



## Concern for Environment in Ancient India

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### **Abstract**

*We derive and cherish our strength from the culture in which we grow. We are a part of the culture and responsible for maintaining the same and passing onto next generation. The culture of ancient India, also known as Vedic Culture, is based on the philosophy of Dharma and Karma. By doing good Karma and following the path of Dharma, we can unite our Atman (oneself) with the Brahman (Universal Self) and that is the ultimate desire of any person following Vedic Culture (Hindu Dharma). The ancient Indian literature has many references which preach that it is our Dharma to protect our environment, conserve our natural resources and to maintain ecological balance. If we had followed this advice (Dharma), we would not have worried now about protecting our environment which has been exploited for personal and business gains.*

**Keywords:** Environment, Pollution, Vedanta, Vedas, Karma, Dharma, Atman, Brahman, PanchMahabhutas

### **Introduction**

As per Oxford English Dictionary, *Environment* is “the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates”. Due to unethical business practices and zeal of maximising profit, we are overexploiting or wasting our natural resources, polluting our environment and disturbing the ecological balance of our planet. It is not only the business houses but individuals are also not bothered about and are not taking enough measures to correct the situation. We have become self-centric individuals and not thinking beyond ourselves. We are merely concentrating on to maximising our current benefits without ever thinking that whether next generations will have enough natural resources for industrial use or non-contaminated water to drink or non-polluted air to breathe. With the rate of current exploitation of all the natural resources, will it be possible to sustain a normal life on this planet? No one has time to think about the duties and responsibilities towards the human race and the world in which we live?



Since the beginning of civilisation, every culture has been guided by religion. From sociological point of view, broadly religion is said to be “*a system of beliefs and practice by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life*” (Yinger, 1970, p. 7). Religion and related philosophy play an important role in forming human values and behaviour, which in turn also influence business operation.

The World Commission on Environment and Development acknowledged, “*to reconcile human affairs with natural laws ... our cultural and spiritual heritages can reinforce our economic interests and survival imperatives*”. (World Commission on Environment and Development [WECD], 1987, P. 1). It further adds, “*It is a terrible irony that as formal development reaches more deeply into rain forests, deserts, and other isolated environments, it tends to destroy the only cultures that have proved able to thrive in these environments*” (WECD, 1987, Ch. IV. 74)

From the perspective of many world religions, the abuse and exploitation of nature for immediate gain is unjust, immoral, and unethical. (Dwivedi, 1993). We can find many instances of moral teachings in ancient Indian literature which tells us to take care of our natural environment. In Hindu, Buddha or Jain cultures, not only the common person but kings were also required follow the ethical guidelines to protect the environment and ecological balance. The God is creator of this universe, so whatever exists in this world is His creation and human beings do not have the privilege of authority over other creatures, on the other hand being a higher level of species and more intelligent, they have more obligations and duties.

### **Methodology**

This paper is based on desktop research methodology. Since most of the original ancient Indian literature is in Sanskrit, Hindi / English translation is used.

To know the culture of any era and place, we need to go through the literature related to that era, analyse the same and correlate with the current requirements. For the purpose of this paper, relevant references from *Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, ShrimadBhagvad Gita, Puranas, Arthashastra* by Kautilya have been used.



The ancient Indian literature was browsed and verses related to environment were identified, interpreted in light of the modern day requirements of environment sustainability and required relevance (direct or indirect) was established.

### **Ancient Indian Literature**

Vedanta is the basic source of *Sanatan Dharma or Vedic Dharma* which was named as Hinduism by Persian invaders. In Persian “S” is pronounced as “H”; hence the country across the Sindhu River was named as “Hindu” and hence the religion as “Hinduism”.

Vedanta is an extract of the ancient Vedic literature. The Vedic literature referenced for this paper includes four Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sam and Atharva), Upanishads, Mahabharata, and Puranas etc. Vedanta is basic source of knowledge providing the essential values to have divinity in human lives and also a smooth sailing of Indian businesses.

The knowledge of *Vedas* is to know the *Atman* (Individual Self) and *Brahman* (Universal Self) and to have a union of Atman with Brahman.

*Upanishads* help us to know the reality of Atman by detaching the Maya, the materialist world and to reunite with the Brahman.

Bhagvad Gita is the discourse given to Arjun during Mahabharata. It describes *Karma, Sankhya and Bhakti Yog* and notions of three Gunas (Satoguna, Rojoguna and Tamoguna) which have an important relationship with Ethical and moral disposition of a person.

*Arthshastras* were written around 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE by Kautilya. The book is having about 6000 Hymns and is a comprehensive manual about ruling and administering a state by a king and his administrators.

### **Environment**

The Environment is defined as, “*The sum total of all surroundings of a living organism, including natural forces and other living things, which provide conditions for development and growth; as well as of danger and damage*” ([www.businessdictionary.com](http://www.businessdictionary.com)). For our purpose we can safely say that Earth, Air, Water, Flora and Fauna (Vegetation and Living organism) are the elements of our environment. Natural Resources are His Gift to the mankind and to all living being. Since all these resources belong to all the inhabitants (big and small)



of this earth, nobody has the authority to misuse or exploit these resources or make them unusable by polluting, for maximising unethical business profit or personal gain.

We are all aware that over a period of time, human race have overly exploited these resources and generated a lot of waste over a period of time, due to which we are facing unprecedented environmental problems threatening the ecological balance. Our future generation may not have any resource left to carry-on the normal life on this earth.

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)

Vedantic scriptures see divinity in everything around us like Sun, Moon, Mountains, Rivers, Land, Sea, Birds Animals, Air, Water and so on. All are creations of the Almighty and have His presence and impression. In Rigveda the Creation of the Universe is described as:

*From Fervour kindled to its height Eternal Law and Truth were born: Thence was the Night produced, and thence the billowy flood of sea arose. From that same billowy flood of sea the Year was afterwards produced, Ordainer of the days nights, Lord over all who close the eye. Dhatar, the great Creator, then formed in due order Sun and Moon. He formed in order Heaven and Earth, the regions of the air and light. (Rigveda 10.190.1-3)*

The co-existence of all is necessary for mutual benefit and unnecessary exploitation of any of these is prohibited. No one can take liberty of harming, exploiting and misusing any of the God's creation.



Bhagwad Gita reiterates that the whole of the Universe is His creation, each and everything of this universe has his presence and ultimately it will merge in Him.

*Earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intellect and egoism—thus is My Nature divided eightfold(Bhagwad Gita 7.4). Know that these two (My higher and lower Natures) are the womb of all beings. So, I am the source and dissolution of the whole universe(Bhagwad Gita 7.6).*

*As the mighty wind, moving everywhere, rests always in the ether, even so, know thou that all beings rest in Me(Bhagwad Gita 9.6). Animating My Nature, I again and again send forth all this multitude of beings, helpless by the force of Nature. (Bhagwad Gita 9.8)*

The Hindu scriptures say that the *Atman* is immortal and goes through the cycle of birth and rebirth(*Punarjanm*)through various species (*Yoni*), and our *atman* may come back to this world,depending on our *Karmas*,as an animal or bird or human.Hence all the species must be given due respect and nothing should be done to harm any living being. This cycle of birth and rebirth continues until we get Moksh i.e. unification of the Atman with the Brahman which is dependent on our good *karma* during this life.

Since God is omnipresent, (Yajurveda 16.34) says, “Homage to him in woods and to him in bushes, Homage to him as sound and to him as echo.” and if we intend to do good *Karmas* to attain *Moksh*, we should give due respect to all creations available on this earth. We should evaluate that whether our actions are in harmony with the nature and future generation will not face any problem to enjoy their life on this planet. Protecting the environment is a part of Hindu *dharma* and there are many rural communities like Bishnoi and Swadhyaya who still protect the environment not as “environmentalist” but as their *dharma*.

**Earth**(*Prithvi*) has been given great importance in the Vedic Literature and is called as *MotherEarth: Mata BhumiPutrohamPrithivyah*: Earth is my mother, I am her son. It is a normal practice in this part of the world to start building construction activities with *Bhoomi Puja* in order to worship mother-earth and seek forgiveness for digging and taking up the construction. In Atharvaveda, one Hymn, Boomi-Sukta, having 63 verses is devoted to the earth. The Hymn depicts the greatness of the earth and lists our responsibilities and duties for



maintaining its sanctity. It declares that earth is not for humans alone but for other creatures as well and wishes to have harmony between all those living on earth.

In their use of the Earth's resources, Jains take their cue from "*the bee that sucks honey in the blossoms of a tree without hurting the blossom and strengthening itself*". Wants should be reduced, desires curbed and consumption levels kept within reasonable limits. (Singhvi, 2013)

**Water (Jal)** 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 which comes from heaven, or those that wander dug from the earth, or flowing free by nature, Bright, purifying, speeding to the Ocean, here let those Waters. Goddesses, protect me.* (The Rigveda 07.49.2)

*Blest be the streams from hills of snow, sweet be spring Waters unto thee; Sweet be swift-running Waters, sweet to thee be Water of the Rains. Sweet unto thee be Waters of the waste and Waters of the pool; Sweet be the Waters dug from earth, to thee, and Waters brought in jars.* (Atharvaveda 19.2.1-2)

But over a period of time, we have forgotten the basics and continue to pollute our water resources by diverting industrial waste to lakes, rivers and sea. Even we have not spared the underground water whose level is reducing day-by-day and making it unfit for drinking. We need to rethink that whether our actions are right or are we doing good *karma*?

