

Environmental Ethics and Philosophical Basis

Abstract

This article is related to the environmental concerns in the ancient India. The ancient India is a treasure of knowledge which is believed to be the source of best possible human ideas. The man and nature relationship has been very closely reflected in the ancient Indian text like manusmriti etc. These texts are theoretical and practical reflection of Indian Seers. The authors have clearly and precisely presented the environmental concerns reflected in the Vedas in this article.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Creation of God, Rigveda and Atharvaveda, Gods and Goddesses, Philosophical Basis.

Introduction

Environmental Concern in Ancient India

The environmental vision in India has been conceived in terms of a universe which is creation of God and therefore, a definite set of rules seem to govern the universe. These rules are there for every living creature to follow. However, humans, being more intelligent, were expected to adhere to the rule more robustly. Since ancient times, the environment has been considered as an integral part of Indian intellectual and popular traditions that suggest a participatory life with environment as humans have been perceived as one component of this wilder reality i.e., nature. The civilization of India had grown up in close association with nature. Every religious school that flowered in our land contained the message in regard to preservation of environment and maintenance of ecological balance. Man is taught to live in harmony with Nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals.¹ The Hindu Rishis of the Vedic and Upanishadic era perceived the value of maintaining a harmonious relationship between the needs of man and the spectacular diversity of the universe. They instructed man to show reverence for the presence of divinity in nature. Therefore trees, animals, hills, mountains, rivers are worshipped as symbols of reverence to these representative samples of Nature. Many verses in the *Rigveda and Atharvaveda* have been devoted to the praise of *Lord Surya (Sun)*, *Vayu Devta (Lord of Air)*, *Agni Devta (Lord of Fire)*, *Varuna Devta (Lord of Water)*, *Prithvi Mata (Mother Earth)*, *Vanya Devi (Goddess of Forests)*, etc.² Therefore, cutting of trees, polluting air, water and land were regarded as sin as these elements of Nature were to be respected and regarded as Gods and Goddesses. It places man alongside other creatures of the animal world and the world of vegetation. He enjoys no perfect position though a whole lot of privileges are exploited due to his intellectual capability. Man has two fold relationships with the nature i.e. Physical and Spiritual. Man is expected to behave ethically towards the society and environment and these duties / behaviour fall in the realm of higher ethics.³

In India, the popular and classical traditions both communicate through popular folk tales, which are part of oral traditions in India. The animals and the flora have been part of the themes of different stories. Popular traditions regard nature as a reality in which man is deep-seated at all levels. It is generally believed that man has gained a lot from these popular stories of animals and birds. The classical traditions, on the other hand, are more philosophical expositions on environment. In these traditions the sky and earth are two important components of the sphere. Also, other worlds do exist beyond the sky and earth. Even the non-living organic world has been perceived as a living creature. Trees and animal have a very important role in Indian traditions.⁴

In Indian philosophy it is generally believed that each creative act comes from direct contact with *Prakriti (Nature)*.

The dance of Shiva is a perfect iconographical statement of ecology. His emblems are *Agni* and *Deer*. He hides within himself Ganga (Water). His hair adorn the Sun and the Moon. His garlands are the snakes. He wears the tiger skin. His energy is *Shakti*. Without her, he is incomplete. She

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herself, the daughter of the Himalayas, must undergo penance and austerities. The emphasis here is on discipline and austerity, with integration of environment.⁵ The violation of the peaceful co-existence amongst the creatures and the material world was considered as 'pradushan', the prime cause of which has been identified as human greed and selfishness. Pollution is perceived to have appeared in all the acts of creation, maintenance and preservation, *sristi* and *sthiti*. Cleanliness has been greatly eulogized in ancient traditions.⁶

Thus, in essence, a good environmental sense has been one of the fundamental features of India's ancient philosophy. There has always been a compassionate concern for every form of life in Indian Mind. This concern is projected through the doctrine of *Dharma*, preached by every religious school that flowered in our land. The Hindu *Rishis* of the Vedic era perceived the value of maintaining a harmonious relationship between the needs of man and spectacular diversity of the Universe. To them, nature was not only the mother that sustained their life; it was the abode of divinity. Sanctity of life to them included not only the efforts to seek salvation, but to seek it by developing a sacred attitude towards spiritual significance of nature. Man, in Hindu culture, was instructed to maintain harmony with nature and to show reverence to the presence of divinity in nature.⁷ The Vedic Hymn to the Mother Earth, the *Prithvi Sukta in Athravaveda* is indisputably the oldest and the most evocative environmental invocation. The Hymn is redolent with ecological and environmental values.⁸

