



## Environmental Conservation Ethics in Ancient India

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**Abstract-** The paper examines the ancient ethics towards environmental conservation in India. The vivid descriptions of environmental components as seen through the pages of Ancient Sanskrit literature emphasize man, the *Homo sapiens* as an integral and valuable components of life support system. The conservation of various components of environment- soil and water, forest and wild life has been enumerated as practiced in Ancient India. Indian myth and environment; therapeutic nihilism and environmental management; ontological argument and environmental ethics; and ancient Indian medicinal system and environmental management have been discussed in the present contribution.

**Index Terms-** Environment, Conservation, Ancient, Myths, Medicinal, Forest.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Early man was an integral part of nature and formed a part of the biosphere. He was a successful practicing ecologist. His attitude towards his environment was probably shaded by reverence, awe and fear of storms, diseases, wild animals, earthquakes, volcanoes, celestial phenomena and countless other events which were not understood. However, with the socio-cultural evolution and technological expansion, a growing conflict has developed between the man and environment. His seeming supremacy over others, scaling greater and greater heights, led him to a state of mind. Considering, if man is to survive beyond the nuclear age, he may have to seek guidance in the arts of human relations, bodily control and respect for the environment from some of the most ancient and primitive races in the world- those who have, for centuries or millennia, thrived and even flourished in some of the most primitive societies such as the nomadic tribes of Australia and Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa, whose lifestyles have remained virtually unchanged for thousands of years, have resources of inner strength, stability and harmony.

The purpose of the present contribution is to present a comprehensive picture of ancient ethics towards environmental conservation as recorded in ancient Sanskrit Literature and archaeological strata. The ancient ethics is very relevant for conserving the environment on this planet earth – which is the only known planet which can support life. The ancient conservation ethics will be instrumental for having a sustainable society and sustainable world.

### INDIAN MYTH AND ENVIRONMENT

The Earth is known to all civilizations and cultures as the great mother Goddess. The Vedas dedicate many hymns to Prithivi, the Prithivisutra being one of the greatest hymns. She is invoked as born of the waters of the ocean. Surrounded by space, she is the Creator, the sustainer. She is the mistress of past and future giver of the wide and wildlife world of human life. The tree- woman relationship dominates Indian myth. The most functionally meaningful, inspires of countless myth and the richest treasure of Indian sculptural motif is the Vrishkika, also called by other names- Yakshi, Sur Sundari and many others. They stand against trees, embrace them and thus become an aspect of the tree articulating the interpretation of the plant and the human. The tree is dependent upon the woman for its fertility as is the woman on the tree.

Water, earth and tree provide the basis of three distinct types of goddesses and woman in myth and art. The sky, although the father is the atmosphere which sustains other goddesses. Water, earth, tree and plant maintain the spatial balance of the cosmos. They are essential for the celestial or terrestrial order, the Rita – a central concept of Indian Cosmology and philosophical thought.

The mythology relating to the Himalayas is intrinsically connected with the Ganges; and of course that other symbol of purity, virginity, austerity – *Uma, Parvati*. Although Shiva appears in the Vedas only as *Rudra* and *Satrudriya*, the Puranas, specially *Siva Purana*, are full of descriptions, myth and stories full of ecological

significance and meaning. In this case also, shiva as the Lord of the Himalayas is everything and anything in the Universe. He is the Lord of animals, *Pasupati* and the Lord of place, *Vastospati*. Significantly, among his progeny, one belongs to the animal kingdom, *Ganesa* and the other to water and fire. *Kartikeya somaskanda* rides a peacock. Vishnu lies on the snake. Shiva rides the mighty bull. Each of these myths moves concurrently on an ecological biophysical and physical plane. Each in the iconographical form is a complete ecological statement and yet none can be conceived without the other. So *Shiva* is incomplete in art without *Shakti*, *Vishnu* without *Lakshmi* and the two are complete in the fusion of the conjoined image: *Hari –hara*.

Myth relating to the sky and space are innumerable. The most powerful amongst these is about *Indra*. He is the most important war god. He is naturally connected with rainfall and hence thunder Storm and wields the thunderbolt. The consciousness of the life giving function of clouds and thunder, its relation with water and fire is also common everyday knowledge, too often taken for granted without nothing is significance.

#### APPLIED ETHICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN

Applied ethics is a direct outgrowths of the philosophical periods that have proceeded it. Applied ethics emerged at a time when doctors were increasingly concerned about ethical issues related to their medical practices. Medical ethics was therefore, the first applied ethics to be developed and it continue to be the most successful and influenced. No area in applied ethics deals more fundamentally with philosophical issue than environmental ethics.

