

Environmental Protection in Ancient Indian Religion System

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Abstract – According to Indian philosophy, the entire universe is created out of the conglomeration of the sub-atomic particles which influence the five gross elements - earth, water, fire, air and space. All living beings, animate or inanimate, come under this classification. So, life forms are created on the backdrop of the gross elements. The five gross elements do inherently carry a link with the five human cognitive organs. The nose carries an inherent relation with the earth, the tongue with the water, the eyes with the fire, the touch with the air and finally, the ear with the space. Hence, a symbiotic relation between macro and micro level environment is apparent in ancient Indian philosophical thought. "These Five Mahabhutas are cosmic elements which create, nurture and sustain all forms of life, and after death or decay they absorb what was created earlier; thus they play an important role in preserving and sustaining the environment"

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INTRODUCTION

"Environment" is a difficult word to define. Its normal meaning relates to surroundings, but obviously that is a concept which is relatable to whatever object it is which is surrounded. Einstein had once observed, "the environment is everything that itself me"¹ Environment is a polycentric and multifaceted problem affecting the human existence. Progress and pollution go together; there can be no end to progress, and consequently, no escape from pollution. It industry is a necessary evil, pollution is the surest sufferance. Another words "pollution" means the direct or indirect discharge by man of substance or energy into the aquatic environment resulting in hazard to human health to living resources and aquatic ecosystem, damage to amenities on interference with other legitimate uses to water.²

The protection of environment is a global issue and it is not an isolated problem of any area or nation. The problem of environmental pollution in an increasing small world concerns all countries irrespective of their size, level of development or ideology.

The problem of environmental pollution is not new in its origin. It is as old as the emergence of homo sapiens on the planet and it was realized in the times of plato 2500 years ago.³

However, different dimensions of the problem of environment protection and its management have taken a serious turn in the present era. Today, society's interaction with nature is so extensive that

the question of environment has assumed proportions affecting all humanity.

India is the second most populated country in the world. As a result there is immense pressure on the existing natural resources and this has led to a drastic increase in the levels of all forms of pollution be it air, water, soil or any other form. Pollution has become a serious issue especially in developing countries due to rapid industrialization and weak regulations or their ineffective implementation. Environmental pollution is a major concern and needs to be addressed urgently.

Environment: Meaning and Definition:

Origin: The term 'Environment' is formulated on the word 'Environ' derived from the French work 'Environner', which means "to surround" or "to encircle".

Dictionary meaning: The dictionary meaning of the word 'Environment' is two told.

1. External condition or surroundings especially those in which people live and work.
2. In Ecological sense it means the external surroundings in which a plant or animals lines which to influence its development and behavior.

Etymological Meaning: The word "Environment" in its etymological sense gives the meaning " surroundings, especially the material and spiritual

influences which affect the growth, development and existence of a living being it means 'the circumstances or conditions that surround or organism or group organism,' or the complex of social or cultural condition that affect an individual or community."

Literally Meaning: "The surroundings and conditions under which man lives and works." Thus, the context of human beings, environment is the sum of all social, economical, biological, physical or chemical factors which constitute the surroundings of man, who is both creator and molder to his own environment.

According to section 2(a) of Environment (protection) Act, 1986 "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-organism and property."

HISTORY OF INDIAN ENVIRONMENTAL LAW

India has an ancient tradition of protecting the environment. Most ancient texts teach us that it is the *Dharma* of each individual in any society to protect nature. This is why people have always worshipped the objects of nature. Trees, water, land and animals have an important mention in our ancient texts. The importance of environment protection in India can be traced back to the period between 321 B.C. and 300 B.C. In *Kautiyya's Arthashastra*, great importance has been laid on environment protection, and clear punishments have been prescribed on the basis of the importance of various parts of a particular tree. *Manusmriti* mentions about the optimum use of the resources of nature and also prescribes different punishment for causing injury to plants.

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN HINDU RELIGION

In Hinduism, we find that Vedas, Upanishads and other ancient scriptures of the Hindu religion have given great importance to trees, plants and wildlife and also to their value to human beings. The ancient Vedas have several references to environmental protection, ecological balance, weather cycles, rainfall phenomena, hydrologic cycle, and related subjects that directly indicate the high level of awareness of the seers and people of that time.

