

# ANCIENT INDIAN VISION: CONCEPT OF ENVIRONMENT

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## Abstract

As we all are well familiar with the environment, it is everything which surrounds us naturally. Ever since man has emerged on the earth, there had been persistent dependency on nature. Ancient Indian literature serves as vast reservoirs of knowledge related to everything about environment. The vedic, puranic, Jain and Bhuddhist traditions established the principles of ecological harmony centuries ago.

The Vedas attach great importance to environment protection and purity. Initially the Rigvedic Gods like Indra, Agni, Varuna, Vayu, Surya and Goddess like Usha, Aditi, Saraswati are associated with different aspects of nature. Also, the people of Indus Valley Civilization had given emphasis in sanitation and environment protection. The IVC environmental tradition was conscious of the need to protect nature and to harness it within the prescribed limits. The vedic peoples are primarily nature worshippers and had great concern about environment and its management. The Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishad are full of references to diversified range of flora and fauna. The main principles of two great reformers Lord Buddha and Vardhman Mahavir are closely related to environment and its protection. The celebrated Indian author Kautilya in his book Arthashastra had given importance on the protection and management of forest, gardens and orchards. He also prescribed fines related to cutting of different parts of the tree. During Ashoka Maurya times the full focus was on the clean environment and burning of farm chaff after harvest was banned. The Gupta period marked significant developments in the area of environment. Kalidas, Aryabhata and Palakalpya of the Gupta period were greatly influenced by the environment. The tradition of sacred groves was also common in the ancient period and still practiced. These Groves can be considered the ancient sanctuaries. Protection of environment was prevalent in our ancient society. It was present in India from time immemorial.

**Keywords:** Environment, Vedic, Jain, Bhuddhist, Groves.

## INTRODUCTION

As we all are well familiar with the environment, it is everything which surrounds us naturally and affects our daily life's on the earth. Everything comes under an environment, the air which we breathe, the water which we use for our daily routine, plants, animals and other living things around us. Ever since man emerged on the earth, there had been persistent dependency on nature. Since early stage and even in modern times human beings are unable to subdue environment, rather they are greatly controlled and influenced by the natural phenomena.

Ancient Indian literature serve as vast reservoirs of knowledge related to everything about environment .Whether it is about maintaining ecological balance, weather cycles or simply protecting. Earth-Vedic age seers indeed understood the environmental phenomena profoundly. 5000 years old legacy still forms the core of India's social fabric and sustainable policies. The Vedic, Puranic , Jain and Buddhist traditions established the principles of ecological harmony centuries ago.

Environment and its protection tradition in India is centuries old and Indians has a great respect for environment, Even in morden times Indians with utmost devotion and sincerity worship different forms of nature, It appears that the early Indians lived in close symbiosis with nature. They worshiped Tulsi, neem. Pipal, Bel, Vat , Sal, Banana trees not only as having religious importance but also of medicinal value. The Indian thinkers attributed religiosity to plant for the maintance of ecological balance. Indian civilization has been known as an 'eco-friendly' civilization. At least in the past it did express a profound awareness of the need to evolve a balance pattern in the man-environment interaction and certainty not work towards 'denaturing humanity'. In order to calibrate this man-environment interaction, ancient Indians divinized nature and laid down well formulated guidelines to define. Principally then, the ancient Indian philosophy and literature has understood the man in context and relation to the environment. Further, they also worshipped mountains, land/soil, water, rivers, animals and birds. Millions of Indians recite Sanskrit mantras daily to revere their rivers, mountains, trees, animals and the earth. Although the Chipko (tree hugging) movement is the most widely known example of Indian environmental leadership and love and devotion to environment. The river Ganga is considered the most pious river of India since time immemorial. Mountains like Mount Kailash and Giri Gobardhan were also worshipped since ancient times, are also worshiped even today.

### **PROTO-HISTORIC HARRAPAN CULTURE**

Evidence regarding the environmental history of India can be traced back to the proto-historic Harrapan culture or the Indus Valley Civilization, originated in the north-western part of the Indian sub-continent which is considered the first civilization of India. The people of Indus Valley Civilization of India had given emphasis to sanitation ad environment. They worshipped tres like Pipal and different animals like humped bulls, elephants, rhinoceroses etc. Since the Harrapan times till the date the tradition of tree worshiped becomes a popular form of worship in the Indian culture and social life. The Indus Valley Civilization environmental tradition was conscious of the need to protect nature and harness it within prescribed limits Harrapan sites at Dholivira, for example, demonstrated the elaborate techniques employed for water harvesting and storing. The drainage system was a special feature of the Indus Valley Civilization. The main drains, covered with bricks or stones, ran below the streets and were connected with the house drains. The main drains emptied the waste into culverts which in turn emptied into the river. The drainage system of Mohenjodaro was impressive. Perhaps no other civilization gave so much attention to health and cleanliness as the Harappan.

## ANCIENT LITERATURE ON ENVIRONMENT CONSERVATION

Initially, the Rigvedic Gods like Indra (who is considered the God of rain, thunderstorm, lightning, and war) Agni, Varuna, Vayu, Maruta, Surya and goddess like Usha, Aditi, Saraswati, etc are associated with different aspects of nature. In Hindu philosophy, it is believed that Pancha Mahabhutas (five great elements) created a web of life that is shown forth in the structure and interconnectedness of the cosmos and the human body. Hinduism teaches that the five great elements (air, space, water, fire and earth) that constitute the environment are all derived from Prakriti, the primal energy. Of the five sacrifices to be performed by a hindu householder, the bhutayajna was involved daily offerings of foods to animals, birds and other creature presumably to maintain an ecological balance. To encourage tree plantation many puranic textx like Skandapurana recommended which trees could be planted and in which direction. For example, Skandapurana says that a Vilva tree should be planted at the centre, and four other Vilva trees on its four sides. In the four corners four Banyan trees and twenty-five Ashoka trees in a circle and a Myrobalan tree (Amla) on one side also should be grown. To create an awareness among the people the Varaha Purana states the following: He never goes to hell who plants an Asvatha, or a Pichumarda, or a Banyan, or ten Jess imines, or two pomegranates, or a Panchamra or five mangoes. It is remarkable 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, don't harm the water and the flora; earth is my mother, I am her son; may the waters remain fresh, do not harm the waters... Tranquillity is to the atmosphere, to the earth, to the crops and vegetation." This Vedic prayer invokes divine intervention to bless and protect the environment.

The Vedic people whose main occupation was animal husbandry and agriculture are primary nature worshipers and had great concern about environment and its management. The Vedic literatures like the Vedas, Brahmans, Aranyak, Upanishad, Samithas, Upvedas are full of references to different aspects of environment. The Vedas described the diversified range of flora and fauna and urge the human beings protect, preserve nature and nourish the environment and natural world. For the benefit of the human and other living organism they prescribed a pleasant environment consisting of sweet breeze, sweet flowing rivers, and beneficial herbs, sweet day and night, sweetness of earth particles, sweet fruits bearing trees, beneficial sun and healthy cows. The Vedic peoples had the knowledge of seasons which promoted agriculture and Rig Veda mentions five seasons. The Athar Veda stresses upon the purity of water and also speaks about the protection of the wild life and domestic cattles. The Vedic hymn the Prithivi suka in the Arthava Veda dedicated to the earth goddess is unquestionable the oldest evocative environmental invocation. All the Vedic educational institutions were located in the forest are amidst the serene environment which generated pious ideas and good thinking.