In 1974, shortly after philosophers began working on environmental ethics, a book challenging the propriety of such research was published in England. This book was “Man’s Responsibility for Nature: Ecological problems and Western traditions” by John Passmore, a noted social and political philosopher in Australia. It remained for many years the only book containing long discussions on environmental ethics and was not formally answered on a compatible scale until 1983, when the ethics of environmental concern by Robin Attfield, a British philosopher, was published.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENVIRONMENT

Aldo Leopold in his famous essay ‘The Land Ethic’ states that environmental problems are ultimately philosophical in nature and require a philosophical solution before there can be much hope of environmental reform.

Philosophy, particularly as envisaged by Socrates and Plato, was also the quest for a meaningful life and for a worth while life. This quest has been gradually eliminated from the course of western philosophy. But this quest has never been abandoned within the Indian tradition, within which philosophy has often been pursued as a path of ‘Moksha’ (liberation) as a guide to human destiny. This has been the strength of the Indian tradition and its philosophy.

Since ancient past, Indian philosophy has argued for environment oriented living. It emphasizes that humen live a participatory life with environment. They are created by the element of environment and they finally dissolve in the environment.

According to ancient Indian philosophers that man being an intelligent creature should have the protection of environment as one of the fundamental duties. *Vedas*, *Upnished*, *Puranas* and other scriptures give a detailed description of trees, plants and wildlife along with their importance to the community. Trees have been considered as an essential part of dwelling in Indian homes. Significance of plants and trees to human life is further exemplified in *VarahPuran* which advocates regular plantation as a means to achieve Heaven. In *Matsayapurana*, plantation of a tree has been equated with progeny of ten sons. Indian accept nature as divinity, and as such various trees and plants are used in religious ceremonies and worship. Some trees and plants are considered so sacred that it is assumed that particular gods and goddess have made their abode in them. In *Narsimha Puran* trees have been personified as God (*Bramha*) itself. *Atharveda* considers *Peepal (Ficus religiosa)* tree as abode of various Gods. Indian society had been very much aware of the fact that indiscriminate destruction of plants and beasts would result in diseases and pollution of the atmosphere.

The Indian culture, in ancient and medieval times, provided a system of moral guidelines towards environmental preservation and conservation. Environmental ethics as propounded by ancient scripture and the seers continued to exist in society and was practiced by not only common man but by rulers and kings,

#### CONSERVATION OF FOREST

In ancient India, there was a sacred uses of natural resources, including forest resources. Present day, India still abounds in many forms of nature worship. All forms of plant life from hedges to *Peepal (Ficus religiosa)* and *fig (Ficus carica)* trees continue to be considered sacred and invaluable in relation to a variety of primitive cults. Amongst these varied religious practices, the most significant from an economic view point are those relating to the preservation of a sizeable patches of forest, sometimes as much as twenty hectares in extent, as ‘sacred groves’. All forms of vegetation in such sacred grove including shrubs and climbers are under

the protection of the reigning deity of that grove and the removal, even of dead wood, is taboo ( *Gadgil and Vartak , 1994*)

The sacred groves harbor vegetation in its climax formation and probably constitute the only representation of forest in near virgin condition in many parts of present day India. Such sacred groves exist in Asia and Africa as well. They exist in *Ghana, Nigeria, Syria and Turkey*. In India they have been reported from Khasi Hills in Assam in the northeast, Aravalli ranges of Rajasthan in northwest, all along Western Ghats in the southern peninsula, Madhya Pradesh in Central India and Maharashtra in West coast of India, Uttarakhand and Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh of Northern India.

The nature of cults associated with the sacred groves indicated their origin in the hunting – gathering stage of the society. There is a tale on the occurrence of groves of mother goddesses of the Altonga tribe in West Africa, in which secret rites of the cult are performed by sister – hood of priestesses. Any man entering the grove by accident is required to join sisterhood and to dress and live like a woman for the rest of his life. There is a similar tale in Indian mythology of Manu’s son, Ila who entered the grove of the mother goddess *Parvati* by mistake and was transformed into a woman (Kosami, 1962)

Today, when deforestation proceeding at a rapid pace, the sacred groves are assuming more and more important role in the daily life of the local population as the only remaining source of forest produce. The preservation of this biological diversity on the basis of ancient conservation ethics is clearly of much potential economic significance.

There are vivid references in the vedic texts about the conservation of forest cover. Sufficient evidences are available in the post vedic literature and even in the epics and classical Sanskrit literature that ancient Indian had the aptitude (ethics) of sustainable utilization of plant species and forest ecosystems which was the essence of environmental conservation.

