

Vedic Culture and Ecology

Dr. Sharma Bhanu Bhupendra

Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy
Hansraj College, University of Delhi

Abstract

There is nothing in universe which is devoid of the pañca-mahā bhūta. Since time immemorial man (in Bhārat) has always considered nature as a living entity as himself thus all social and cultural activities here have environmental overtones. In nature everything is included be it animals, birds, plant kingdom and so on. There is no hierarchy, in this every one lives harmoniously with each other. The young minds were taught Bhumi Sukta (Atharvada) where earth is not seen just as a planet or soil but as mother, living and nourishing all the beings without partiality. Water also occupies a special place, being either uncreated or produced in a very peculiar way. It is essential to all forms of life. But, the present state of affairs is gloomy as some nations and organizations are still not acknowledging this fact and in lust for acquiring more or in the name of development the nature is used and abused for selfish intension of man. Be it developed nations, developing nations all need to come together in this mission of saving the environment. Vedic era was the age of enlightenment which was promoting holistic healing and harmonious co-existence and living. So, now is the time where the Vedic values must be revisited and included in daily life. The natural elements must be given due importance and all this can be achieved only if Earth is seen as Vedic seers saw it in Bhumi Sukt. It is our duty for our future generations to give protection and preserve the Mother Earth.

Key Words: Bhumi Sukta, Pañca-mahā bhūta, Vedas, Ecological Issues, Environmental Ethics, Global Warming, Deforestation, Carbon emissions, Yoga

Introduction

Our forefathers / ancestors had lived harmoniously co-existing with all other forms of lives inhabiting our planet Earth and had led the holistic life full of values. In Bhārat, Life is considered as a journey where man has to discharge three debts i.e. *Pitr ṛṇa*, *Deva ṛṇa* and *Ṛṣi ṛṇa*. In *Deva ṛṇa*, man is required to perform the *Yajñas* and take care of the natural surroundings by providing food and shelter to birds and animals. In Indian ethos, everything consists of *Prakṛti*, thus fundamentally everything in reality is constituted of *pañca-mahābhūtai*. i.e. Earth, water, fire, air and ether. There is nothing in universe which is devoid of these *pañca-mahābhūta*.

Since time immemorial, man (in Bhārat) has always considered nature as a living entity as himself, thus all social and cultural activities here have environmental overtones. In nature everything is included be it animals, birds, plant kingdom and so on. There is no hierarchy, in this every one lives harmoniously with each other. In daily life man performs several rituals which are coined by the scriptures for the welfare of all. The Vedic Revelations unfolds the process of Man's "becoming conscious", of discovering himself along with the three worlds and their mutual relationship. But, the present-day man has become indifferent towards nature and have started treating it

as commodity this is the main reason as to why environmental issues are on the rise. The issue is, when in Indian ethos environmental ethics has always been incorporated then why are we facing such problem? Here it becomes important, to revisit our ancient roots, culture and literature and see where the things have gone wrong. In this article I am taking up this issue.

Significance of *Pañca-mahā bhūtain Vedas*

As we are aware that the Veda are eternal and the source of knowledge and guidance to Indian society since time immemorial. Our cultural, social and religious practices are all guided by the Vedic injunctions, for instance, the performance of *dāna*, giving food to animals and birds, worshiping sun, fire and so on. These all are proclaimed as duties by the Vedic ṛṣi, as all life forms are equal and sacred. R̥g Veda invokes divine intervention to bliss and protect the environment¹ showing how rivers are like mother providing the pure water which nourish our physical bodies, she is invested with divinity. The Vedic ṛṣi sees heaven as father, atmosphere as naval and earth as the mother. The people of Vedic era judiciously utilized as well as nurtured the Nature as they were well aware of its importance in their life, trees were compared to human beings. R̥g Veda has a prayer to Indra not to separate trees from forests and the sons from their fathers. Forest were considered as abode of Gods. Planting a tree was considered as a pious act, trees like Pippal, Vatavrksha and Tulsi plant holds a special place, it was immoral to cut such trees, moreover trees were also considered as equivalent to humans, people were not allowed to cut the green trees. In recent

history we have seen Chipko movement where villagers (especially women) fought against cutting of trees (it is because of our cultural heritage, trees should not be cut). Atharava Vedastates that those who worship Tulsi plant will go to heaven, there is a famous example from *Ramcharitra Manas* which confirms this i.e. when Lord Hanuman on seeing Tulsi plant at Vibhishan's house inferred that, the house belongs to a good, pious and moral man and seeks his help in finding Sita ji. Vedic ṛṣi were also aware of the value of the mountains, how they help in causing rains and are also the store house of medicinal plants that was the prime reason that they lived in forest or mountains rather than in towns or villages. The gurukuls were also situated in the forest, as the ṛṣis took it as their responsibility to introduce the nature to the young minds who came to attain the knowledge. In gurukul the disciple got a holistic knowledge, they were introduced to the Mother Nature and Her importance in the lives of human beings. The young minds were taught *Bhumi Sukta* (Atharvada) where earth is not seen just as a planet or soil but as mother, living and nourishing all the beings without partiality. In this sukta, the ṛṣi clearly states that Bhumi is my mother and I am *Prithvi's* son, this sukta reinstates human umbilical relationship with Mother Earth, where the aspirant is praying to mother earth to nurture him with and also guide and show him the clear path. She is the abode of all creatures who throughout their lives and after their death shall be embraced by her. There are several names which are attributed to earth as, *Vasudhā* since she contains all wealth, *Hiranyavrksha* for having gold bosom and *Jagato Niveshani* for being abode of whole world. Similarly the animals and plants are also important in

the sustenance of all beings, in Yajurvedaman is abstained from killing helpful animals thus protection of animals have been in the ethos of Indian culture, there are several festivals where the animals are worshiped for example, Nag Panchami where snakes are worshipped, Balabhadra puja where cows are revered. Manu Śāmhita bans the killing of birds and animals who are scavengers, since they feed on carcasses and filth thus clean the surroundings. Today we can see how important these birds and animals are for clearing the waste material, otherwise it gets accumulated and cause major problems like diseases and pollution thus causing harm to man and nature.

Water occupies a special place, being either uncreated or produced in a very peculiar way. It is essential to all forms of life. According to *Śatpatha Brāhmaṇa*¹¹ water is considered to be created out *vāc*, the word, thus it's also known as *āpaḥ*. Since it covers everything (*vr-*). it is also called *vāri*. Varun is considered as one of the chief *R̥g* – Vedic God, who is the supreme Ruler and controls everything in the cosmos even the deeds of men. The sun is all Seeing Eye of Varuna; nothing escapes his glance, which sees everything, penetrates, surveys, examines and assesses. It is important to note that many cosmologies award primordial status to water rather to any other *pañca-mahā bhūta*. Atharva Veda takes water as milk of Mother Earth which helps in nurturing her off spring and make them pure in hundred ways, it is the source of dignity. Water possess an integral reality thus having a special power of healing.

In daily rituals in a Hindu traditional home one can notice that before

eating food the agent purifies the food by taking water in his hand and circles it around food. In order to cure a patient, the *vaid* (*r̥ṣi* who practiced medicine) used to give *abhi-mantr̥it jala*. Water convey divine energy, it is the elixir of immortality¹⁵, *āpo vāmṛtam*. It is also known as Soma, elixir of Gods. In Yajurveda it is strictly prohibit anyone to pollute water, '*maapo hi msir*'. According to Taittiriya Upaniṣad man should not cause urine or stool in water, nor should he spit in water; should not bath without clothes. In this way one will be able to keep water clean. In traditional Hindu family no one is allowed to touch water pot with dirty (impure) hands. The water pot is given importance equivalent to God. The ancient *r̥ṣi* were aware that disease can spread by polluted water. According to Archarya Sushruta, water is best among all foods, pure water is life- giving and always helpful to human bodies. In Paippalada Śāmhita, there is a prayer in reverence to water which states that water is good and useful for the universe. According to Yajurveda oceans are treasure of wealth they should be protected. Man is forbidden from poisoning water as well as atmosphere; the whole universe is full of energy with Sun as the source. The energy flows from Sun to the Earth and if there is imbalance the vegetation, forests take care of it (due to the photosynthesis process in plants and trees) and control the heat buildup thus global warming problem is taken care of. Purāṇa too highlight the importance of *pañca-mahā bhūta*, "there is no other thing in this universe other than the elements. Markandeya Purāṇa states that," The Gods, Danavs, Yaksas, men, beasts, trees, animals, birds, reptiles are all satisfied and nourished by thee, O Agni. They all originate from thee and meet

with dissolution in thee.” It also states that, “not only does it cook what is eaten or drunk, but also purifies the entire universe.” It is said that, earth, water, fire, air, along with Gods and other objects were created by Surya, the Sun God.

In R̥g Veda, Air is termed as *Vata* or *Vāyu*, it is connected to primordial water, the first born though no one knows from where it comes and where it goes; it is free, is heard and felt sensed without being comprehended. “Breath, O Wind your healing breezes. Blow away evil. You are the medicine of this world, the Messenger of God! In Prāṇāgni hotra Upaniṣad Breath is the sacrificial Fire, the Supreme Self which is enveloped by the five winds. “May he comfort all beings, may there be no fear for me! You are the universe, you are common to all men, you assume all forms, all things that are born and carried by you. In you are offered all the offerings and they proceed there where you are the immortal Brahman”. In Rayisamvardhana the aspirant address, “May I speak a word that wins cows! soar above me in splendor. May Vāyu surround us on all sides, may Tvaṣṭṛ grant me abundance”. It is considered as prayer which is potent in nature and thus yield results. Thus, we can see that, Vedic ṛṣiknew the significance of air in sustenance of life. The man and animals require oxygen and plants takes on carbon di oxide and exhale oxygen, thus the nature has made a perfect balance between the two, the ṛṣis tried to retain the balance by promoting the eco- friendly customs. They also researched and established that, if man have proper breathing then he can remain healthy. Yoga school of Indian philosophy of Patanjali has mastered this art of breathing.

