited issues. Cities in India van not manage their waste as it is in such a massive scale. The only solution is strictly following 3 Rs- Reuse/Recycle/Reduce
3. Demand-based economic model can help reduce the excessive use of unnecessary products and also help in reducing the wastage. Simplicity in life can also reduce many issues.
4. Emphasis not on reducing consumption and finding alternate energy sources can solve the problems but not for long. The solution lies in reducing the requirements and making life simple.
5. Root Cause of Ecological Imbalance lies in all developmental activities like, industrial development, construction work, use of private vehicles instead of public transport, etc. Use of public transport can reduce the carbon emission and accidents.

Conclusion

India should provide serious attention to preserving and promoting its cultural heritage, which is essential to the country's sense of self. India's new education policy aims to give pupils a sense of independence and a deep appreciation for India's complex and fascinating history, cultural heritage, and contemporary knowledge base and practices.

Our aim is to become "true global citizens" by helping all humans gain the information, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to commit responsibly to issues like human rights, sustainable development and living, and global well-being and welfare. The goal is Harmonious Society. Indian wisdom can play a vital role in it.

As Shashi Tiwari says, "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.'⁷⁴ Vedic message is clear that environment belongs to all living beings, so it needs protection by all, for the welfare of all. Thus the study proves the origin of environmental studies from the Vedas."

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