



Ecocritical Perspectives in “Prithvi Sukta”

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Abstract

Prithvi Sukta, which is part of the Atharva Veda is in the tradition of hymns to the forces of nature. The Prithvi Sukta has an entire hymn of sixty three verses dedicated to Mother Earth. It presents ecofriendly ideas to understand the treasures of planet earth and means to exploit and utilise them in a sustainable manner. Thus, the Prithvi Sukta considers the progress of human civilization as part of the progress of the whole universe or ecosphere. It also shows how our earth system with its complex inter-linkages between the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the biosphere and the ecosphere provides us with water resources, land resources, energy resources, and many other ecological resources.

This essay tries to explore how the ideas presented in the Prithvi Sukta in Atharva veda can be made relevant for the present ecological issues.

Introduction:

Literature is a mirror of the society. A literary work reflects the acts as well as the aspirations of the people in which it takes birth. As the times change, the way we look at the literature also changes. That is, the methods, approaches and tools of literary analysis change from time to time and from society to society. Since the days of the ancient literary critics and Philosophers like Aristotle, there have been various literary theories that interpreted literary works in various perspectives. One such modern literary theory is ‘Ecocriticism’. It is to be noted that though the emergence of Ecocriticism as a literary theory dates back to only 1970s, the spirit and **consciousness** of this theory i.e., Ecocritical consciousness or environmental spirit had been there since times immemorial. It can be said that Ecocriticism as a practice was very well present in the literatures of the world thousands of centuries ago.

Ecocriticism has been a buzzword in the Academic circles, Research Organisations and Universities in the recent days. Ecocriticism attempts to link literary theory and criticism with ecology and ecological issues. By analyzing the representation of nature in various literary texts, it tries to synthesize literary theory and the ecological matters. Thus, it focuses on the current environmental issues also. Though the emergence of Ecocriticism as a literary theory dates back to 1970s, as a field of practice it had been there across the cultures dating back to thousands of years. Unfortunately in the 19th and 20th centuries, the exploitation of nature by man has reached a dangerous state. Therefore, the need for serious attempts to protect the nature arose across the fields. In the field of literature, this responsibility has been taken by the Ecocritics.

Cheryll Glotfelty gave a working definition of Ecocriticism in his article published in “The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology”. He defines “Ecocriticism- as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”(Reference). Since then, the study of literature from the ecological perspective is given different names – such as ecocriticism, eco-aesthetics, environmental aesthetics, environmental studies, green literature, green studies, etc.

Ecocriticism in Indian Texts:

Ancient Indian literature including the Vedas and Upanishads had emphasized on the need to protect the environment placing more responsibility on the shoulders of human beings in this regard. Particularly in the classical Sanskrit literature, ecology or the nature as a whole occupies an important respectable place. Though they didn't name their works as ecological works or green literature, they strived to strike out a harmonious balance between the man and nature. Many aspects, which ecocriticism focuses today, were dealt with earlier by the ancient Indian writers.

The sacred texts of India have elaborately laid down man's place, role and responsibility in the eco-system. They considered the whole eco-system consisting of the Pancha Bhutas i.e., five elements – Prithvi (Earth), Apus (Water), Tejas (Fire), Vayu (Air), Akasha (the Ether) – as a balanced and harmonious structure which should not be disturbed or destroyed with selfishness of man. The best examples in this regard is Prithvi Suktam (A Hymn to Mother Earth), Nadee Suktam (A Hymn to Rivers) and other hymns in Atharvaveda.

The principles of ecology were echoed in the great Sanskrit works such as – the Ramayana, the first epic by sage Valmiki, and the works of Kalidasa, etc. The Ramayana presents not only wonderful descriptions of nature, but also the harmonious relation between man and nature. In the same way, in the important works of Kalidasa such as – 'Abhignana Shakunthalam', 'Raghuvamsham', 'Kumara Sambhavam', 'Meghadootham', and "Rithu Samahara", nature appears in its varied forms. Interestingly, Kalidasa made 'clouds' and 'seasons' as his protagonists long before the romantic poets addressed their odes to winds and nightingales.

Prithvi Suktam:

It is an interesting fact to note that the ancient Indian literature displays exact knowledge of environmental phenomena. The ancient literature was full of works with a strong environmental sense, covering different aspects of nature. The core belief projected in all these works was that unity encompasses human as well as non-human forms. They display a fairly exact knowledge and understanding of environmental phenomena, of seasons, of climatic changes, of birds, beasts and vegetation. While describing animals and plants, the writers of these anthologies show a great sympathy towards them.