One has only to turn to *Agnipurana* to have an insight into the minds of the ancient seers for their curiosity and anxiety to preserve the forests and wild life. Agni Puran says:

*Equal to ten well is a tank,
Equal to ten tanks is a son,
Equal to ten sons is a tree.*⁹

As man occupied the highest and the noblest place among the animals, in the same way tree is regarded as the highest and noblest production of the vegetable kingdom. Tree occupies a venerable place in *Buddhism*. Siddharth after long days of penance attained enlightenment under a Bodhi tree. Buddha described forests as a peculiar organism of unlimited benevolence that makes no demands for subsistence and extends generously the products of its life activity. Affords protection to all beings and offering shade even to axe man who destroys it.¹⁰

Jainism also lays stress upon the indisputable principle of cultural environment that one should refrain from the easily avoidable acts, harmful to self or to other. *Ahimsa*, which is the fundamental postulate of the Jaina way of life, touches the deepest and noblest aspects of human nature maintaining that truth, harmony and compassion, based on spiritual and physical symbiosis must be the foundation for any civilized community.¹¹

Sikh religion and philosophy are also deeply related to nature. In *Mul-Mantra* (the seminal formula), while discussing the basic attributes of God, Guru Nanak calls Him the *Karta Purukh* (creating power of the universe). He perceives Him as the inner self of all living beings. He Himself is the Creator and the

Created including the act of Creation.¹² The beauty of His creation is of incomparable characteristic. The physical world is full of wonderful specimens of His creation, as has been beautifully depicted in *Guru Granth Sahib*. From among the major tenets of Sikhism is *Vand Ke Chakko* (eat after sharing). Man does not exercise absolute control over nature. Sikh Gurus strongly warn mankind against any attempt to control nature of the world. Upset the balance and out of order will come chaos. Out of God's perfect ecological balance will come ecological upheaval.¹³

Thus, ancient Indian tradition established the principles of ecological harmony centuries ago through its quest for spiritual and physical symbiosis, synthesized in a system of ethical awareness and moral responsibility. This has helped in outlining a set of principles that is broad and undogmatic enough to function as a rallying point for groups of widely divergent views on the causes of the ecological crisis. These timeless and ageless revelations draw our attention to the importance of developing a higher ecological consciousness that encourage us to adopt holistic attitude towards nature.¹⁴

A perusal of Hindu religious scriptures called the Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Gita, Mythological literature including stories, social and moral codes, and political rules reveal that the following were the general guiding principles to be observed by all in their daily life:

1. Respect nature.
2. Life in living is dependent on various components of nature.
3. Keep harmony with nature.
4. Protect natural environment.
5. Utilize natural resources only to satisfy the need of the people.
6. Presence of the divinity of nature in all living and non-living objects.
7. Destruction of nature means destruction of mankind.
8. All must have compassion for animate objects; for example, trees, animals, birds, aquatic life, etc.
9. Air, water, land, sky, trees, animals are the creation of god and He dwells in all of them. Therefore, to worship them is to worship Him—the creator of the universe.
10. Man, being one of the creations of god, has no special privilege or authority over other creatures, on the other hand he has more obligations and duties to protect and improve them.
11. *Ahimsa Parmo Dharmah* (non-violence) is the *dharma* of the highest order, one should be non-violent towards animals, trees and other micro-organisms alike, Hinsa (violence) was considered as a sin. Therefore, "not eating of meat in Hinduism is considered both an appropriate conduct and a duty".
12. Drought, fury of floods and storms, heavy rains, cloudbursts, lightning, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, heavy tides are the violent forms of anger manifested by the goods and goddesses.
13. Purity of thought and expression, and cleanliness of the environment around us should be observed.

14. All lives, human and non-human including trees, are of equal value and all have the same right to existence. It shows that the principle of sanctity of life is clearly ingrained in the Hindu religion.¹⁵

Environment Ethics: An Overview

India has inherited a culture of tolerance, non-violence, equity and compassion for animate objects. In the olden times, they were a part of daily life and synthesized with the religion. Religious teachings, social and political norms, and economic policies treated man as a part of nature, not as a moulder or superior to it. Air, water, land, animals, plants and human beings are the creation of one superior power – god. Therefore, the fundamental ethics of behaviour with each other was to live in harmony with each other, because it was well realized that each one of them is dependent on one another and destruction or damage to the other is the destruction of self and is complimentary to each other. Therefore, interdependence, cooperative living and close association with other components of environment was the real basis of human life. Wisdom of Vedas, religious principles of Hindus, and moral doctrines taught the lesson of coexistence between man and his environment which later on became a part of the daily life of the people.¹⁶

Ethics help us to decide how we ought to live. They are the standards employed, amongst other factors, to determine our actions. They are prescriptive in that they tell us what we should or ought to do and which values we should or ought to hold. They also help us evaluate whether something is good or bad, right or wrong.¹⁷ Environmental ethics concern those issues which arise when human beings interact with the natural environment. They offer guidance as to how people ought to think and behave vis-à-vis their relationship with the nature. For instance, environmental ethicists debate whether the natural environment is simply an exploitable resource for human interests, or whether it has value apart from any use that might be made of it, a value ought to constrain certain practices.