The Indian traditions and customs are intimately associated with the forest conservation since time immemorial. These traditions were established in ancient India. Trees stand as silent symbols of India’s spiritual roots – last outputs of the vast forests which once covered the whole continent and which gave shelter to Lord Rama and his beautiful wife in their years of exile and echoed with the sound of Lord Krishna’s flute as he danced with his friends and herded the cows. Sages dwelt in these forests, living simple and austere lives in search of spiritual perfection.

The tradition of valuing trees was passed on into Indian culture and led to a subtle ecological relationship between human communities and the forest communities of trees, plants and animals. The basis of this relationship was the recognition of the rights of the trees, forest dwelling animals and plants to a life of their own, free from exploitation by humans.

According to ancient ethics forest was for survival and prosperity for the ancient people. Vedic culture required that another kind of forest be established in the place of original forest, of which has been cleared. It was also a tradition for planting trees and digging wells by the wayside down the ages. The great emperor Ashoka implemented this concept on a massive scale throughout his vast kingdom.

According to ancient Hindu traditions, three basic categories of forest have been described: *shrivana* (forest which provides the prosperity), *Tapovana* ( forest where you can contemplate), and *Mahavana* (great natural forest where all species find shelter).

## WILD-LIFE CONSERVATION

India has a rich heritage of wildlife as well as a long history and tradition of the protection of a most sensitive and vulnerable element of natural life- wildlife. The ethic of wildlife protection was imbibed in the Sylvan surroundings of the Ashramas of our sages which were the seats of learning in the country’s ancient past. The first recorded game laws were promulgated by Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* in third century B.C. in which provision was made to punish severely all offenders if they entrapped, killed or molested deer, bison, bird or fish in an area declared “protected”. The forests were called *Abhayarnaya*. One – sixth of all wildlife, such as birds and beasts, was let off in forests under state protection. Certain animals and birds were absolutely protected.

The ancient Sanskrit literature such as *Sutras* and *Smriti* which were written in the centuries immediately preceding Christ contain some laws intended to protect wildlife. Killing of birds and fish even unintentionally, is to be atoned for by fasting and suitable penances. A killer or a stealer of animals is also required to pay a fine, thus it says:

*Paksighati matsyaghati ca dasa- Karsapanan (Adhyay V Sutra 53)*

Indian mythology is equally profuse with reference to our regard and love for wild animals. In the *Purusha Sukta*, a prayer “ *Shanno astu dwipade San Chatuspade*” meant to invoke peace and happiness to all men and animals. Different animals were associated with different gods and were thus provided with religious sanctity

and ensured protection Kalidas's hunted deer also flew to the rishi's ashram for protection ( *Bho bho Rajan! Ashram mragoyamna hantavya no hantavyah* ).

Ashoka's fifth pillar edict of the third century B.C. gave protection to animals and forests. Emperor Ashoka defined a king's duty as not merely to protect citizens and punish wrong doers but also to protect animal life and forest trees. Ashoka had prohibited the catching of fish even from tanks and animals from forests on certain specific days.

#### SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION

Soil and water are the important ingredients of environment. Without these environmental components life is not possible. Therefore, keeping in view the importance of these two vital components of environments, ancient Indian had intimate relationship with earth which has been emphasized in the verse of the *Atharva Veda*:

***Sano bhumirvi srajatam mata putrayama payam.***

(She who bestows on us crops of various nourishing kinds as mother feeds her child on breast is soil and I am her son)

As for the complex of soil and water-

***' mata bhumi putro aham prithiviyah parjanya pitah sa un pipastu.'***

(Soil is my mother, water is my father let both lead me to perfection.)

These descriptions speak about the attitude of man towards environment – it was so revered like the relation between parent and offsprings.

About soil conservation, the following verse is very relevant:

***“Yasya Vriksha Vanaspatya, dhrirvastishthati vishwaha prithavi vishvadhay sam dhratamac echavadamsi “***

(Let us protect her with all the care- the soil that produces crops, fruits and grows trees for us.)

There are so many important and relevant traditions for conservation of water in ancient past. There are numerous traditional technologies to collect their crop and to augment production. These were intended to provide insurance against monsoon failure during the Kharif season when river supplies were plentiful. Water is such a precious thing that rights to it have always been zealously safeguarded. The Buddha is said to have intervened to settle a water dispute while still a Prince of Kapilavastu in Nepal. In early times, however population were limited and it was often possible for individuals or communities or settle differences in many cases by simply moving on and exploiting a new source. The scale of water resource development on times past was modest in relation to the magnitude of water available in most situations and consumptive uses, even for irrigation, seldom threatened others with deprivation. Customary use regulated most transactions.

