

# Environmental Awareness and Conservation in Ancient India: a Study

Paper Submission: 15/10/2020, Date of Acceptance: 26/10/2020, Date of Publication: 27/10/2020

## Abstract

The concept of environmental conservation is an ancient thought prevailed in the Indian Cultural ethos since very early age 'Paryavaranam' is a Sanskrit word for environment that was used frequently in ancient Indian literature. Indian Ethos since Vedic age till the present era depicts India's awareness about importance of environmental awareness and conservation of natural resources. Our ancestors though did not study environmental issues as a problem which we face today, but they innately followed the basic principles for conserving natural resources. They believed that destruction of mother Nature would revert back to the gradual abolition of their own. Thus our ancestors felt it essential to preserve the nature as far as possible with maintaining the balance between their needs and natural environmental norms. The object of this research paper is to highlight the ideas of ancient people of India regarding environmental awareness and conservation of natural resources. India is one of the oldest civilizations of natural resources. India is one of the oldest civilizations in the world.

**Keywords:** Biodiversity, ancient India, forest, environment, literature.

## Introduction

In Sanskrit, the equivalent word for environment is 'Paryavarana.' This word is constituted as pari+a+ vr-anat in which the earlier prefix means 'fully', the second means 'completely' and the root has the sense of 'covering'. Thus it refers to the environment which entirely surrounds the living creatures, especially the human beings, whose existence depends upon it. Environment strongly determined the lives and activities of the people. The ancient people developed many effective measures to safeguard our ecosystems and environment, which reflect sustainable development in true sense. In this study, I shall try to highlight some texts and archaeological evidences of ancient India which can eminently reflect the perspectives of environment, forest and biodiversity conservation of our forefathers.

## Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to highlight the greatness of ancient Indian norms i.e cultural, social and ideological and to make this study more fruitful and relevant for the awareness of environmental conservation and preservation. India has a very enthusiastic history having a lot of evidences whether literary or archaeological showing its depth and ideas regarding environmental protection and sustainability.

## Environmental Issues and Indus Valley Civilization

The Indus Valley Civilization was a Bronze Age Civilization extending from what today is north-east Afghanistan to Pakistan and north west India. It flourished in the basins of the Indus River and the Ghaggar - Hakra River. In many seals and sealings of Harappan Culture, there were a variety of animals including elephants, rhinoceroses and tigers. But at present, there is no forest area in Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, which can indicate the changes in climatic conditions. *Ficus religiosa*, which has perhaps the longest continuity of a sacred tree in India, occurs on the seals from the Indus civilization, it is associated with Buddhism and is depicted in sculpture from Buddhist places of worship and is continued to be venerated in association with religious shrines of Hindus and Muslims.<sup>1</sup> An Icon, which had both the characteristics of human and other animals and the image of tree god in the seals, reflects their closeness with nature. In the seal of 'Pashupati', a man was encircled with animals proved that they often went to the forest to spend a part of their life.<sup>2</sup>

Reduction of forests in that area was due to use of huge amount of timber-wood for burning bricks. So an rainfall reduced and soil erosion

## Anjana

Assistant Professor,  
Dept. of Ancient History,  
K.N.Govt. P.G. College,  
Gyanpur, Bhadohi, India

caused deposition of silt in the Indus river which had choked off Mohenjo-daro from the sea, causing a rise in the water table that must have been a prime factor in the destruction of Mohenjo-daro. Causes of erosion was also because of intensive agriculture, depletion of soil nutrients by inadequate crop rotation, disturbance of the natural pattern of drainage by the slow rise of river bed and banks as a result of silting and overgrazing because of the insufficient food of the cattle.<sup>3</sup> Inadequate maintenance of dams and irrigation channels hastened the downfall of the civilization.

#### **Awareness of Environmental factors in Vedic India**

In Vedic times people used to lived in forests and villages. Ancient saints and sages instructed man to show reverence for presence of spirituality in nature. The flora and fauna, hills, mountains, rivers are worshipped as symbols of veneration. Activities such as cutting of trees, polluting air, water and land were regarded as sins and all these natural resources were respected and associated with various gods and goddesses. The phenomenon of environmental conservation is not a new concept to the human civilization. The efforts of people in Vedic times for improving the environment can be traced out from vedic literature. Our ancestors have understood the complete significance of natural resources for their survival on earth. It was considered that the primary duty of every individual is to protect the nature. The people used to worship the gods and goddess associated with their objects of flora and fauna. Sanatan dharma said to be dealt with various aspects of nature and ways of worshipping the natural resources. This religion inculcated spirit of duty and reverence for the presence of holiness and harmony in nature. The five elements of nature were recognized as Panchabhutas and people considered that they are divine incarnations. Long before, India has already developed a pristine tradition of the sensible use and judicious conservation of all natural resources useful to whole mankind. Our ancestors were first amongst other contemporary countries to show their reverence to nature with religious belief. Such endless devotion to the natural resources unabated for the past many generations.

It was considered in ancient times that an invaluable natural resources are not only protected but also conserved properly. Conservation of water resources, protection of forests and wild life considered of utmost importance for the whole human race. Water and air were considered as the most basic and essential elements for the survival of people. The Rigveda verse says that " Let the feeling of glorious well-being be upon us. May the whole human race be happy. Let the plant kingdom flourish upwards in great profusions May prosperity be with the bipeds and with the quadruped animals as well"<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, the concern for land was found in the hymns of Atharva- veda " O earth whatever I dig out from you, must that have to be filled up again and restored as fast as possible. O pure one, I indeed have no intention to hit you at your heart of hearts."<sup>5</sup>

Aranyakas or the 'forest' works and the Upanishad 'Bhahdaranyaka (translated as "Great Forest Text") are particularly important from the perspective of forestry traditions.<sup>6</sup> Although Aranyakas provide the theological foundations of early hinduism, which is outside the realm of forestry, some of these descriptions are relevant to indigenous ecological knowledge, on which there is considerable attention now.<sup>7</sup>

The Atharveda XIX.9.14 is indeed astounding - "Let there be balance in the space! Let three be balance in the sky! Let there be peace in the earth! Let there be calmness in waters! Let there be growth in the plants! Let there be the growth in the trees! Let there be grace in all Gods! Let there be bliss in the Brahman! Let there be balance in everything!, Let there be peace and peace! Let such peace be with every one of us!

The Ayurveda demonstrate profound knowledge of biodiversity. The inter- relationship between living species and the environment was established. It described the need to maintain natural dynamism, the right ways of handling plants and trees, native flora and fauna and the price one should pay for going against the ecological principles. Medicinal plants such as palash, arjun, yava, laksha, haritaki, haridra, etc. were widely used for treatment.

#### **Buddhism and Environmental Protection**

Buddhism is eco-centric in nature. Gautam Buddha admired trees stating that trees provide shade and shelter to the person who is planning to destroy trees. He preached in Vanaropa Sutra in Sanyukta Nikaya that gardening and afforestation are acts which increase doer's merits every day. Environment and natural resources are considered as things not inherited from the past generation but things borrowed for the future generations. If we destroy natural resources base or pollute environment, future generations will find it difficult to survive. Buddhism is the only religion which has taught its followers to think of future generations. In Kariya metts Sutra, Buddha while insisting on compassionate to all living beings said, whatever breathing creatures here may be no matter whether they are frail or firm or middle sized or be they short or small or whether they are dwelling for or near existing or get seeking to exist may beings all be of a blissful heart.<sup>8</sup> Buddhism is spiritual approach which emphasized ecological values through a reverence and compassion for all beings or all forms of life. This approach, along with deep ecology, points towards the development of spirituality, a higher consciousness or awareness, which would recognize and integrate spiritual values towards nature. The formulation of positive ecological and environmental values as the basis for assuming a wise stewardship role towards the earth is becoming increasingly important, if not critical, especially between people of diverse cultures.<sup>9</sup>

