

CONSCIOUSNESS ABOUT ENVIRONMENT IN ANCIENT INDIA

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Nowadays, every nook and corner of the world is being echoed by the phrases ‘ecology’, ‘ecological balance’, ‘environmental conservation’ etc. From every sphere of the society, except that of the total illiterates – there is a hue and cry for preserving the environment, our own environment, the ‘Mother Nature on our beloved planet.

In this connection, we may note a very interesting thing while making a keen study of history. The ancient people though did not study environmental or ecological science in its present form, were very much conscious of its basic principles. They know that destruction of Mother Nature would revert back to the gradual abolition of their own. Thus they felt it essential to preserve the nature as far as possible- at least they never agreed to sacrifice the whole natural environment in exchange of satisfaction of their needs.

Recognition of the Importance of Environment – the Indian View.

Ancient Indian philosophers propagated the notion that the entire universe including the earth, the plants, the animals and the human beings is composed of five essential elements e.g., Kshiti, Ap, Teja, Marut, Byom (i.e., soil, water, energy, air and void, the last one being the empty space in the universe). Bodies of plants, animals and human beings are created out of those five elements. After their death, their bodies are disintegrated and converted back to those elements.

The fundamentals of conservation ethics were brilliantly formulated in the Isha Upanishad.

“The whole universe together with its creatures belongs to nature. Let no one species encroach over the rights and privilege of other species. One can enjoy the bounties of nature, by giving up greed” – in other words, if nature is over exploited because of our greed, we stand to lose all its benefits.

The classical Indian view towards the environment had been depicted in the story of King Veṅa and King Pṛthu, a famous story from the Vishnupurāṇa.

Long ago, the world was governed by the cruel and selfish King Vena. He was so tyrannical that the Mother Earth (Pṛthivī) withheld all her riches. Vena became died by the curse of the sages and his successor became famous as Pṛthu, the subduer of the earth. Earth took the form of a cow and asked Pṛthu to bring

a calf. When the cow saw the calf, she became overwhelmed with affection and her milk started to flow freely. With the milk, came out the seeds, herbs and roots withheld so far. The symbol of the cow and her calf used here therefore emphasized that the relationship between the earth and her inhabitants is that of a mother and her children. What is needed to bring her life- nourishing goodness is love and respect, not greed and exploitation.

The Atharvaveda & the Ṛgveda

AV. XII. 1.3 says that

“From whom, ocean, rivers and waters, food and fields have come into existence. The whole world comes to life in her breathing and moving.”

AV. 1.2.1 says that

“We know the creator and the liberal nourisher of the shafts, as we know well his mother Pṛthivī, with her manifold designs.”

Here the seer addresses a plant i.e. shaft where the cloud has been perceived as the father of the shaft and the earth as the mother of the shaft. The central theme is fatherly relation with natural elements. The shaft is used in medicinal purpose and it represented to all plants’

AV. XVI. 4. 4. tells that

“May the Sun protect me by day, Agni by the earth, wind from the skies, Yama from mortals and Sarasvati from the earth dwellers.”

According to another verse,

‘Heaven is cow. The sun is her calf. May she, through her calf, Aditya, bestows food, strength, desires, long life, progeny, nourishment, wealth.’

The AV. XIX. 9. 14 is indeed astounding –

“Let there be balance in the space! Let there be balance in the sky! Let there be peace in the earth! Let there be calmness in waters! Let there be growth in the plants! Let there be the growth in the trees! Let there be grace in all Gods! Let there be bliss in the Brahman! Let there be balance in everything! Let there be peace and peace! Let such peace be with everyone of us!”

The renowned Ushāsukta of the ṚgVeda, may be recalled in this context.

‘Like an early riser housewife, Usha comes with an objective of nurturing all, she wakes all the living beings, make the footed creatures go and make all the birds awake. You are creator for dewdrops, you never remain for long. For her manifestation, every living being is saluting her, as she, the leaderless – expresses the glow that the daughter of heaven eradicates all those bearing evil. O dawn!

You possess the life, the most desired by all the living beings, because you remove the darkness.”