Today we can see how people from all over the world are attracted to Yoga, they are now also trying to include it in their daily life. But by trying to perform yogic postures (asana) is not enough, people must give up the materialistic attitude towards life and start to lead a simple life, an eco-friendly approach is must. Mahatma Gandhi rightly said that, nature has ability to provide to every one’s need but not to their greed, so until or unless people do not give up their greed they can not help in sustaining Nature.

Contemporary challenges

The present state of affairs is gloomy as some nations and organizations are still not acknowledging this fact and in lust for acquiring more or in the name of development the nature is used and abused for selfish intension of man. It is unfortunate that India was projected as the nation of snake charmers, the western world could not understand our approach, which was holistic and harmonious, treating everyone on the same platform, considering the world as one’s own family, *Vasudev Kuṭumbhakam* and wishing peace and happiness for everyone. Whereas, in west the earth is treated as a planet, and not living thing. They also lack the intimate bonding with it, thus earth (along with nature) is treated as ‘means’, man considers himself as superior to nature. He has encroached the rights and privileges of other species be it animals, birds, flora or fauna, for his personal benefits he created non-ecofriendly things and put them to use and after the use those objects were discarded as a result, things started to pile up and pollution problem started, there are not only mountains of waste material on land but also in sea and Carbon emission in atmosphere, due to which the animals of

land and water along with birds are suffering. Many a times there is huge oil spill in oceans killing many large and small water animals? Many species are extinct and some are on verge of extinction. Now, the issue is how to make people aware of their participation in protecting the environment and becoming a part of a larger family.

It is important to note that if we want to change the behavior of the masses then one must provide them with an ideal, the one who gave importance to the Nature and Mother earth; in Indian scenario Śrī Rāma is a befitting example of this approach. If, one reads the narration of Śrī Rāma's life story be it Rāmāyaṇa or Ramcharitra Manas or any regional narration, then one can see how Śrī Rāma treated Mother Earth, flora and fauna, along with the animals, for example the way a bird Jatayu was given full honour and his last rites were performed by Śrī Rāma. He also makes the bond of friendship with non-human race (vānara) and give full respect to them. Moreover, being all powerful he does not dry the ocean thinking about the serious repercussions (the innocent sea animals shall be killed and it will have a catastrophic effect on the environment) but seeks help from the ocean and worship it. Klostermaier rightly points out that, "these issues are not issues to be dealt with science and technology- they are issues that had been dealt with traditionally by philosophies and religion"³⁰ The moral concept ṛta has permeated throughout the thought process of the Vedic ṛṣi, it is this ṛta which is the fulcrum of the whole creation. This is dharma (the moral cosmic order) which is ultimate, every being be it man, God or even nature has to follow, it is an obligation which ought to be performed.

This duty is not only towards one's family but towards the whole universe, of which the environment is an integral part. Klostermaier points out that, "Indian tradition associates the visible deterioration of man's condition and of the quality of an environment to a truncating and mutilating of dharma."

Conclusion

Today, when we are facing this acute problem of global warming, due to deforestation, Carbon emissions, also depletion of natural earthly reserves, man is still not giving due place to nature but is using it for his personal materialistic worldly gains. Today, when the glaciers are melting and the environmentalists are predicting acute storage of water in near future many people are not only disagreeing to this fact but are taking the ostrich approach towards this problem. Today the ecological, environmental and other related problems which are arising are the result of ill-treating and mismanaging the natural resources. It is still time that human race should learn how to co-exist with nature, else the fury of the Nature will annihilate the mankind which is so vivid by the frequent natural calamities like cyclones, typhoons, earthquakes and so on in the present era. Still if we are not able to value the Vedic vision of our ṛṣi, we will not only endanger our existence but also become the cause of total annihilation. The world of clear environment, pure water and air belongs to all, it needs protection by all, so it is imperative for man to take on his responsibility in toto. Be it developed nations, developing nations all need to come together in this mission of saving the environment. It is also true that only governments coming together will not be able to solve this problem, it is imperative

that everyone change their attitude as well as their behavior, they should encourage traditional knowledge management, for their livelihoods and pursue value orientation in their approach towards nature with more zeal, fervor and passion. Swami Dayanand Saraswati gave a call to Indians ‘go back to Vedas’, I think he could foresee, that by following the western culture (as at that time India was blindly following the footsteps of west, be in education systems, administration system and so on) the consequences will be bad. Vedic era was the age of enlightenment which was promoting holistic healing and harmonious co-existence and living. So, now is the time where the Vedic values must be revisited and be included in daily life. The natural elements must be given due importance and all this can be achieved only if Earth is seen as Vedic seers saw it in Bhumi Sukt. It is our duty for our future generations to give protection and preserve the Mother Earth.

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