Prithvi Sukta is part of the Atharva Veda. It is in the tradition of hymns to the forces of nature. Though the Bhoo Suktam in the Rig Veda was the earliest hymn addressed to Mother Earth, the Prithvi Sukta appears more comprehensive.

The entire hymn of sixty three verses is dedicated to Mother Earth. The Prithvi Sukta explains how the human civilization can progress in a sustainable way with proper understanding of and use of the treasures of planet earth. It also explores the inter-linkages between different sub elements of ecosphere – the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the biosphere, etc. It tells how the planet earth provides us with water resources, land resources, energy resources, and other resources. The Prithvi Suktam contains essential principles of life, environmental sustainability, peaceful coexistence and resultant multicultural approaches. Many of the verses are very relevant to the present times of strife, conflict and mindless exploitation of environment.

The Prithvi Sukta describes the earth as a living entity. The poet (actually Vedas are said to be 'Apourusheyas' – written by no human) has addressed the Earth as mother and described himself as son. The irrevocative relationship between the man, mother and maker established in this hymn is indeed incomparable.

The available translations of the Prithvi Sukta are – (i) by Maurice Bloomfield (Sacred Books of the East, Vol.42, 1897); and (iii) recent work "Atharva Veda Prithvi Sukta" by Shri N.C. Joshi, Secretary, Rajya Sabha.

Important ecocritical aspects expressed in Prithvi Suktam:

1. Need for certain principles & universal order

The Verse No.(1) itself begins the ecoconsciousness and environmental spirit of the hymn – Prithvi Suktam.

“Truth, settled laws, sacred oblation, penance,
The Supreme Reality and sacrifice
Sustain this earth
Which is the presiding deity of all those
Who exist and are yet to be born.
Let this Earth create enough space for all.”... (1)

The verse says that the Ecosystem is an Earth-centered one which runs on Truth (which never changes), settled laws (not temporary or conveniently changing), sacred oblation (not in irresponsible attitude), penance (self-punishment, not inflected one), the supreme reality (highest level of knowledge/wisdom) and sacrifice (not exploitation of the earth) which assures its sustenance. The verse considers the Earth as ‘the presiding deity of all human beings who exist and who will born in future’. The verse ends with a hope that the Earth provides enough space and resources to all.

2. The Earth as Mother of men and other living beings:

The fundamental announcement made by the Bhu Sooktam (in Rigveda) that “Earth is mother and all the men are its children” has been reiterated in this hymn at several places.

The verse No. (12) tells that the Earth purifies itself for men. This verse also tells that the earth is the mother and the man is her son. **Parjanya** is the father.

The final verse (No.63) once again shows the earth as mother to the men. He prays her to provide him a pleasant and well-founded place, with the cooperation of the God of heaven. He requests her to give him never ending happiness and prosperity

3. Physical features of the Earth:

Ecology refers to the relation between the human beings and their environment (surroundings). Hence, all the elements of the earth and other elements which are connected with earth also fall part of the Ecosystem.

In the Verse (2), the physical features/ elements of the earth were described. They include heights, slopes, great plains. It also explains how the Earth addresses needs of the men for food and other things. This shows **plants** as the most important of the resources on the earth.

The verse No. (11) also has references to – the mountains, the forests. All these resources shall be kind to the mankind. The earth (soils) is in different colours- the brown, the black, the red, the multi-coloured. the Earth is firm. the Man has landed on the earth – unslained, unwounded, unsubdued, Lord Indra protects the Earth.

The verse (59) says that mother earth gives courage to men with its milk filled with gentleness, fragrance, kindness, and sweetness.

The verse No. (62) refers to the gratefulness of the ancient Indians or Vedic people in praying homage to the mother earth for her kindness. He prays the earth to free him from the ailments, diseases, etc. He wishes to get long life by offering sacrifices (bali) to earth.

4. Resources on the Earth:

The Verse (2)... and other verses elaborately explain various resources available on the earth for the progress of human civilization. It considers plants, forests, and water resources, etc. The 3rd verse explains about the Water Resources available on the Earth – such as seas, rivers, and other water bodies that give us food and allow us to breathe and live. The Verse (9) considers water as the everflowing resource given by Earth. The waters are compared to milk for men. The water flows in streams and sprinkles glory upon the men. The water flows in streams and sprinkles glory upon the men.

The Verse (4) tells that the Earth provides us food material, and cattle and other possessions. Verse No.(22) considers the Earth as giver of breath and life. Earth helps us live until our old age gracefully.

5. References to Plants, Trees & Forests:

The plants which are also children of mother Earth support the men. The earth/ecosystem is supported by divine law. the earth is propitious and kind to men. Men live upon her support.