The RV. 1. 160. 1-5 tells,

Dyu & Pṛthivī (the earth system) are bringing happiness to all. They are caring for producing water and giving crops to us.

The RV. 7. 35. 3-15 are elucidation of our eternal quest for peace.

“Let wind impart peace on us. Let Varuṇa, the master of winds impart peace on us. Let this rotating earth, alongwith crops, impart peace on us. Let the great sky and earth may impart peace on us. Let the Mountains, the fire with radiant mouth, let gods Mitra & Varuṇa impart peace on us. Let wind blows for the sake of our peace. Let the sky, earth, herbs, trees and the powerful sun impart peace on us. Let the rivers and all the waters originate for the sake of our peace. Let the winds, being admired with beautiful hymns, impart peace on us”.

Thus we see how the Vedic people formed a tight bonding with the nature. They perceived the principles of natural phenomena and thus, prayed so that those natural cycles become well – maintained so that they themselves could live properly. In more than one verses of the Atharvaveda, the people are praying that let the teeth of the wild animals be broken off. This is a remarkable idea. The ancient people did not wish the total destruction of the wild animals – they simply wanted that they should not get hurt by those. This is an exquisite example of the concept of sustainable development.

The Arthaśāstra and the Smṛitis

Now, we will enter the arena of the Arthaśāstra and the Smritis (the book of polity, civil and criminal codes of ancient India). The periods of writing those texts i.e. the classical age shows more developed thinking about environmental matters.

In this age, already a common apathy was developed against the Vedic rituals of animal sacrifices in the Yajnas. We may recall the following sloka of the Pancatantra.

*‘Vṛkshamschitvā pasun hatvā kṛtvā
Rudhira kurdamam
Yaddeva gamyate svargam narakam kena
Gamayate?’*

By cutting the trees and killing the animals, if someone aspires to go to the heaven, which is the way to hell?

Kauṇilya, in his monumental work, had emphasized upon the protection of natural resources for the sustenance of man as well as optimization of the natural

wealth as economic resources. In 2.17 – he advised that the differences between villages should be one to two croshes. A village at its border, should be encircled by river (for water resources), hill (though it is not always possible), forest, medicinal plants, various types of large and small trees etc. In the other words – a habitat, when established, the simultaneous existence of plantation and water resources must be ensured.

In 4.11.16 – To destroy the dam of a reservoir, specially kept for farming purpose, is to be punished with the death of the offender by drowning into the very reservoir. Thus, we can easily apprehend that destroying the water resource and thus, being harmful to agriculture was considered an unpardonable offence.

The lands not fully barren but unsuitable for crops were to be used as the sites for pleasure groves and deer park for the ruler (mrgavana). In this context we must mention the concept, of 'Nagarodyāna (city gardens). Every city or town was to be adorned by a pleasure garden within its periphery. This is not a concept generated by Kauṣilya – the practice dated back even to the age of the epics and Purāṇas. This idea completely corroborates with the modern concept of town planning. Kauṣilya considered the cutting of tree as a physical torture to the plants and he prescribed various level of fines to be imposed on the offenders. He was equally aware of the importance for preserving the animal life. Giving pain to the animals or causing their death was considered a severe offence.

According to

3.10.6 – Animals belonging to reserved forest, if captured while eating crops of a crop field, must be prevented after due intimation to their owner, in a way, so that the animals could not get killed or hurt.

2.26.3 – Even for the animals declared for killing, lactating or carrying cow, infant calf and fertile oxes were not to be killed.

Non-violent animals like deer, rabbit etc or animals residing in reserved forest were not to be harmed. To captivate them or kill them was to be punished with highest amount of monetary penalty.

Let us shift our attention to Manusamhita or Manava – Dharmasamhita popularly known as Manusnriti. He tells,

“Do not excrete into water, do not spit or throw dirty substances, blood or poison into water”. Clearly, this is intended for maintaining the water resource as pristine as possible. In spite of the difficulty imposed upon self one must walk after seeing the path meticulously, to protect the smaller creatures like ants etc. (6.68)

In the eighth chapter, he has written down various amounts of fines to be imposed for killing different types of animals.

Interestingly, Manu is silent about acts harmful to plant life. But Yajnavalkya, the works of whom should be ranked at par with that of Manu, is appreciably vocal regarding the intentional damage to vegetation. In the Vyavahara – adhyaya of his masterpiece work ‘Yajnavalkya Samhita’, he describes the various level of fines that should be charged for harming different types of plants and animals (verse 225-229). We should go through the verse no. 226.

*“Lingasya chedane mṛtoyu madhyamo
Mulyameva ca!
Mahapasunameteshu sthāneshu
Dviguno damaó!!”*

Cutting the genitals of or killing the small animals will attract 500 panas and the value of the animals to be reimbursed to its owner by the offender. In case for bigger animals like cow, horse, elephant etc the penalty will be 1000 panas. It must be noted that he considered it a grave offence, to put an intentional bar on the multiplying power of the animals. In this context, we may recall that hunting in the season of spring was forbidden, as spring was considered the mating season of most of the animals. Hunting during the spring was taken as an offence, even for the king.

Now we are shifting our concentration to the Pali texts of Buddhism – the text, which contain the messages of Lord Buddha, without any deviation.

The Pāli Buddhist Text

One of the main pillars of Buddhism is Ahi&sā (non – violence), which is as well an essential principle to keep environmental balance. The Buddhistic perception of ecological changes is very much pronounced in the CakkavattisEhanāda Sutta. It depicts unimaginable miseries as the ultimate outcome of the practice of greed and violence. The Buddha, in a discourse in the Anguttara Nikāya (A. N. Vol 1, P – 160), even hints at the ecological devastation of the natural resources when lust, greed and wrong values grip the heart of humans.

The Sigalovāda Sutta asks a householder to accumulate wealth in a way similar to the one adopted by a bee gathering nectar to turn sweet honey without harming either the fragrance or the beauty of the flowers. It means the human being is required to make appropriate use of nature so that the symbiotic relation of man and nature is not hampered.

Buddha, realizing the importance of greeneries in our life, specially advised not to cut the branches or even pluck a leaf, as the shadow of a tree is extremely beneficial to us.

*“Yassa rjkkhassa chāyāya, nisi deyyam
sayeyya!*

Na tassa sākhām bhangeya, mitta dubbho
hi pāpako
Yassa rjkkhassa chāyāya, nisideyya
sāyeyya vā!
Khandham pi tassa chindeyya, atthi ce
tādiso sĒya ti!!
Yassa rukkhassa chāyāya, nisideyya
sāyeyya vā!
Na tassa pattam bhindeyya, mittadubbho
hi pāpako.”

In a nutshell, one should not cut a tree, not even cut its branches or tear the leaves as the tree soothes us, comforts us and thus it is a great friend and to harm a friend is a grave sin.

CONCLUSION

So, we have seen how the ancient Indian scholars were concerned about the balance of the environment – though, then there were no questions of global warming or chemical or nuclear pollutions like those of today. Within this short span, I have not been able to discuss the Sanskrit poems (Kāvya) and dramas (Nāūaka). They are full of beautiful examples of characterization of animals and trees and even inanimate objects like water and air. Such lively descriptions cannot be created by simply literary talent – it requires love, affection and respect towards nature – a feeling that must be nourished within one’s self. Thus, the Sanskrit and Pali literatures reassert that:

1. The general attitude of ancient Indians, towards environment was one of love and togetherness.
2. The scholarly people of the then Indian felt the necessity of maintaining the purity of the environment.

This attitude was echoed through the message of the Vedanta – ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,’ all living beings in this universe are relatives. The very basic idea behind the need for conserving our environment is captivated in Mettasutta (Suttapitaka) by the Buddha, which is equally true for our contemporary ages, for all times and places.

“Ye keci pāṇabhutatthi, tasā va thāvarā
anavasesā!
Dighā vā ye mahantā vā, majjhima
Rassakanukathulā!!
Diūūhā vā ye vā adiūūhā, ye ca dÿre Vasanti
avidÿre!

*Bhutā vā sambhavesi vā,sabbe!! Satta
bhavantu sukhittā!”*

Every living being whether it is small or large or medium, tall or short, visible or invisible, living near or far, born already or to be born, let live in happiness.

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