That has been emphasized in various Sanskrit scriptures maintaining the quality of water of streams:

***Aapah shantih*** (let the streams be at peace).

***Shuddha na apastanveksharantu*** (let pure water flow in our rivers.)

#### AESTHETIC AND SCIENTIFIC ATTITUDES OF EARLY MAN

For many years now, environmentalists have been calling for a new ethic that will help and protect the natural environment from destruction. An examination of the scientific and aesthetic orientations of key environmentalists and scientists also provides abundant evidences of the close relationship between science, art and nature protection. Passmore is dedicated to the idea that there will always be economic considerations that will over ride the preservation of anything. If this idea is ultimately triumphant, there can never be an environmental ethic of any sort and the environment can never be given any permanent protection. The correct approach seems to be to return to the notion of higher and lower organisms. It does not mean the end of western civilization or the end of man since it does not by any means completely oppose the economic use of the earth for human purpose. In addition, it does not involve an intrusion of any oriental influences, merely the return to a more balanced western value system.

#### THERAPEUTIC NIHILISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

In assessing the importance of therapeutic nihilism in nature preservation arguments, we need to look at two very different kinds of things: first the relationship of therapeutic nihilism to environmental values, and second the long term viability of therapeutic nihilism as an ecosystem management approach.

In some important ways, therapeutic nihilism may not promote appropriate environmental values at all. First it seems likely that environmental therapeutic nihilism has contributed to a peculiar kind of callousness

towards wild animals. The perpetuation of such an attitude not only runs counter to our basic moral sentiments but may also be counter-productive in terms of environmental management. (Buscher et.al. 2014).

Second, therapeutic nihilism may sometimes allow environmental managers to avoid confronting their environmental values altogether. There is, of course, a strong tendency among scientists to defend their positions exclusively in terms of scientific research whenever possible to argue in terms of facts rather than values.

Environmental therapeutic nihilism as precautions or produce continues to be a pragmatically useful foundation for nature preservation. It is really an outgrowth of historical development on ecology and environment management and although it is still widely held by most environmentalists and many applied ecologists working in environmental management.

## **ANCIENT INDIAN MEDICINAL SYSTEM AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT**

The traditional system of medicine in India prescribing plant extract in therapy dates back to the early age of *Rig Veda* ( 4500-1600 B.C.). There is ample proof of the application of various recipes of Indian herbs in curing many maladies. The therapeutic efficacies of herbal medicines led to the evolution (2500-600 B.C.) of *Ayurveda* which literally means “Science of life”.

According to *Ayurveda*, health is an indication of normal biological processes which would help to maintain mental and physical alertness and happiness. The period between 800 B.C. and 1000 A.D. could be considered as the golden age of Indian system of medicine, particularly because of the availability of these three ( *Charaka Sanhita*, *Sushruta Sanhita* and *Hridaya Sanhita* ) which collectively became known as *Vridhdha Trayi of Ayurveda*.

In the ancient times, the Indian materia medica could classify drugs based on their physiological actions and specify the details of the habitat of different plants, the parts to be used and the proper time for their collection, method of storage etc. It is thus abundantly clear that the users of the Ayurvedic system were fully aware of the important factors regulating the yield of active principles and as such the efficacy of drug preparation.

## **AN ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS**

It is commonly held that our nature experiences are aesthetic and that in this context they are valuable for their own sake, without regard to their use that is they are intrinsically valuable experiences analogous to those we have when we view works of art in a museum. It is generally held, that the value of the experience of an art object is increased if the object experience is the original and that in cases where the original has been lost or destroyed of for some reason a reproduction has been substituted the experience is diminished.

According to positive esthetics, nature to the degree that it is natural, is beautiful and has no negative aesthetic qualities. Positive aesthetic is closely associated with a specific kind of preservationists argument that asserts nature’s right to exist. According to this argument which is generally expressed very poorly. Whatever exist has a right to exist simply because it exists.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Thus, scanning the ancient Sanskrit literature and philosophical ingredients, it has been revealed that the key essence of the environmental conservation ethics in ancient India was the art of human relations, bodily control (Sanyam), respect and non- violent relations with the environment. It was based on simplicity and non-violence, people satisfying their needs by means of modest use of resources which has been amply reflected in one of the verses mentioned in *Atharveda* , which runs as : “What of the, O’ Earth I dig out , Let that quickly grows ever, Let me not hit thy vitals or thy heart.”

This is parallel with the modern concept of environmental conservation given by *Usher (1973)*.

“Biological conservation is essentially concerned with the interaction between man and the environment. Fulfillment of conservation objectives for a biological resources requires the resource’s management in perpetuity on the basis of a sustained production of the resource or biotic component of the environment and a sustained on resource or environment by man”.

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