

Indian Philosophy and Environment

Abstract

Environment problem pose a challenge to humanity, which is unprecedented in its scope and complexity. Life on this planet earth has been possible only because of its environment and depends upon its natural resources forest, water, coupled with short sightedness have disturbed the delicate ecological balance .Environment is a global concept today , we have special environmental responsibility to ourselves to conserve the environment not merely for the aesthetic value but for sheer survival. Indian culture believes that man is the greatest creation of nature. So, if nature is nurtured, it become a medium for development of personality which further will protect the culture in which arts,literature,music and moral values could be saved.

Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and other scriptures give a detailed description of trees, plants and wildlife along with their importance to the community. Trees have considered as an essential part of dwelling in Indian homes. Significance of plants and trees to human life is further exemplified in Varah Puran which advocates regular plantation as a means to achieve heaven. In Matsyapurana and Padmapurana also there is description of great plantation ceremony- Vriksha Mahotsava (Tree Festival). In Matsyapurana plantation of a tree has been equated with progeny of ten sons.

India is a country which has taught from centuries to live in harmony with nature .Almost all the thinkers from Rigvedic age to date stressed the importance of nature .Gandhi has said that “Nature has enough for everybody’s needs & not for his greed”.

If we look up in our sacred books. We find Indian Cultures consciousness about environment from Vedic periods it is written in Atharva Veda Mata Bhumi Putrahen Prithva meant that “Bhumi”or earth is our Mother and I am the son of earth .Rishies in Atharva Veda while praying to earth has said that may your mountains, forests prove blessing for us. ‘In our Vedas earth has been honored as mother and has given the message for the protection of natural resources. Various trees were worshiped by people. According to Mahatma Gandhi, “It will be violence if we destroy the earth without keeping in mind the interest of the posterity.”

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Preservation of animals was also advocated in the Rig-Veda and Upanishads. Violence against animals and human sacrifices was prohibited in Upanishad .Like human beings animals and trees are also creation of God. What then, if it is not violence to destroy them. Celebrating Van Mahotsva signifies the importance of plants and trees in keeping our environment clean and healthy .Trees provides pure air Shade, rains, fruits, flower and mental satisfaction.

In Buddha –Jatak there is a story about trees. In a jungle Jodhi- Satava was born as a God of tree .Near him were other God trees. In that forest lived lions and tigers. With their fear all the trees were safe .Once a foolish tree asked the wise one that because of these tigers our forest has become foul smelling so they should be expelled out of forest. The wise tree said that with these wild animals we are safe so they should be kept in forest only .But the foolish tree did not listen to his advise and drove out all the tigers from there

.When the people living nearby jungles came to know about it they came without any fear or hesitation to cut trees. On this the wise tree said it is all because of your mistake and advised to call the tigers back for the safety of the jungle. The great poet Kali Das also described the importance of forest and wild life in his great works.

In Tulsi's Ramayana there are extensive references of forest and wild life .Not only that Mughal Kings and even before that Muslim Emperors had made efforts to plant shady trees by road-sides. Even before that Emperor Ashoka had banned the sacrifice of animals.

In his edicts it is mentioned that, "Sacrifice of animal is prohibited here". Plants provide us many medicines for curing many diseases both for man and animals. The trees are the great gift of God to us .So they should be planted in large number by the side of roads.

In our country there is a tradition to worship plants .To some we pray for the well- being of children and to some for prosperity and comforts to some we pray for diseases free society. Indian culture is quite rich and conscious about environment. This is just the result of man's greed that we are facing the disasters like drought, floods and other natural calamities. Industrialization and technology are not the only reason behind pollution, but our polluted mentality which is because of western education system .We can construct huge buildings of university, colleges and professional colleges but they are not going to change the mental set up of students.

Man has forgotten inner goodness for the sake of physical comforts. The true education is that which is for the well being of mankind. The roots of such education can be best found in our own Indian Culture.

Worldwide awareness of the need for protection of the environment and prevention of ecological disaster has taken root, very slowly, only in the past 50 years or so.

Although human beings are considered the most intelligent life form on earth, they are responsible for most of the damage done to planet earth.

In India and elsewhere, as awareness of clean water needs, pollution of air, water and soil, global warming, species extinction, etc creates urgency for action, religious thinkers and activists have begun to reflect on how the values of Indian tradition might contribute to fostering greater care for earth's ecology. Environmental in Indian thought is not conceived as a physical, lifeless entity- it is very living mechanism where humans are one of the many living creatures. There is also a great emphasis on adaptation as one of the guiding principles for an interaction between human and non- human world.

It has been argued by ancient Indian philosophers that man being an intelligent creature should have the protection of environment as one of the fundamental duties. The fragility of the environment has also been carefully stressed in such discourses.

The principal cosmic-vision is fully integrated in two different but related traditions- the oral and textual. While the reflections of the oral tradition are more focused on practice, the textual tradition offers a complete and systemic analysis of the universe.

The Indian textual tradition assumes that, like the rest of the material world, man is made of elements which at death disintegrate and dissolve into nature. At the most general levels there are nine tatvas or elements; Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Sky, Time, directions, Mind and Soil. Indian mythology explains that elements

originate in phases. Water, Earth and sky come first; aquatic animals and birds second; land third; air or wind fourth and finally fire.

Indian thought explains Environment as a given entity which is transcendental in nature. It perceives that there is life in all kinds of things; it might be biotic or non-biotic material. There is greater emphasis on mutual dependence where living in isolation was not possible. Environment has been perceived as a friendly abode.