## THE PRINCIPLES OF BUDDHISM AND JAINISM

The main principles of the two great reformers and religious teachers Lord Buddha and Vardhman Mahavir are closely related to environment and its protection. Both Gautam Buddha and Vardhman Mahavir got their supreme knowledge on the banks of the river and under the two giant trees. Gautam Buddha under

papal tree known as Bodhi tree and Mahavir under sal tree. This shows that how man could be able to attain supreme knowledge in fresh and pollution free environment. Lord Buddha's compassionate nature and the principles of adaptability teach us how to adjust with the environment. In fact, Buddhism represents the way of compassion. The Buddha manifested a complete compassion and is respectfully seen as the compassionate protector of all beings and advocated that there should be a proper harmony between human beings and nature. For thousand years, the Buddhist forest monasteries have manifested a harmonious living with nature, being established in the mountains and in the forest. Tranquil life in the forest helped Bhuddhist practitioners to improved their inner minds and at the same time, they also worked for the protection of animals and flora and fauna in the area. Compassion and non-violence are the basis of the ancient Jain scriptural aphorism Parasparopagraho Jivanam (all life is bound together by the mutual support of interdependence). Lord Mahavir proclaimed a profound ecological truth "one who neglects or disregards the existence of earth, air, fire, water and vegetation disregards his own existence which is entwined with them." The concept of Jainism restricts its followers to harm any creature and eventually leads to limited consumption as well as help in protecting environment. In Jain evolutionary theory all souls are equal but are bound by varying amounts of asravas (karmic particles), reflected in the type of body they inhabit. The lowest form of physical bodies, like those of trees and vegetation, have only the sense of touch; yet are able to experience pleasure and pain, and have souls. Mahavir thought that only the one who understood the grave demerit and detriment caused by the destruction of plants and trees could also understand the meaning and merit of reverence of nature. Above these forms of life are micro-organisms and small animals with two, three or four senses. The highest grade of animals, and human beings, also posses rationality and intuition. As a highly evolved form of life, human beings have a great moral responsibility in their responsibility in their mutual dealings and in their relationship with the rest of the universe. It is this conception of life and its eternal coherence, in which humans have an inescapable ethical responsibility, that made the Jain tradition a cradle for the creed of environmental protection and harmony.

### **ARTHASASTRA AND MAURYAN EMPIRE**

The book Arthasastra written by celebrated Indian author Kautilya during the Maurayan period is a treatise on government and economics of ancient India. In this book, importance was given on the protection and management of forests, gardens, orchards. According to the Kautilya it should be the dharma of each individual in the society to protect nature. He also prescribed fines related to cutting of the different parts of tree according to him. Kautilya also recommended sylvan surrounding for residence and pinpointed importance of lakes, groves, gardens, hillocks to make a city worth living which gave rise to a distinctly comprehensive science in ancient India, called arboriculture which dealt with the construction and maintenance of gardens and planned greenery. During Emperor Ashoka's time the focus was on a clean environment, and burning of farm chaff after harvest was banned. Ashoka believed that the state had a responsibility not just to protect the welfare of the people but also its forest, wildlife and environment. Hunting certain species of wild animals was banned, forest and wildlife reserves were established and cruelty to domestic and wild animals was prohibited. Ashokan edicts, that dated back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, clearly provide the first constitutional check against environmental degradation and animal cruelty. The

Mauryan state also maintained the empire's forest along with groves, botanical pharmacies and herbal gardens that have been established for the cultivation of the medicinal herbs. The first veterinary hospitals in the world were probably set up by Ashoka. Fa Hien the Chinese traveller had written about veterinary hospitals in Pataliputra. Ashoka's rule is the foremost example of ecologically responsible statehood in India's ancient history.

### **POST- MAURYAN AND IMPERIAL GUPTA EMPIRE**

The Maurayans were succeeded in the north by Sungas and Kushans and in the south by Satavahans of Andhra who also gave emphasis on the preservation and protection of environment. Depiction of animals, trees and animals figures, trees and vegetal motifs infact dominated the post Mauryan art and sculpture. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea and Ptolemy furnish valuable information about various aspects of environment during this period. The environment conservation as it existed during Mauryan period continued more or less unaltered in subsequent reigns until the end of Gupta empire. The Gupta period which is considered the golden age of the ancient Indian history marked significant developments in the area of environment. The poets, astronomers and scientists of the Gupta period were greatly influenced by the environment.