Again reference to Forest trees is there in Verse No. (27). The earth is praised as the all-nourishing and compact one.

There are also References to Food crops – Rice, Barley; Five races of men.

6. References to Earth's Layers:

in the Verse No. (26), reference is made to the physical features of earth – Stones, rocks, dust, etc.

7. References to Fragrance, etc.:

In Verse No. (23), the reference was made to the fragrance given by the plants and waters which is again requested by the men. Verse No. (24) also refers to the fragrance of lotus.

8. References to Cattle & other animals:

Ecosystem gives equal importance to non-human living beings also because it is upon their wellness, the progress of the civilization exists.

Prithvi Suktam refers the earth as the procurer of all kinds of cattle, horses, fowls, good fortune and glory. The animals (domestic cows, etc) shall yield milk for men. The earth gives us the honey of speech (Ver.16).

the man prays mother earth to provide protection from the snakes, scorpions, and other poisonous insects that live on the earth and come out during rainy season. He prays that the creeping insects may not creep upon the men. He wishes to treat the earth by performing only auspicious acts on earth.

In verse No. 48, there is reference to animals – wild animals, domesticated, man-eating lions, tigers, the ula, the wolf, and even to Rakshasas (evil spirits).

In Verse No. 51, there is reference to **birds, flamingoes, eagles, birds of prey, and fowls, etc.** Thus this verse again refers to the rich Biodiversity that is seen on earth. It refers to various birds – flamingoes, eagles, birds of prey, and fowls. It tells how the wind raises the dust, and how the wind causes fire in the forests.

9. Reference to Directions:

The Verse No.(31) refers to all the four directions. The man prays that he may not fall while he walks on either of these directions.

In the next verse, he requests the Mother earth to protect him in all directions from his enemies.

10. Reference to Seasons:

The Verse (36) refers to various seasons and day and nights that result out of the earth (earth's movement around the Sun).

11. Reference to Paths/ Roads/ Tracks:

The Verse No. 46 refers to various vehicles, animals, transportation systems and various ways, roads, tracks that man uses to commute from one place to other. He prays for protecting him from the enemies, thieves. He wishes to do only auspicious things.

12. Coexistence of different people :

Ecology itself advocates coexistence and interdependence between different sections of people, animals, etc.

Verse No. (18) tells that there is haste, commotion and agitation on earth and Great Indra is the protector of the Earth.

13. Biodiversity:

The Prithvi Sukta gives equal importance and reference to other animals, plants, and insects also. it shows the spirit of Biodiversity.

In verse No. 37, there are references to serpents.

14. Earth as Supporter/ supplier/ Provider:

Earth is referred as the supporter of us all. It provides us wealth, the foundation. In the verse (6), the earth is referred as the golden-breasted resting place of all living creatures (referring to the wealth / resources within the earth's inner crest). It provides us property.

The Verse (29) also has references to the Earth as giver/ provider of nourishment, prosperity, food and ghee.

“I address you, O Earth,

Which consecrates me.

This duty-abiding Earth expands

With offerings.

May we sit on you, O Earth,

Which fills us with agility, prosperity,

Food and clarified butter.”.....(29)

This verse tells that the Earth consecrates us, that is the Earth blesses us and makes us holy. It also tells that the Earth is duty-abiding, ever ready to offer its resources to its children. The Earth gives us agility, prosperity and food. Thus, the verse focuses on the sole duty of the Earth as an ever dutiful and kind giver of resources. In verse (34), the earth is considered as bed for the men when they lie down. The man prays her not to hurt or injure him.

15. Men as Supreme, Sovereign, yet obedient Dwellers:

In the verse (8), the Earth is regarded as water in its first form. The earth's heart is in the highest heaven. The earth is surrounded by truth. The Earth may provide us brilliancy, strength and give us supreme sovereignty.

In the verse (14), the man is seeking the protection of the mother Earth from other (evil) forces and enemies. The man requests her to make the enemies subject to him.

In Verse No. (25), there is reference to qualities of men – fragrance, loveliness, charm in male and female, heroic qualities, etc. But it equally tells about the vigour in wild animals with trunks.

In Verse No. 54, it is said that the man has conquered all other creatures on the earth. He considers himself as all-conquering, completely conquering every region. Still, this verse is not showing his pride. But, it appears as a prayer to earth thanking her for granting him such a superior position.

16. Man's craving for wealth/ Resources:

The Verse No. (40) refers to **the man's craving for wealth and his prayer of Earth.**

In the Verse No. 43, the reference is given to the earth's **treasures manifold in secret places, wealth, jewels, and gold and man's request to give them to him.**

17. Responsibility of Men towards Earth:

Prithvi Suktam tells about various activities that can be performed by the men to show their respect/reverence to mother Earth.