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. In *Rigveda*, it has been mentioned that there are five elements which give basis to life and these elements are Earth, Water, Fire, Space and Air. The *Rigveda* makes a clear reference to the presence of a protective layer which we know now to be the ozone layer that filters the harmful rays of the sun

and protects the earth. In *Yajurveda*, it has been mentioned that *yajna* be performed by offering butter and firewood into the sacrificial fire so that it mixes in the atmosphere and makes the environment free from impurities. It mentions about keeping the sky clean and about praying to the water bodies as they sustain life. The *Samaveda* like all other Vedas also recognizes the importance of maintenance of the seasons' cycles that are likely to get altered due to climate change owing to inappropriate human actions. In *Atharvaveda*, there is a clear concept of give and take which means that one can take from the earth and atmosphere only so much as one would give back to them. Many other things are also highlighted in the *Atharvaveda* like purity of water, protection of wild life and domestication of animals like cattle.

In ancient India, philosophers like Chanakya emphasized on the importance of environment protection. In his jurisprudence, the State wets required to maintain forests, fines were imposed for cutting trees and damaging forests, forest reserves were for wild animals and they would be killed or bound in outside the reserve forests when harmful.

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN OTHER RELIGIONS IN INDIA

It is not only in ancient Hindu religion that environmental protection was given special attention for the survival and well being of the mankind and other living organisms, but other communities also laid emphasis on purity of ecosystem and protection of environment. Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and s am also preached for conservation of environment and protection of ecosystem through their religious tenets.

Buddhism. Buddhism which came to India after the Vedic period, laid great stress on truth, non-violence and love for all living creatures including trees, plants and flora-fauna. Every follower of Buddhism was supposed to plant a tree every year and nourish it until it became a full-grown tree. Any kind of hunting and killing of animals, birds or living organism was strictly prohibited being against the cherished principle of *Ahimsa* i.e. non-violence. Compassion for all living creatures formed a part of Buddhism which every Buddhist was expected to follow ardently.

The Great King Ashok is known to have relinquished the throne out of compassion for living creatures and preached *Ahimsa* (non-violence). It was perhaps the first ruler who opened veterinary hospitals for the care and treatment of ailing animals and cattle and started nurseries for the care and protection of plants. He vigorously

campaigns for plantation of trees on both side of the roads throughout his kingdom.

Jainism: The followers of Jainism also abhorred killing of animals and plants as they were the natural resources for supporting the human life. Like Buddhism, the Jainism also laid great emphasis on truth, non-violence and compassion for living creatures including animals, birds, aquatics, worms and insects. They believed that plants and trees also had life and therefore, (destroying them was an act of violence which was against the principle of non-violence. Every follower of Jainism was supposed to take fifteen vows such as *Karma, Karmdan, Van Karm, Sphotrik Karm, Nirlanchan Karm, Asotipasan Karm* etc. which were exclusively related to protection of environment against any kind of pollution.⁴

Sikhism: The religious tenets of Sikhism also accepted that preservation of environment is one of the sacred duties of every follower of this religion. There are references in holy religious discourse in *Guru Nanak Bani* about *Joga* and *Jagat* tracing creation of world from natural resources of water, fire, air, sky and God. It is analogous to the ancient religious belief that human body is composed of *Panchatatva* and any life without these elements (*Tatvas*) cannot exist on the earth. Sikhism believes that imminent spirit of God is present in nature. All living creatures and human actions are guided by Almighty's wishes. It is therefore, an ardent duty of every person to protect animals, plants, trees, rivers, mountains which are the natural source for human existence and life on earth.⁵

Islam: The followers of Islamic faith also believe in peace with nature based on divine ethical principles of mutual coexistence. It believes that human beings must maintain a balance with nature and natural resources which are valuable gifts of nature which need to be preserved from destruction or spoliation. Protection of environment against any kind of pollution has been a cardinal principle of Islamic religious philosophy. It believes that *Allah* (God) has created the earth and implanted therein mountains, hills, valleys, rivers, lakes, springs, forests, pastures, plaits etc., wherein live human beings along with animals, birds and thousands of other living creatures serving the mankind. Each of these has a function and role in maintenance of ecological balance.

