Tracing the consciousness of ancient Indians for protection and preservation of environment

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Abstract: There is an urgent need for environmental awareness in order to re-establish the broken link between modern man and nature. Because the impact of climate change is having a drastic effect on life on earth leading to Global Warming, Greenhouse effect, natural and manmade disasters. But environmental concerns can be found in ancient India. The Vaidik Philosophical traditions had established a way of living that was in tune with nature and its surrounding. In this paper I have tried to show that the ancient Indian love and respect for the nature and their tradition of taking care of the environment.

Key Words: Environment, Ancient awareness, Vedas, Panchamahavuta, Ancient Scriptures.

1. INTRODUCTION:
Environment origins from the French word “environ” meaning “that which surrounds” or “surrounding circumstances”. To put it simple the term environment implies all that of which surrounds a person, animal, plant that lives or is operational. It implies both physical (non-living) and biological (living) surroundings. Each living or non-living thing has its own environment in which it is existing. Environment can said to be the summation of all the circumstances that influence the life and development of various living and non-living beings on earth.

Over the ages the people of India have shown their concern in protection of environment. Since the ancient period, there were legislation, execution and operation of environmental policies. Manu imposed a condition on mankind on forest. Ashoka edicts specially the fifth pillar states that how animal and birds were protected in those days. The countries of the modern age are now involved in the policies for the protection of environment, but in India, it has been an old phenomenon. In India, the concern for environment was expressed in ancient period encompassing all the five traditiona lelements of natural environment namely, land (ksiti), water (ap), radiation or energy (tejas), air (marut) and cosmic space (vyoman) and their relation with human activities. There were many ancient treaties which contain chapters dealing with sauco(purity and cleanliness) and sadacara(normal ethical behaviour). (Das Gupta, 1998). Thus, our ancestors have been praising and worshipping nature including trees and animals for many centuries. Writing of the sages, especially Vedas and Upanishads, emphasised that man and nature should live in harmony and peace; and plants and animals should be subject to limitless kindness and benevolence as they make no demands for their sustenance and instead they generously extend their product for the sustenance of humankind. (Mathur, 1996,).

2. Environmental philosophy for protection of nature in ancient India:
The world felt the urgency to protect the environment from the past 50 years or so, only after man realised the price he was paying for plundering the nature. Nature has lost its purity. Natural resources are not fresh as it was before. There is major depletion in forest wealth leading to drastic climatic changes because of greenhouse effect. All this is occurring at such a fast phase and to such an extent that the very notion of progress and development has become a paradox. The world scenario is not only restricted to the economically weaker nations or developing nations but its effect is being felt by the developed nations also. Against this scenario, we look for guidance from our ancient Indian treatises and ponder on how these ancient traditional values can throw light in caring for our earth and all its life-sustaining resources. An alternate search for sustaining lifestyle can be had from the ancient scriptures whose environmental philosophy has an ethical, spiritual and aesthetic appeal to all generations.

2.1 Pre-Vedic
Ancient environmental awareness can be said to have existed even in the pre-Vedic man of the Indus valley civilization which flourished in northern India about 5,000 years ago. This is evident from the archaeological evidence gathered from Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro which were the chief cities of that civilization. They had acute awareness about hygiene and sanitation as evident from their construction of ventilated houses, orderly streets, numerous wells, bathrooms, public baths and covered underground drains. Several tablets found at the site show their love for trees as a form of worshipping tree goddesses.
2.2 Vedas

For ancient Indians, the notion of environment is that it is transcendental in nature. Indian philosophical texts proclaim that all of creation does occupy the same gamut of existence and they are different in comparison to their level of consciousness. This concept of oneness is what is seen in the ancient textual references. They worshipped Nature for its sun, water, air, soil, earth, plants, trees, animals. They held these divine and showed their respect through their works of art that highlighted the natural beauties. These moral values that displayed genuine love for nature instilled the ancients to exploit nature for only those resources that is needed for living and not otherwise. This notion was given so much importance so that doing otherwise was akin to having committed a grave and unpardonable sin.

2.3 Earth (Prthvi)

Prakrti is the supreme mother and all creations her children. Even today, planet earth is fondly referred to as DhartiMata, a Sanskrit name for Mother Earth. The Prthvisukta in the Atharvana Veda showcases a beautiful hymn which is full of praise for the Mother Earth. It shows the ancients’ reverence given to nature with a remarkable foresight. Quotations given below:
1) The ever true principles of cosmic order alone sustain the balance of Mother Earth. (AtharvaVeda 14.1.1) (Griffith, (1895-96),
2) Sweet be the herbes to us and waters, and for us the mid-air be full of sweetness….(Rig Veda 4.57.3) (Griffith, (1896 ).

2.4 Water (Jal)

Water is considered as a powerful medium for purification and source of energy and is hence used in rituals. There are many verses written on water which shows the importance of water in our lives.

