



Environmentalism in ancient Indian scriptures – a short review

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Introduction:

The concerns of environmental awareness and protection of the environment from adverse anthropogenic factors has reached a point of global significance. But, the origins of these concerns can be traced to times of antiquity in the Indian context. The concepts of environment and environmental conservation are known to differ from time to time as they are dependent on the conditions prevalent during those time spans. But the awareness about the environment in ancient residents of the Indian Subcontinent is evident from the literature analysis of *Vedic* texts and *Samhitas* available from those time periods. The current review sheds light on the references to environmental awareness and environmental protection as observed in these scriptures using a few reference examples.

The ancient word for Environment, ‘*Paryavarana*’ is a mix of two words namely ‘*Pari/Paritah*’ which means omnipresent and ‘*Avarana*’ is cover. Hence, *Vedic* understanding of environment shows the inclusion or the sum of everything around us as an environment. The notions of proper sanitation and sense of the environmental protection can also be observed from historical and pre-historical excavations and literature studies. The emphasis on rainfall and hydrological cycles which has been elaborated in numerous *Suktas* of *Vedic* literature such as *Indrasukta*, *Varun Sukta*, *Parjanya Suktas* and thus in all four *Vedas*, is evidence of an environmentally aware civilization. Further, all of the *Vedas* are observed to recognize the importance of seasonal cycles and the relation of these cycles to changing climatic conditions due to anthropogenic activities. These references indicate the extreme level of environmental awareness of the populace of that time (Nigam & Chandra, 2022; Sarmah, 2015; Padhy, Dash, & Mohapatra, 2006).

Among the *Vedas*, numerous references also mention the critical role played by plant ecology with respect to maintenance of ecological balance of nature (Sarmah, 2015). With reference to a tree, a hymn from *Vrikshayurveda* explains that, ‘दशपुत्र सम द्रुमः...’ i.e., ‘planting a tree is equal to having ten virtuous sons’, thus fortifying the hypothesis that, *Vedic* Period civilization was aware of the role of plants. The medicinal and environmental importance of



numerous plants such as *Aswattha* (*Ficus religiosa*), *Vatavriksha* (*Ficus benghalensis*), *Bilva* (*Aegle marmelos*), *Bakul* (*Mimusops elengi*), *Rudraksha* (*Elaeocarpus angustifolius*) etc. have been asserted at various locations in the *Vedas* and *Puranas* of India (Sarmah, 2015) (*Atharvaveda* 5/4/3) (*Rigveda* 10/97/2). Through hymns from *Rigveda Khanda* 8 (Part 8), it can also be observed that the habitants of the *Vedic* era were aware that mountains are the causal factor for rain and air currents, hence also mention the importance of saving mountains and forests (Sarmah, 2015).

Even the *Puranas* of Ancient India provide various such examples. *Matya Purana* refers to a festival called as *Vrikshotsav* (A festival of nature wherein tree plantation is carried out) (Bharadwaj, 2021). Across *Vedas* and *Puranas*, various such festivals and occasions can be observed which have been undertaken to spread awareness and protect the trees and environment as a whole. Few such examples include *Navahimpatotsava* from *Nilamata Purana*, the festival for first snow which emphasizes the role of mountains in the origin of rivers, *Damanaka Tritiya Vrata* from *Agni Purana* to emphasize the tremendous medicinal importance of *Damanaka* Plant (*Artemisia pallens*). Also, *Agni Purana* speaks of *Ashokashtami*, a festival to portray the myriad medicinal properties of *Saracaasoca*. One of the most important such festivals is *Aranyashanthi* which symbolizes the bountiful forest, nature and signifies fertility, resources and prosperity of Nature (Bharadwaj, 2021).

About water, the *Chandogya Upanishad* describes water as the source of life and healthy living in all organisms and further also describes the stages in the hydrological cycle elaborately. The importance of maintaining purity of all forms of water and prevention of pollution has been emphasized. The *Padma Purana* condemns water pollution to such an extent that it claims that, the one who pollutes has no space in heaven (*Shatapatha Brahman* 1.9.3.7) (*Rigveda* 10.87.6) (*Rigveda* 1.23.20) (*Padmapurana*, Bhimi 96.7.8) (Tiwari, 2010). Thus, implying that, the concept of pollution and its ill effects were also well known to the populace.

Conclusion:

From the above citing, it can be observed that, the *Vedic* populace was aware of the importance of environment and also of maintaining balance in the abiotic and biotic factors of the ecosystem. It can also be noted that the *Vedic* vision to live in synchrony with environmental factors and other biotic components of the environment was not simply an objective approach but includes a far wider, subjective and comprehensive understanding of



the transactions between humans and the environment. The sages and extant population of those times, grasped the need of pure or unpolluted water, air and surroundings as the roots of healthy and prosperous life and hence revered these environmental factors as deities.

Yajurveda 36.24, mentions the desire of the *Vedic* population to live a hundred years and believes that this can be achieved by a pollution free, clean and peaceful environment (Sarmah, 2015). In current India, various environment based legislative laws and acts are in place such as the forest act of 1972, water act of 1974, air act of 1981, environment protection act of 1986. But a verse of the *Sukla Yajurved* speaks thus:

द्यूःशान्तिरन्तरीक्षन्, शान्तिपृथिवी, शान्तिरापः, शान्तिरोषधयःवनस्पतयः,

शान्तिविस्वदेवह, शान्तिब्रह्म, शान्तिःसर्वशान्तिःशान्तिरेवशान्तिःसामाशन्तिरेधि II

Stating that, (Let there be) Peace be upon the heavens and peace be upon the sky, peace be upon the earth and peace be upon the waters, peace be upon the herbs and plants, peace be upon the *Visvadevah*, peace be upon Brahma, and peace be upon all, peace be upon all, peace be upon thee!

This further emphasizes the all-encompassing approach to environmentalism during *Vedic* times wherein people were made aware of the importance of sustainability and a comprehensive approach to prevent pollution and protect the environment. By making the population aware and by treating the environment as a part of all human existence, protection would also be perceived as the moral duty of all humans of the society without the implementation of stringent law based systems.

The current study is but a glimpse into the vastness of knowledge held in the traditional scriptures of Ancient India. This knowledge from *Vedic Sciences* and available literatures can be used to upgrade our current understanding of environmental interactions and be used to initiate better awareness about the need of environmental protection.

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