Environmental ethics is concerned with the issue of responsible personal conduct with respect to natural landscapes, resources, species and non-human organisms, since one's response to these requirements reflects upon his value as a moral person, a peculiarly distinctive trait of humanity that has a moral significance.¹⁸ Environmental ethics justify the use of natural resources in terms of common good. The great American environmentalist Aldo Leopold said in *Sandy County Almanac* that, 'we can be ethical only in relation to something that we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in'.¹⁹ He pointed out that the history of land has been accompanied by a gradual extension of inherent values and rights, first to men, then to women, children and minorities and more recently to non-humans such as corporations and states.

The different perspectives of environmental ethics namely, anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, deep ecology, etc., suggest different emphasis on value but primarily, environmentalism is still concerned with human survival and well-being rather than about the welfare of non-human life or the planet's ecosystems as such, but a slow shift towards that is discernible.²⁰

Human arrogance towards nature is rooted in anthropocentrism: A way of thinking that regards humans as the source of all value and those human needs and interest are of highest, perhaps exclusive, significance – humans are placed at the centre of the universe, separated from nature, and endowed with unique values. According to anthropocentric attitude, protection or promotion of human interests or well-being at the expense of non-human things turns out to be always justified. Aristotle maintains that nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man and that the value of non-human beings in nature is merely instrumental. According to him, 'plants exist for the sake of animals ... all other animals exist for the sake of man ... nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man'.²¹ Thomas Aquinas claims that 'animals are ordered to man's use in the natural course of things, according to divine providence. Consequently, man uses them without any injustice, either by killing them or employing them in any other way'.²²

Contrary to this view is the biocentric or ecocentric vision. Ecocentrism rejects the human chauvinism of anthropocentrism and argues that all of nature has intrinsic value. Ecocentrists object to human chauvinism, not to humans; they want human and human culture to blossom and flourish, just as they do to other species. Their emphasis on the welfare of the non-human world is an attempt to correct an imbalance in philosophical and social science theory. Granting intrinsic value to nature would make a huge practical difference. It will encourage the civil society to change its behaviour towards nature.²³

Many leading contributors are also committed activists whose main objective is to develop a robust environmental activist theory to underpin green activism. Radical perspectives such as 'Deep Ecology' question the existence of a clear divide between humans and nature and even push humans off their pedestal at the top of the ethical hierarchy.²⁴ It is founded on two basic principles: one is that scientific insight into the interrelatedness of all systems of life on earth is possible; and that the idea of anthropocentrism or human-centeredness is a misguided way of seeing things. In other words, it argues for equality of all natural things-ecosystems, life and landscape and agrees that all of them have an intrinsic right to co-exist. Ecocentrism is more consistent with the truth about the nature of life on earth and instead of regarding humans as something completely unique or chosen by God, they see humans as integral threads in the fabric of life. Hence it demands a less aggressive human attitude towards nature. In the words of Naess 'living a simple life, a human will affect the earth minimally: simple in means, rich in end'.²⁵

In common parlance, the characterization of the deep ecology platform is based upon the following deep ecology eight points:

1. The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of their usefulness for human purposes.

2. The richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital human needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease in the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
5. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies affecting basic economic, technological and ideological structures must change.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living.
8. Those who subscribe to the above have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.²⁶

The deep ecology perspective is informed by the idea of symbiosis. It calls for a closer identification of the human self with nature that could provide a rationale for nurturing higher ecological consciousness. A non-anthropocentric environmental approach could contribute to a change in popular consciousness and give conservationists the means to argue in less egotistic and more emphatic terms.²⁷

However, there are many who advocate a sort of convergence of anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric environment ethics, as they argue, that both approaches prescribe the same personal practices and public policies if we take human interests to be sufficiently broad and long. When the interests of future generations (as well as of present) and the ecological services and psycho-spiritual resources afforded by nature are taken into account, respect for human beings (or for human interests) is quite enough to support nature protection.²⁸

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