Waters contain
All diseases-dispelling medicaments,
Useful for the upkeep of our body,
So that we may live long
To enjoy the bright sun. (RigVeda.1.23.2)

Blest be the streams from hills of snow,
Sweet be spring Waters unto thee;
Sweet be swiftrunning Waters, sweet to thee be Water of the Rains.
Sweet unto thee be Waters of the wasteand Waters of the pool;
Sweet be the Waters dug from earth, to thee, and Waters brought injars. (Atharvaveda 19.2.1-2).

2.5 Air (Vayu)

According to Brahadaranyaka Upnishad, air is the bond and thread which keeps the universe together. Vayu is also Pran (Life Sustaining Breath) and without pran nothing survives. When, in about 200 BCE Charaka wrote about Vikrti (pollution) and diseases, he mentioned air and water pollution specifically as a cause of many diseases (Dwiwedi, 1993).

2.6 Trees (Vriksh)

Tees and certain other plants are considered sacred and are worshiped regularly. This shows the importance of plants and trees in Hinduism. It is inauspicious to urinate or spilt on a tree; even plucking flower or leaf or a branch of a tree after sunset is a taboo. Hindu sages realised the importance of the forest / trees for reducing pollution and therefore people were advised not to cut trees or destroy forests: Tear not up by the roots the Kakambira tree: destroy thou all malignity (The Rigveda 06.48.17)

2.7 PanchMahabhuta

Indian philosophy of PanchMahabhutas explains that the Five Great Elements - Earth, Air, Space, Water and Fire (Energy) are interconnected, interdependent and form the web of life. The Upanishads explains the interdependence of these elements in relation to Brahman, the supreme reality, from which they arise: "From Brahman arises space, from space arises air, from air arises fire, from fire arises water, and from water arises earth" (Jain, 2011). These elements are also part of the environment and Indian sages have established a relationship between these five elements (PanchMahabhutas) and five sensory organs. The human nose is related to earth, tongue to water, Eyes to fire, skin to air and ears to space. The relationship establishes the fact that people need to give them the same importance as they give to their sensory organs. 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. (Dwivedi, 2001).

2.8 Manusmruti

From Manusmruti, written in the post-Vedic age, we can realize that religion plays diversified role in saving the integrity of the natural environment. Manusmruti is the world’s first ethical compendium on human jurisprudence, presented by Maharshi Manu, originated sometimes immediate to the post Vedic age. (Buhlar G., 1886). In the dicta for prevention of pollution in Manusmruti, we can get the reflection of ecological awareness:

a. Pollution refers to spoilage of the five gross elements by unethical activity.

b. Storage organs of plants like tuberous roots and underground stems, leafy vegetables, beautiful flowers, tasteful fruits, timber yielding trees, crops etc. remained objects of allurement in that period. For saving the plants and their parts from injury, Manusmruti describes various punishments for the offenders.(Padhy, Dash & Mohapatra, 2006)

2.9 Arthasastra

Kautilya’s Arthasastra written between 321 and 300 B.C. Kautilya was the prime minister of the Magadha Empire during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. The Arthasastras divided into fourteen books. The principal provisions dealing with the environment are found in two Books.(Divan and Rosencranz, 2001). The well planned administration and drainage system, pronounced by Kautilya, testify that the ancient rulers were keen on maintaining clean and healthy environment. (Gadgil and Guha, 2000). In the book, importance was given on the protection and management of forests, gardens, orchards as these all were considered as sources of revenue, besides being of recreational spots. The king is supposed to protect forests, elephant forests, irrigation works and mines. Forests were considered as a valuable resource, forest products should be used in a sustainable manner and factories for goods made from forest products should be started as Kautilya mentioned in Arthasastra. For 36 Volume 30 cutting any part of a tree, fines of variable amounts were imposed on the offender depending on the types of injury. Emphasis was given particularly on those which bear fruits, flowers or provide shades. Among material forests, one which was large, full of resource, accessible and watered by a river was given more importance, because it could be a shelter in time of trouble. (Rangarajan, 1992).

3. CONCLUSION:

To respect and harmony with nature was the ethos of ancient India. Ancient Indians followed some ethical principles which taught them sustainable use of natural resources. But now, sanctity and divinity is not found in the ethical principles as they are no longer deemed important. As such, land has become a commodity to be played with. The same is true when we look at the other resources. It was evident to the ancients that only an earth that is filled with trees and forests and hills can harbour and nurtures the human race. Hence ample evidence can be seen in the ancient scriptures pointing out to the need for protection of environment that helps in maintaining the ecological balance which in turn has an overall benefit to the society. In the present scenario, globalization has changed the very nature and quality of the environment. The world has become a global hut–people are hell bent to mad excavation of natural resources for its lifestyle and profit putting on the brink of utter devastation of only liveable planet – mother earth. Nature was the vortex around which the people went about doing their jobs in ancient India. But now the environment has become one among the different tangents of the vortex. The need of the hour is to bring the “environment” back into focus and that’s where the environmental awareness of ancient India helps.

REFERENCES:


