



THE ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN VEDIC LITERATURE

Dr. Vishwanath Verma

Associate Professor, Ancient History

Harish chandra P.G. College, Varanasi-01 (U.P.) India

Abstract:

The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 defines “Environment includes water air and land and the inter-relationship which exists among and between water, air and land and human being, other living creatures, plants, microorganisms and property. Every living and non-living body is made up five basic, gross elements of Nature, called ‘Panchamahabhuta.’ The substance capacity in the five basic elements (Bhutas) manifests in the following order - Ether or Space or Firmament (Akash), Air (Vayu), Energy or Fire (Tej or Agni), Water (Aapah) and Earth. The Vedas, in fact, is the oldest book in which we can study the first beginning of our language and of everything which is imbodyed in all the languages under the sun. The ancient scriptures present in great detail, inter alia, the evolution of earth, the science of rainfall, its measurement and forecast, climatology, meteorology, hydrology, water use and management, environmental protection and agricultural planning etc. Waters have been considered as mostly “motherless, and the producers of all that is stationary and all that moves”. They are also hailed as mothers of all beings. “It is the waters which pervade everything, big or small, the earth, the atmosphere, the heaven, the mountains, gods, men, animals, birds, grass, plants, dogs, worms, insects, ants. All these (worldly manifestations) are waters indeed. All the living creatures found in the universe have distance environment and every living creature has an environment of its own. But when we look from man’s perspective all of them constitute his environment. There is a general feeling in the Vedic texts that animals should be safe, protected and healthy. The whole process of nature is nothing but a sort of Yajna. The view that Yajna cleans atmosphere through its medicinal smoke, and provides longevity, breath, vision etc., is established in Yajurveda. Thus, the Vedic vision to live in harmony with environment was not merely physical but was far wider and much comprehensive. The Vedic people desired to live a life of hundred years. It is very clear that our Vedic seers were aware about the environment. ‘One should enjoy with renouncing or giving up others part. Vedic message is clear that environment belongs to all living beings, so it needs protection by all, for the welfare of all.



Human beings find expression, fulfillment and meaning of life, in relation to the environment in which they live. With the advent of modern civilization, development and industrial growth, man has developed a rivalry with nature. The oldest and simplest form of nature-worship and environmental awareness finds expression in Vedic texts. The Vedas are the oldest monumental scriptures and represent fountain of wisdom and knowledge. “The Vedas, in fact, is the oldest book in which we can study the first beginning of our language and of everything which is imbodyed in all the languages under the sun.”¹ These are four in number –Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. The other ancient scriptures include - Brahmins, Upanishads, Smritis, Samhitas, Aranyakas, Purans, etc. The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 defines “Environment includes water air and land and the inter-relationship which exists among and between water, air and land and human being, other living creatures, plants, micro organisms and property.”² Every living and non-living body is made up five basic, gross elements of Nature, called ‘Panchamahabhuta.’ The substance capacity in the five basic elements (Bhutas) manifests in the following order - Ether or Space or Firmament (Akash), Air (Vayu), Energy or Fire(Tej or Agni), Water (Aapah) and Earth (Prithivi).³ The nature has maintained a status of balance between and among these constituents or elements and living creatures. Any change or disturbance in the natural balance causes lots of problems to the living creatures in the universe.

The Indian saints, sages and seers of ancient times were great visionaries who perceived the creation of universe in a scientific manner and revealed the mysteries of cosmic evolution with profound wisdom and theories which were, perhaps, too advanced at that time for the world to understand. The ancient scriptures present in great detail, inter alia, the evolution of earth, the science of rainfall, its measurement and forecast, climatology, meteorology, hydrology, water use and management, environmental protection and agricultural planning etc.

It is interesting to know that the utmost reverences for the entities of nature were regarded as deities (Devata). All those forces that were facilitators of rains like Sun (also known as Aditya), wind, etc. were prayed as gods.⁴ A deity was also assigned to each of the main cosmic element. Indra is most powerful God who kills Vritra, the symbol of cloud to free water.⁵ Maruts are considered Gods of winds and Aryaman, Mitra, Varuna and Soma are the facilitators of water. Aditi is praised as Devamata, the mother of all natural energies and she symbolizes the nature. Fire (Agni) was also regarded as a God.