Among the known Sanskrit poets of the Gupta period Kalidasa was the greatest one who lived probably in the court of Chandragupta II. In his work *Ritusamhara* he described the six seasons in relation to *Sringara*. *Meghaduta* another political work written by him reflects various aspects of nature, especially of clouds. *Aryabhatta* who was the first astronomer to pose the more fundamental problems of astronomy in A.D. 499. He believed that the earth was sphere and rotated on its axis and the shadow of the moon caused eclipse which is the great contribution to the world of the natural science. *Hastayurveda* or the veterinary science, authored by the *Palakalpya* attests to the advances made in medical science during the Gupta period. The *Navanitakam*, a medical work, which is a manual of recipes, formula and prescriptions was compiled during this period. *Varahamihira* threw light on the subjects of Astrology, Geography and Botany. *Brahmgupta* told many years ago before Newton that the earth attracts everything towards itself.

### **ANCIENT SACRED GROVES TRADITION**

The tradition of sacred groves was also common in the ancient period and is still practised by folk and tribal communities. A sacred grove consists of a bunch of old trees, generally at the outskirts of a village, which were left untouched when the original settlers cleared the forest to establish the village. Such groves were regarded as the abodes of Gods and Goddess or spirits and hence protected with utmost care. These small packets of forest dedicated to local deities. They are a common phenomenon in many parts of the country particularly in the north-eastern regions and Western Ghats. These dark evergreen forest patches are believed to be sacred to the village God or Goddess; and have been preserved from time immemorial. The ancient cities of *Vaisali*, *Kushinaraana*, *Champa* all maintained sacred groves. Many ancient Indian texts highlighted the concept of sacred groves through the ages. Protected groves in the hills of *Garhwal* and *Kumaun* are mentioned in old Hindu scriptures like the 'Purans'. In the *Bhagwat Gita* Krishna compared the



world to a single Banyan tree with unlimited branches in which all the species of animals, humans and demigods wander, which reflects the concept of community ecology. These groves can be considered the ancient equivalent of natural sanctuaries where all forms of living creatures are given protection by a deity. There is a category of protected groves among many communities that are associated with certain deity. The presiding deities not only look after the well being of the people but also protected the groves by punishing the offences. The practice of oath taking in the groves was fairly wide spread in the country.

### CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

To sum up, ancient India had a philosophy of environmental management principally enshrined in old injunctions as they were contained in many scriptures and smritis. Early Indian attitude towards nature was conglomeration of spiritual and philosophical thinking as well as social awareness and environmental ethics. The early Indians realising the contribution and value of nature gave it prime importance and devised the ways that how nature could be protected from destruction and environment be made free of pollution. The environmental ethics of native conservation were not only applicable to common man but the rulers and kings were also bound to it. Protection of environment was prevalent in our ancient society. The concept of environment was best explained by the word 'Paryavarana' meaning that envelopes us. Some Indian literature of older times especially mentioned about worship of plants, trees, mother earth, water, air and animals. As a philosophy of life it has been considered as the duty of the mankind to protect the nature. Ancient scriptures like Vedas, Upnishad, Smritis, Purans, Mahabharat, Geeta, Bible, The Holy Quran, Gurugranth Sahib and mythological literature are full of revelations of the idea of harmony with nature and respect of nature. India has had a philosophy of environmental policy dating back to the ancient period. If we look back into our ancient Literature, it provides a good deal of knowledge about each and every aspects of life. Moral injunctions acted as guidelines towards environmental preservations. Environmental concern is not a new phenomenon in Indian scenario. It was present in India from time immortal. It was however not practised to its fullest extent. Now and then people followed this concept by their own moral and ethical deeds. Our ancestors have long been among the most outspoken defenders of natures balance. Ancient Indians were very much aware about the ecology and sustainability. It helps in solving specific environmental problems and the modern principles which can be very helpful in now days. Today environment has become a subject itself which is multidisciplinary in focus and there is an urgent need to make the younger generation aware of environmental protection which was prevalent in our ancient Indian society.

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