**Air (Vayu)**, according to Brahadaranyaka Upanishad, 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). But because of unrestricted industrial growth, the air is polluted to a great extent. There have been reports of the acid rains in some areas. Respiratory diseases are on the rise in the urban area and now it has started affecting the rural habitations also.



**Trees**(*Vriksh*) 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 spit on a tree; even plucking flower or leaf or a branch of a tree after sunset is a taboo.

Planting of tree is a religious activity. In Rigveda, the trees are regarded to have divine powers due to their medicinal properties. A full hymn (Rigveda 10.97) having 23 verses is devoted in their praise.

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). Also in Charak Samhita it is stated that the destruction of the forest is equivalent to destruction of the state and conversely the reforestation is an act of rebuilding the State and advancing its welfare.

In Mahabharata there are various verses advising protection of trees and forest. At one instance Bhishm Pitamah says to Yudhister, “*Let not such trees as yield edible fruits be cut down in thy dominions*” (Mahabharata, Shanti Parva, Sec 89, P 194)

### **Environment Sustainability**

Hindu philosophy puts great importance on environment sustainability since they realised that for a balanced growth of humanity, protection of our environment is important and said that people polluting the environment were cursed. Accordingly, a code of conduct (*Dharma*) was framed to define the ethical relationship with environment. “*A person, who is engaged in killing creatures, polluting wells, and ponds and tanks, and destroying gardens, certainly goes to hell*” (Padmapurana, Bhoomikhananda 96.7-8, cited at [http://www.hinduwisdom.info/Nature\\_Worship.htm](http://www.hinduwisdom.info/Nature_Worship.htm), Page 1).

To conserve the environment, Rigveda warns against polluting space and air, advising to be in harmony with the environment and letting forests grow as much as possible.

*Graze not the sky. Harm not mid-air. Be in accordance with the earth.  
For this well-sharpened axe hath led thee forth to great felicity.  
Hence, with a hundred branches, God, Lord of the Forest, grow thou up.  
May we grow spreading with a hundred branches.* (Rigveda 5.43)



In the past, it was everybody's duty to maintain a proper sanitation and punishments were set for default. As Kautilya wrote, "*The punishment of one-eighth of apana should be awarded to those who throw dirt on the road. For muddy water one-fourth pana, if both are thrown, the punishment should be double. If latrine is thrown or caused near temple, well or pond, sacred place, or government building, then the punishment should increase gradually one pana in each case. For urine the punishment should be only half*". (Kautilya's Arthashastra, Book II, Ch. 36, Verse 145, Cited by Dwivedi, 2001)

The Buddhist Emperor, Ashoka (273-236 BCE), advised his subjects to plant trees and preserve Flora and Fauna. He got the message engraved on pillars located at various places showing his concern for the welfare of animals and plants. Various punishments were also set for killing of animals.

On the co-existence of human and his environment, Brhadaranyaka Upanisad observed: "*...In so far as beasts and birds, even to the ants find a living in his houses he becomes their world. Verily, as one wishes non-injury for his own world, so all beings wish non-injury for him who has this knowledge. This, indeed, is known and well investigated.*" (Brhadaranyaka Upanisad 1.4.16, as cited by Nelson 1998, p. 52).

All ancient Indian literature shows us the way to live in harmony with the nature and not to kill other creature and follow the policy of live and let live.

### Conclusion

The current issues concerning our planet are attributed mainly to those of the biosphere, global warming, waste, pollution, overpopulation, and nuclear proliferation (Crawford 1995). The Vedantic Philosophy proclaims that *Atman* (One-self) is a part of *Brahman* (Universal-self) and according to our *Karmas* our *Atman* takes the next birth which may be in the form of any animal, bird or any other creature. This cycle of birth and rebirth continues until we get *Moksh* i.e. unification of the *Atman* with the *Brahman*. Since each and everything in this universe is part of the Him, we are not supposed to do any harm to any of His creation. The Vedantic Literature has advised to co-exist with the environment and have an ecological balance. All have equal rights to co-exist and enjoy the creation of the Almighty. We need to conserve our resources as only use what is essential. To summarise in the words of Marshall McLuhan, "*There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth. We are all crew.*"

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