According to Islamic concept of environmental conservation, human beings are mere trustees of natural resources which they are supposed to preserve for the benefit of the society.⁶

Christianity: Need for purity of environment has also been advocated by Pope Paul VI of the Vatican City for the overall progress of human society. Christians are baptized in water as a sign of purification; therefore, they strongly believe that purity of water

must be maintained at all costs. Bible ordains man not to exhaust natural resources by misuse as they are immensely useful in maintaining ecological equilibrium and clear environment. The natural resources are gift from God given to mankind for its survival and therefore, they have to be preserved for the survival of life on earth.

A perusal of Hindu religious scriptures called the Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Gita, mythological literature including stories, social and moral codes, and political rules reveal that the following were the general guiding principles to be observed by all in their daily life:

1. Respect Nature.
2. Life in living is dependent on various components of nature.
3. Keep harmony with nature.
4. Protect natural environment.
5. Utilise natural resources only to satisfy the needs of the people.
6. Presence of the divinity of nature in all living and non-living objects.
7. Destruction of nature means destruction of mankind.
8. All must have compassion for animate objects; for example, trees, animals, birds, aquatic life, etc.
9. Air, water, land, sky, trees, animals are the creation of God and He dwells in all of them. Therefore, to worship them is to worship Him—the creator of the universe.
10. Man, being one of the creations of God, has no special privilege or authority over other creatures, on the other hand he has more obligations and duties to protect and improve them.
11. *Ahimsa Parmo Dharmah* (non-violence) is the *dharma* of the highest order, one should be non-violent towards animals, tree's, and other microorganisms alike. *Hinsa* (violence) was considered as a sin.
12. Drought, fury of floods and storms, heavy rains, cloudbursts, lightning, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, heavy tides is the violent forms of anger manifested by the Gods and Goddesses.

13. Purity of thought and expression, and cleanliness of the environment around us should be observed.
14. All lives, human and non-human including trees, are of equal value and all have the same right to existence. It shows that the principle of sanctity of life is clearly ingrained in the Hindu religion.

The oldest and simplest form of nature — worship finds expression in Vedic texts and more particularly in Rigveda. The origin of environmental science can be seen long back in the Vedic and ancient Sanskrit literature. Vedic view on environment is well-defined in one verse of the Atharvaveda where three coverings of our surroundings are referred as *Chandamsi*:

Wise utilise 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 *Chandamsi* meaning coverings available everywhere.

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

"According to one indigenous theory established in the Upanishads, the universe consists of five basic elements, viz. 1) earth or land, 2) water, 3) light or luster 4) air, and 5) ether. The nature has maintained a status of balance between and among these constituents or elements and living creatures. A disturbance in percentage of any constituent of the environment beyond certain limits disturbs the natural balance, and any change in the natural balance causes lots of problems to the living creatures in the universe. The relation of human beings with the environment is very natural as he cannot live without it. Rigvedic hymns are devoted to natural forces and they have been identified with deities. In these hymns, we find prayers for certain natural elements such as air, water, earth, sun, rain, dawn, etc.

In Rigveda, one *Aranyani Sukta* is addressed to the deity of forest⁷ and *Oshadhi Sukta* cautioned that they should not be destroyed. Rigveda acknowledged air (*vayu*) as one of deities and mentioned that "Let wind blow in the form of medicine and bring me welfare and happiness" and that it has medicinal value. Animals and birds have also been accepted as part of nature and environment. It has also been warned that animals should be safe, protected and healthy.¹ The Atharvaveda talks about the relation of plants with earth, "The earth is keeper of creation, container of forests, trees and herbs." And that plants are life forms. It is also maintained that "One tree is equal to ten sons"