In Verse No. 28, the man promises that whether in Rising or sitting, standing or walking, he shall not stumble with his right or left foot upon the earth. The verse cautions the man not to hit upon the earth roughly. Whether sitting or rising, standing or walking, we should not stumble with our right or left foot upon the earth. It shows us how gently the men need to walk on the earth.

In Verse No. (35), The man prays that whatever he reaps out of the earth may replenish. He also wishes not to pierce the vital spots or the heart of the earth. This verse is the crux of man's basic responsibility towards earth. Man may enjoy the fruits of the earth, but he should not exploit the earth to such an extent that it equals to piercing the vital spots and heart of the earth. This shows the pledge taken by the Vedic Indian not to resort to mindless exploitation of the earth's resources. This actually sounds as a warning bell to the modern man who is exploiting the mother earth in every aspect by digging every element out of the core of the earth – oil, gas, minerals, coal, stones, rocks, sand. Further, he is exploiting the exteriors of the earth also by cutting the trees, destroying the forests, polluting the mountains, soils, and water resources.

This verse reflects the original Indian spirit of ecoconsciousness and environmental protection.

18. Equality/ Respect to other animals:

The mother Earth supports both men (bipeds) and animals (quadrupeds). Five races of men belong to her.

19. References to Vedic pundits, sacrifices, Yagnas, etc:

Upon the earth, the holy priests perform their holy works. They do sacrifices to her. The wish of the man is for the prosperity of the earth so that it can give him prosperity (Verse 13). Verse No. (20) refers to the performance of Yagnas to Agni. He is referred as the lover of ghee. Verse no. (21) tells that the earth, clothed in Agni, with dark knees, shall make men brilliant and alert!

In Verse No. 39, there are references to the seven active priests (Sapta Rishis)

20. References to Panchabhutas (Five Elements) & other Natural elements:

Agni is one element of nature or God who is considered as omni present by the prithvi Sukta. The Verse (19) shows us the various resources in which the Fire exists. He is in the earth, in the plants, in the waters, in the stones, and even within the men. The Agnis (different forms of fires) are also seen within Cattle and horses.

In the verse No. (33), there is a reference to Surya (Sun God). it treats Surya as the companion of Earth. The man seeks the help of the earth to have better eye sight all through his life.

The verse refers to the important elements of nature – Agni (fire), Surya (Solar light), the waters, air, and other important elements of nature. All these together give **wisdom** to mankind.

21. Reference to Social & Cultural Diversity:

The verse (44) referse to the diversied geographical and cultural varieties that exist on the earth. This refers to the social and cultural ecology where different languages, different customs exist based on the habitations (environments) they live in. He prays the earth for granting wealth as the cow gives milk.

The diversity that exists on the earth is referred in the verse No. (47). The same earth is abode to the fools and wise men. The same earth endures good and bad dwell on it. It allows both the boar and wild hogs to roam on it. Thus, the verse refers to the biodiversity that exists on earth. This verse also is a direct reference to the ecosystem in which we live, and for which the earth is center.

22. Religious/ Spiritual/ Super Natural elements in the Hymn:

Prithvi Suktam is part of the Atharva Veda. Vedic Texts in India are the rich resources for philosophical and spiritual discourses. At the same time, they are the richest treasures of knowledge in all fields.

In the Verse (5), there are religious or Supernatural references.

In the verse (7), The Earth is said to be guarded by the Gods. The God gives us – precious honey and glory

the verse (10) also has references to spiritual/ religious aspects. The verse has references to Gods – Asvins who measured the earth, Lord Vishnu who stepped on it, Indra (the lord of might) who was her friend. The Earth is the mother and the men are her sons, to whom she gives milk.

In the verse No. 37, there is a reference to Dasyus (the evil spirits), Lord Indra and Vrita. In the verse 38 also, there is reference to Indra.

In Prithvisuktam, lord Indra is very frequently referred and praised as the protector of earth.

In Verse No. (42), there are Reference to Gods & citadels built by them. Prayer to Prajapati for making every part of earth pleasant and habitable to me

In Verse No. 50 also, there is reference to semi-Gods/ lesser Gods – Gandharvas, apsarasas, and other supernatural elements and demons.

Conclusion:

The Prithvi Suktam in Atharva Veda stands as an example how the ancient Indian works of literature contained ecofriendly spirit or environment friendly nature, which proves that the ecocritical spirit in Indian literature dates back to ancient Vedic period.

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