In Vedic cosmology, the earth (Prithivi) symbolises material base and the upper sky or heaven (Dyaus) symbolizes the unmanifested immortal source which together and between them, provide the environment (paryavaran).⁶ Heaven and Earth (Dyavaprihivi) are referred to as mother and father providing water and food to all living beings.⁷ The seer praises the Heaven and Earth (Dyavaprihivi) by saying “You are surrounded, Heaven and Earth, by water, you are the asylum for water; imbued with water, the augmenters of water, vast and manifold; you are the first propitiated in the sacrifice, the pious (people) pray to you for happiness, that the sacrifice (may be celebrated). May Heaven and Earth, the effusers of water, the milkers of water, dischargers of the functions of water, divinities, the promoters of sacrifice, the bestowers of wealth, of renown, of food, of male posterity, combine together”.⁸ Bhumisukta or Prithivisukta indicates the environmental consciousness of Vedic seers. She is called Vasudha, Hiranyavaksha, Jagato Neveshani⁹ and Visvambhara. “If atmosphere, earth, and sky and if father and mother we have injured, may this house-holder’s Firelead us from that to the world of their perfectly restored state. May mother earth, Aditi our birthplace, brother atmosphere (save) us from imprecation; may our father heaven be weal to us from paternal (guilt); having gone to my relatives, let me not fall down from their world.”¹⁰

Water has been highly respected and treated with great reverences in the Vedic literature and has been prayed to grant men procreative power.¹¹ Water is a part of human environment which occurs in five forms: Rain water (Divyah), Natural spring (Sravanti) Wells¹² and canals (Khanitrimah), Lakes (Svayamjah) and Rivers (Samudrarthah).¹³ There are some other classifications as Drinking water; medicinal water and stable water are also in Vedic literatures.¹⁴ It mentions- “All creatures are born from the waters.”¹⁵ Waters have been considered as mostly “motherless, and the producers of all that is stationary and all that moves”.¹⁶ They are also hailed as mothers of all beings.¹⁷ “It is the waters which pervade everything, big or small, the earth, the atmosphere, the heaven, the mountains, gods, men, animals, birds, grass, plants, dogs, worms, insects, ants. All these (worldly manifestations) are waters indeed.”¹⁸ “They are the foundations of all in the universe.”¹⁹ “They are a place of abode for all the gods.”²⁰ Taittiriya Upanishad says: “From the Self, verily, space arose, from space air, from air fire, from fire water, from water the earth, from the earth herbs, from herbs food, from food semen, from semen the person.”²¹

The importance of water to living being was always understood and has been stated by the Vedic seers as: “Water is like a mother to this world. It is the sovereign of the world. It holds divine



wealth, immorality, pious deeds in its possession for the welfare of the living beings.”²² “Water is the basis of all that is good in life. The most beautiful things happen to us because water provides us with vigor.”²³ The same mantra is in Atharvaveda²⁴ and is repeated in our rituals performed even today. “Water exercises maximum control over the living beings on earth.”²⁵ The rivers, worshipped like goddesses, were considered to be holy and the waters in them were described as life sustaining, medicinal, as ambrosia, cleanser of sins and were regarded as divine, protectors and blissful. It was addressed by various names: nectar²⁶, honey.... in the prayers. The place of water as a life giving and life sustaining element was very high.

In Vedas, Mitra and Varuna have been recognized as the facilitators of water. They are invoked in a hymns to create favourable conditions for rains - “I invoke Mitra of pure vigor, and Varuna, the devourer of foes; the joint accomplishers of the act bestowing water (on the earth). Mitra and Varuna, augmenters of water, dispensers of water, you connect this perfect rite with its true (reward).”²⁷ Mitra, in its ordinary sense is the name of the sun; Varuna, of the regent of the waters. Mitras and Varunas are said to cause rains indirectly by producing evaporation, the vapors thus raised becoming condensed in the atmosphere descend again in showers. The sage invites the Maruts (gods of wind) to create conditions whereby the rains are formed for showering on the earth. It is an excellent example of hydrologic phenomenon - “Sons of strength, the Maruts, awaiting your arrival; advance from the sky, Agni comes (to meet you) from the earth, the wind traverses the firmament; and Varuna comes with undulating waters (clouds).”²⁸ They prayed the Maruts not to create such conditions as to spell excess rains causing misery from floods rather than happiness. “The radiant, ever-moving Maruts have mingled with (their) associate (lightning), like (youths) with common women; the formidable divinities do not overwhelm heaven and earth (with excess rain), but promote their prosperity through (friendly) regard.”²⁹ Thus, the influence of water and waterbodies in their various forms in the Indian society has been witnessed practically in all aspects of culture and traditions, predominantly on religion and prayers, social customs, ecology-related actions, architecture, literature, sayings, imageries, festivals, tourism, pilgrimage, etc. This respect for waters worked as a deterrent against their pollution.

The sages were aware of undesirable actions by humans that could pollute the waters or harm the nature’s balance, whereby the waters could be unfit for drinking. The very thought of this unwise action propels him to ask for forgiveness - “Whatever the offence which we men commit, Varuna,



against divine beings, whatever law of thin we may through ignorance violate, do not you, divine Varuna , punish us on account of that iniquity.”³⁰ The Padmapurana condemns water pollution forcefully saying, “The person who pollutes water of ponds, wells or lakes goes to hell.”³¹ The import of the verses is to wish for a clean and unpolluted earth and environment to which no harm or injury be done. Several water-related festivals including the Kumbha are celebrated throughout the country. Thus, Water is the single most important tool/mode for performing daily religious rituals or social ceremonies and a primary means for purification of body and soul in Indian culture even today.