There are mentions of "panchvati" in ancient Indian text including famous epic Ramayana; a "panch" means "five" and "vati" means "grove", meaning thereby a grove consisting of five trees. Giving importance to five kinds of trees, denotes a forest in which there is abundance of those five kinds of trees. In Sanskrit literature, the most important of the five trees is "vata" (banyan) tree. This tree represents the floor of sub-generating trees by turning its branches into trunks and when they reach the soil, it starts taking roots and becomes a tree. It has great medicinal value.⁹ Second tree is "peepal" (*ficus religiosa*) which is also mentioned in Sanskrit literature. It also has medicinal value as mentioned in Atharvaveda. Other three mentioned in olden literature are "ashoka" (*polyalthia longifolia*), "bael" (*aegle marmelos*) and "harad" (*myrobalan terminalia chebula*). But nowadays they are named as Amla, Neem, Tulsi. But one thing is common that these all have great medicinal value and keep people hale and hearty.

Many verses in the Rigveda and Atharvaveda have been devoted to the praise of Lord *Surya* (sun), *Vayu Devta* (Lord of the winds), *Agni Devta* (God of fire), *Varuna Devta* (God of water), *Prithvi Mata* (Mother Earth), *Vanya Devi* (Goddess of forests), etc. Therefore, cutting of trees, polluting air, water, land were regarded as sins as elements of nature were to be respected and regarded as Gods and Goddesses. Protection of their purity and wholesomeness was considered to be the duty of everyone. Hindu society did not consider it proper even to throw dust on a public path (highway). Rigveda¹, Manusmriti¹ and Charaka Samhita¹ have emphasised on the purity of water and healing and medicinal value of water. Because of these injunctions a system of *Maryada* (code of conduct) developed in Indian society to keep water clean and wholesome,

Similarly, trees and plants have been regarded as indispensable in the life of human beings. They have been considered as revered, bestowers of good and protectors from evil with a concept of God living in them. Trees and plants are considered as the abode of various Gods and Goddesses. This sense of worship has also a background of utility and spiritfulness. The Rigveda devoted an entire hymn to the praise of healing properties of trees.¹⁰ Some of the names of trees associated with Gods and Goddesses are given in Table:

Table 1

Trees Associated with Gods and Goddesses

Ashoka	Buddha, Indra
Fig	Vishnu, Rudra
Kadamb	Krishna
Lotus	Laxmi (Goddess of wealth)
Mongo	Laxmi, Govardhan
Neem	Sitala, Manasa
Palasa	Brahma, Gandharva
peepal	Vishnu, Krishna
Vata (Banyan)	Brahma (creator of universe)

The Hindu way of life has respect and consideration for the natural world including animals and birds. Hindus were advised to treat all other species just like their own children. One should look upon deer, camels, monkeys, donkeys, rats, reptiles, birds, and flies as though they were their own children, what is that which distinguishes these from those (children).¹¹

Several Hindu Gods and Goddesses have animals and birds as their mounts. Some of them, associated with Hindu Gods and Goddesses, are given in Table2:

Table 2

Animals Associated with Gods and Goddesses

Name of animal/bird	Name of God/Goddesses
Ass	Sitla
Bull	Shiva
Crocodile	Ganga
Deer	Vayu
Dog	Bhairava, Dattatreya
Eagle	Vishnu
Elephant	Indra, Ganesh
Lion	Durga
Monkey	Hanuman, Ram
Owl	Laxmi
Peacock	Kartikeya, Saraswati
Rat	Ganesh
Serpent	Shiva
Swan	Saraswati
Wild goose	Brahma

CONCLUSION:

India has an ancient tradition of protecting the environment. Most ancient texts teach us that it is the *Dharma* of each individual in any society to protect nature. This is why people have always worshipped the objects of nature. Trees, water, land and animals have an important mention in our ancient texts. In Hinduism, we find that Vedas, Upanishads and other ancient scriptures of the Hindu religion have given great importance to trees, plants and wildlife and also to their value to human beings. A perusal of Hindu religious scriptures called the Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas, Ramayana,

Mahabharata, Gita, mythological literature including stories, social and moral codes, and political rules reveal that the following were the general guiding principles to be observed by all in their daily life. In ancient times well developed mechanism regarding the protection of environment was established in our culture. Human conduct was mended according to the protection of environment. Our ancient legal codes such as Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas etc. protected the environment. We are required to adopt our ancient environmental protection system.

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