

## Environmental Issues and Indian Thinkers

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**Abstract:** The environment is not simply passive recipient; it actively participates in the formation and transformation of human society. The present age is the age of science; it is the time when everything is tested on the parameter of it. We, therefore, tend to interpret every happening, change or formation on the basis of scientific norms; even religion or faith is a subject of postmortem today. Our ancient great philosophers (Rishis), because of this reason, associated several plants, animals, rivers, mountains and the earth with affectionate relationship of faith, emotions and feelings. In fact, those people were great scientists, environmentalists and above all, the great benevolent figures to the Mother Earth.

**Key words:** Dharma, Mahabharata, Abhigyanshakuntalam, Kalidasa, spiritual bondage, Sam Veda, Rig Veda.

According to Vedas, *dharma* is a vast term; it encompasses all the goodness in itself. As it is said, "धारयते इति धर्मः",<sup>1</sup> that is, all that is good is *dharma*. Now, if we protect *dharma*, i.e. goodness, it protects us and this is what is announced by our ancient philosophers (Rishis) – "धर्मो रक्षतिरक्षितः।"<sup>2</sup> Now, in this sense plantation and protection of trees itself is *dharma*; let no one should say it religion as it has got a narrow range. If this idea of conservation (*dharma*) is nurtured and nourished by the human beings, they will be blessed with good health—physical, mental and emotional; the 'Green Lungs' provide fresh air to the world which paves the way to sound physical health and which ultimately leads to sound mental and emotional health. It is a scientific fact that people who live in direct contact of Nature are more emotional and humane. In this way our Vedic *dharma* teaches us to secure the lives of trees and plants and hence our beloved *vasudha*, the earth - our great family, as it is said *vasudhaivaikutumbakam*. Vedic cultural propounds the concept of worshiping the natural resources; it should not be seen with an eye of pomp and show; behind this thought hatches the philosophy of conservation. It was hundreds of years back when the great pillars of knowledge like Yagyavalkya and Manu asked for punishment for those who cut green trees:

प्ररोहशाखिनां भाखास्कन्ध सर्वविदारणे ।  
उपजीव्य द्रुमाणाज्य विंशतेर्द्विगुणो दमः ।

गुल्मगुच्छक्षुपलताप्रतानौभाधिवीरुधम् ।  
पूर्वस्मशतार्धदण्डश्चस्थानेभूक्तेभुकर्तने ।।<sup>3</sup>

In **AbhigyanShakuntalam** by kalidasa, there is one more example of emotional attachment and co-existence of human beings with plants and trees as well as their utility for us. On the occasion of Shakuntala's farewell after her marriage when the trees came to know that she was going to her husband's house, they presented her different types of gifts like auspicious white silken clothes and floral jewellery. The sholka says:

क्षौमंकेनचिदिन्दुपाण्डुतरुणा मांगल्यमाविभक्तं  
निभद्यूतश्चरणोपरागसुल्लभः लाक्षारसः केनचित् ।  
अन्येभ्योवनदेवताकरतलैरापर्वभागौत्थितैः  
दन्तान्याभरणानिनः किसलयोद्भेदप्रतिद्वन्द्विभिः ।।<sup>4</sup>

Indian thinkers abhor the idea of measuring the value of environment in material terms or in terms of satisfaction of preferences, because they realize that "environment is the background of social meaning, social relations and evaluative commitments whose value cannot be measured in materials terms. These values are not extrinsic; rather they are intrinsic to our being. We have spiritual bondage with them."<sup>5</sup> This relationship is incommensurable and is incompatible with market relations. To confuse them with things that have a computable value is to make a category mistake. Indic sages realized that "the cause for environmental degradation is not need but greed or unnatural desires of the human beings to accumulate more and more. According to them the criterion of distinguishing between a natural or real, and a non-natural, artificial or contrived desire is that natural desires are quenched easily: thirst by water, hunger by food. But the craving for possession is an artificial one; it goes on unceasingly and is never fully satisfied. Moreover, "a natural desire is fulfilled or satisfied the moment one gets what he sought. For example, if you drink the water you thirst for, your desire ceases. Similarly, if feeling hungry, you receive the food you seek, your hunger comes to an end. If then, man's appetite for gold, for examples; always comes back, a passion never satiated, and so man's craving goes on without an end, this is because it does not proceed from an inclination implemented by nature."<sup>6</sup>

In the **Sama Veda**, the hymns of the Rig Veda are turned into melodies. "These melodies are classified into two groups: the forest songs aranya —gaye - gana or Forest Songs, and grama-gaye-gana or Settlement Songs. This divide plays a key role in the understanding of dharma. Forest is the default state of nature. In the forest, there are rules. The fit survives and the unfit dies. The stronger or the smarter, have access to food. The rest starve. There is no law, no authority and no regulation. This is called matsyanyaya' or law of the fishes, the Vedic equivalent of the law of the jungle."<sup>7</sup> Humans domesticate the

forest to turn the forest into fields and villages for human settlement. Here everything is tamed: plants, animals, even humans, bound by *niti*, rules; *riti*, tradition; codes of conduct, duties and rights. Here, there is an attempt to take care of the weak and unfit. "Dharma is when we function for the benefit of others. It has nothings to do with rules. Which is why Krishna, the rule — breaker, is also upholding dharma, for he cares for the other. In the forest, everyone is driven by self- preservation. Only humans have the wherewithal to enable and empower others to survive, and thrive. To do so is dharma. It has nothing to do with rules or tradition. It is about being sensitive to, and caring for, the other."<sup>8</sup> We can do this whether we are in the forest, or in the city. And so it is the vana or forest, that Krishna dances with the gopikas, making them feel safe even though they are out of their comfort zone.

The **Bhagwad Gita** tells us that the Lord reveals himself as the Supreme Being, birthless, immutable and imperishable. Krishna, an incarnation says that among those who worship him, the wise are dearest to him. The three gunas of prakriti or nature - sattva, rajas and tamas - emanate from him and are under his control. He is creator, preserver as well as the past, present and future. "He is the flavour in water, radiance of the Sun and the coolness of the Moon, the 'Aum' in the Vedas, sound of the sky and manliness of man. He is the holy fragrance of the earth, heat of the fire, life of all living beings and penance of yogis. He is the seed of all beings, intelligence of the intelligent and the luster of radiant ones. He is the strength of the strong, bereft if desire, and energy if procreation that is not contrary to dharma."<sup>9</sup>

The mantras of Vedas not only forbade to cut trees but also motivated people to plant more and more trees; **Matsyapurana** considered a tree equivalent to ten sons and hence a man who has ten sons and wins glory for himself and for his family because of them, he may have the same glory, name and fame by planting and conserving just one tree. Tulsi, the very common plant of our daily life is an inseparable part of our cultural too. There are many rituals associated with it; it just show the deep concern of our ancestors about the well being of it. Fondly it is not only addressed as **Mata** but also worshiped daily; it is a tradition just as we are said to touch the feet of our parents every morning as we get up. Before winter comes, there is a ritual of marriage of tulsi which is purely a means of protection of this plant from server cold; there is need to feel the love and emotions filled in this ritual. It is just for the sake of conservation of a mere plant and this is the greatness of Vedic philosophy. It means even ages back Indians knew the scientific value of this plant but the way they explained it to the people was more practical,

acceptable and impressive which is still workable and is in practice even today. In **PadyontarKhandam**, it is said that if a house has tulsi in its yard, it becomes a pilgrim and even the servants of Yama (the God of Death) are unable to reach there.

Vedas considered the five elements to be Gods. The earth is described as mother Goddess. Atharvaveda says that she is at times mother and father and product of Antariksha. Every thing has been and is being and will be created due to Earth. Water is source of all living being and strength of Earth or cause of the earth. Water may also be called Jeevan which means life as said in Chandogya Upanishad and considered as Varuna Deva. Air is source of energy, it is treated as Vayu Deva. Fire is considered as life principle in Rig Veda and may be prayed as Agni Deva, Surya Deva. **Chandogya Upanishad** says that celestial region is the fire, sun alone is fuel, the sun-beams are ember, the day is the blaze; the moon is the ignition; and stars are the sparks; with this fire, the oblation given is shraddha or the favour from which the soma is begotten. The concept of environment protection is an ancient phenomenon for Hindus; they inherited it from Vedic age. During the earliest, formative period of their society, Hindus first perceived God's presence around them through nature. The motherly perception of nature is very prominent in Hindu religion. Mountains, caves, rocks, forests, trees, plants, healing herbs, rivers, streams, lakes were conceived of as prominent cipher of female power, innate in nature. India is the home of Vedic culture, which is over 5,000 years old and the Panchamahayajna (the five great sacrifices), the Brahmajajna, Devayajna, Pitrayajna, Atithiyajna and Balivaishyadevayajna has been a vital part of this culture.

## References

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2. Manusmriti, 8.15.
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9. Ibid.