The principal deity of ‘Antariksha’ is Vayu. Jaiminiya Brahmana quotes, ‘Vayu brightens in Antariksha.’³² Yajurveda says, ‘Vayu has penetrating brightness’.³³ Apparent meaning of Vayu is air. The Vedic seers knew the importance of air for life. Concept and significance of air is highlighted in Vedic verses. Rigveda mentions: “O Air! You are our father, the protector.”³⁴ Air has medical values.³⁵ “Let wind blow in the form of medicine and bring me welfare and happiness.”³⁶ Medicated air is the international physician that annihilates pollution and imparts health and hilarity, life and liveliness to people of the world. Thus, The Vedic seers emphasized that the unpolluted, pure air is source of good health, happiness and long life.

Animals and birds are part of nature and environment. The Vedic seers have mentioned about their characteristic and have desired their welfare. Rigveda classifies them in three groups: sky animals, forest animals and animals in human habitation.³⁷ All the living creatures found in the universe have distance environment and every living creature has an environment of its own. But when we look from man’s perspective all of them constitute his environment. There is a general feeling in the Vedic texts that animals should be safe, protected and healthy.³⁸ Vedic people have shown anxious solicitude for welfare of their cattle, cows, horses etc. The cow as the symbol of wealth and prosperity, occupied a very prominent place in the life of the people in Vedic times.³⁹

The people in Vedic times regarded nature and the environment in a holistic manner and revered each of its constituents and entities by carefully preserving them. In Rigveda ‘Aranyani sukta’ is addressed to the deity of forest.⁴⁰ Forest should be green with trees and plants. ‘Oshadhi sukta’ addresses to plants and vegetables as mother.⁴¹ The Atharvaved mentions certain names of Oshadhis with their values. Chandogya Upanishad elaborates “water has generated plants which in turn generated food.”⁴² The Rig-Veda instructs that forests should not be destroyed.⁴³ The earth is keeper of creation, container of forests, trees and herbs.⁴⁴ Plants are live.⁴⁵ The Atharvaveda prays for



continuous growth of herbs.⁴⁶ An important quotation of a Padma Purana ‘One tree is equal to ten sons’⁴⁷ is very relevant for today’s world.

The sacrifice ‘Yajna’ is regarded as an important concept of Vedic philosophy and religion but in broader sense, it seems to be a part of Vedic environmental awareness. In Rigveda and Yajurveda ‘Yajna’ describe as the “navel (nucleus) of the whole world.”⁴⁸ Through Yajna, Vedic seers were able to understand the true meaning of the Mantras.⁴⁹ It is considered as the noblest action.⁵⁰ In environment all elements are inter-related, and affect each other. Sun is drawing water from ocean through rays. Earth gets rain from sky and grows plants. Plants produce food for living beings. The whole process of nature is nothing but a sort of Yajna. The view that Yajna cleans atmosphere through its medicinal smoke, and provides longevity, breath, vision etc., is established in Yajurveda.⁵¹ This Yajna is going on in the universe since beginning of the creation and almost everywhere for production and, also for keeping maintenance in the world. Thus, the concept of Yajna presents a major principle of Vedic environmental awareness.

The logicians recognize Manas as one of the nine basic substances in the universe.⁵² Many prayers are found in Vedas requesting the God to keep the mind free from bad thoughts, and bad thinking.⁵³ Although, the study of mind does not appear directly under the contents of modern environmental science but in reference to cultural environmental consciousness of Vedic seers, we find many ideas discussed in Vedic literature on the pollution of mind and its precautions.⁵⁴ The Vedic seers were not only conscious of the purity of natural environment i.e. earth, water, air, light, space etc. but also of human mind and spirit.

The Rigveda makes a clear reference to the presence of a protective layer ‘which we know now to be the ozone layer’ that filters the harmful rays of the sun and protects the earth and praises theradiation that enters the atmosphere that is responsible for the health of the environment. In a hymn of the Rigveda the seer prays to the Ashvins for their indulgence for protection against any excessive solar flares that also affect earth’s temperature.

Thus, ancient Vedic seers knew about various aspects of environment, about cosmic order, and also about the importance of co-ordination between all natural powers for universal peace and harmony. In the ‘Shanti Mantra’ they pray for peace at all levels: “peace of sky, peace of mid-region, peace of earth, peace of waters, peace of plants, peace of trees, peace of all-gods, peace of Brahman, peace of universe, peace of peace; May that peace come to me!”⁵⁵. Thus, the Vedic vision to live in



harmony with environment was not merely physical but was far wider and much comprehensive. The Vedic people desired to live a life of hundred years.⁵⁶ It is very clear that our Vedic seers were aware about the environment. 'One should enjoy with renouncing or giving up others part.'⁵⁷ Vedic message is clear that environment belongs to all living beings, so it needs protection by all, for the welfare of all.

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