It was considered very good to live in forest where one can experience environment in its purest form. Living in urban centers, which is natural- man made living, was given secondary position. It was perceived that nature can satisfy everybody's need if one maintains harmony with the given environment.

Even in different stages of human life in Hindu philosophy, shifting to forest in older age was given importance which is commonly known as "Vanaprastha". A Vanaprastha (Sanskrit) is a person who is living in the forest as a hermit after partially giving up material desires.

This word is generally used to denote a particular phase of life in the Vedic ashram system when a person is between the ages of 50 and 74. In this phase of life, the person is in a retreat from worldly life. He lives away from the city, in a jungle as a hermit, with as little material possessions as possible. This stage denotes a transition phase from material to spiritual life. When a householder is considered to be older or advanced in years, perceiving his skin become wrinkled, his hair turns gray, and has grandchildren, the time is said to have come for him to enter the third stage of life, or vanaprastha. It is said that he should now disengage himself from all family ties, except that his wife may accompany him, if she chooses.

Ancient Indian felt Brahman (not caste) presence in everything around them. Since these divine forces sustained all living creatures and organic things on this earth, to please God, they felt they must live in harmony with His creation including earth, rivers, forests, sun, air, and mountains. This belief spawned many rituals that are still followed by traditional Indians. For example, before the foundation of a building is dug, a priest is invited to perform the Bhoomi Pooja in order to worship and appease mother earth and seek forgiveness for violating her. Certain plants, trees and rivers were considered sacred, and worshipped in festivals.

What oral tradition says?

Oral traditions form the basic method by which we come to know about the knowledge which has not been codified. They also help us to understand those societies, for which we have very limited textual information. Day-to-day human conversation carries the glimpses of ancient past. In oral tradition in India, environment has been perceived as a living being which breathes, feels, protects etc. Environment is a friendly entity.

The animals and forms are one of the basic components of tales and oral tradition in India had created. Various attributes of animals were identified and were used as if they are natural characteristics. Plant life provided the base of different stories. It was always kept in mind that human survival was possible only with the conservation of entire flora and fauna. It is also reflected in the religious practices as different animals and plants were worshipped at different times so as to ensure their survival.

Environment in Philosophical treatises-

The Indian textual tradition conceives environment as a system with life which has synchronized the complex inter-relationship of numerous living and non-living entities. Even the abiotic world has been perceived as a living creature with a soul. It is a very significant concept as it placed man as equal to every other element of our environment. The Indian thought greatly emphasizes upon a very cordial relationship among all the elements of our world. To highlight the importance of various components of our environment, various rituals have been institutionalized. These rituals ensured that we treated even the non-living world with great care and maintain a harmony.

For example fire is conceived as messenger of God. Earth has been considered as mother goddess. Sky is worshipped as father. Earth worship manifested itself even in stone worship. The tales of Panchtantra also highlight the special position which is given to living world. Animals are given human characteristic of not only language but also faculty of feelings and rationality. It tries to give lessons to mankind by highlighting the problems through animal world's characteristics. Different attributes of animals have been identified and are very beautifully utilized in these tales. Cow is worshipped. Trees are worshiped. Various animals are allotted to different Gods and Goddesses as their mode of transportation to highlight their utility and to enhance their position.

Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and other scriptures give a detailed description of trees, plants and wildlife along with their importance to the community. Trees have considered as an essential part of dwelling in Indian homes. Significance of plants and trees to human life is further exemplified in Varah Puran which advocates regular plantation as a means to achieve heaven. In Matsyapurana and Padmapurana also there is description of great plantation ceremony- Vriksha Mahotsava (Tree Festival). In Matsyapurana plantation of a tree has been equated with progeny of ten sons.

Indians believed that humans, gods and nature were integral parts of one organic whole. Ancient Indian writers, later on, personified each of the divine force as a Devata or deity worthy of reverence and worship. Even Charvaka, the atheist philosopher of ancient India, who totally rejected Vedas, the Hindu scriptures, considered the principles of Vayu (air) Bhumi (earth), Jala (water), Agni (fire) as important factors in regulating the lives of humans, animals and plants.

Hymn IX of Book 10 of Rig Veda is dedicated to Water. The hymn recognizes the life giving ability of water, not only physically but also spiritually. The prayer concludes that plentiful supply of pure water be always available.

Here is a hymn from Isha Upanishad: "Everything in the universe belongs to the Supreme God. Therefore take only what you need, that is set aside for you. Do not take anything else, for you know to whom it belongs". Isha Upanishad also says: "Resources are given to mankind for their living. Knowledge of using the resources is absolutely necessary."

The holy scripture Bhagavatam (Volume 2, Chapter 1, Verses 32-33) says: "The air is His breath, the trees are the hairs of His body, The oceans His waist, the hills and mountains are His bones, The rivers are the veins of the Cosmic Being (Brahman), His movements are the passing of ages".

Indian philosophical thought also highlights the numerous species of flora and fauna and their special position vis-à-vis environment and Master living creature. This totalistic view is a great achievement of the Indian philosophy.

Conclusion

Education is what makes people aware of the need for any activity and can generate the much –needed support for that can save our besieged environment. The basis of a healthy environment is good air, water, and soil. These basic building blocks of life are obviously essential for life to continue and must be cared for, preserved and enhanced. The most important step in achieving the goals of environment friendliness is arousing the concern and awareness among the public regarding the maintenance of ecological balance, environment conservation and adoption of green technologies. To achieve the goals of protection of environment, participation of public is must that is possible only when the public is aware about the ecological and environment issues. India is a country which has taught from century to live in harmony with nature almost all the thinkers from Rig-Veda age to stressed the importance of nature.

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