#### **The Pali Buddhist Text and Environment**

One of the main pillars of Buddhism is Ahimsa (Non-Violence), which is as well an essential principle to keep environmental balance. The Buddha,

in a discourse in the Anguthara Nikaya<sup>10</sup>, even hints at the ecological divastation of the natural resources when lust, greed and wrong values grip the heart of humans. Buddha realizing the importance of greenesies in our life, specially advised not to cut the branches or even plunk a leaf, as the shadow of a tree is extremely beneficial to us. In a nutshell, one should not cut a tree, not even cut its branches or tear the leaves as the tree soothes us, comforts us and thus it is a great friend and to harm a friend is a grave him.

#### **Jainism and Love for Nature**

Reverence for all forms of life is deeply ingrained in the Jaina Ethos. It is strongly asserted that every living being wants to live. Sorrow and killing are not liked by any living being. All being have the right to live. Nonviolence is for the welfare of all beings. Lord Mahavira has said, "To kill or to hurt any living being amounts to killing or hurting oneself. Compassion of others is compassion to ones own self."<sup>11</sup> Man should live in harmony with all being and nature. Hence, the relevance of Jaina concept of non-violence which bring adaptability in modern life style and may help us change the attitude of people in today's world of consumerism and terrorism.

#### **Ashoka and Environmental Sense**

The most popular ancient King regarding the conservation of environment was the Mauryan King Ashoka, who considered the preservation of living organisms including trees, animals, and plants as part of the duties of the king. He restricted a killing and hunting of number of animals for game and food; and advocated planting and preservation of plants and trees. The edicts of Ashoka, from the third century B.C., in Dhauli, notes as following in translation:

"The King with charming appearance, the beloved of the goats, in his conquered territories and in the neighbouring countries, thus enjoins that medical attendance should be made available to both man and animal; the medicinal herbs, the fruit trees, the roots and tubers are to be transplanted in those place where they are not presently available, after being collected from those places where they usually grow; wells should be dug and shadowy trees should be planted by the roadside for enjoyment both by man and animal"<sup>12</sup>

"The Fifth Pillar Edict of Ashoka also tells about his concern for animals, birds and forests: "I forbade the killing of the following species of animals, namely: parrots, mynahs, red-headed ducks ... and all quadrupeds which are of no utility and are not eaten ... chaff which contains living things must not be set on fire. Forest must not be burned in order to kill living things or without good reason....."<sup>13</sup>

#### **Kautilya's Arthashastra and Environment**

In the book 'Arthashastra' written by Kautilya, importance was given on the protection and management of forests, gardens, orchards as these all were considered as sources of revenue. The Arthashastra divided the country between the Himalayas and the oceans into various kinds of regions - forests (arnya), village areas (gramya), mountains (parvata), wet or humid areas (audaka), drylands (bhauma), plains (sama).<sup>14</sup>

Arthashastra demonstrates Kautilya's perception and concern about the living creatures - domestic and wild animals, plants and vegetations. penalties and punishments were specified for injuring living creatures. Special positions were occupied by directors of forests, supervisor of animal slaughter. These officials used to protect wildlife, ensured proper rations for pet animals regulated grazing, prevented peaching of wild animals, ensured proper care of domestic animals etc. Individuals were supposed to follow norms about their dealing with the domestic animals. Village headman was made responsible for preventing cruelty to animals in village communities. Details of care, training, and treatment of horses, elephants and cows had been indicated.<sup>15</sup> The king is supposed to protect forests, elephants forests, irrigation works and mines that were made in ancient times and also should start new ones. Forests were considered as valuable sources, forest products should be used in a sustainable manner. For cutting any part of a tree, fines of variable amounts were imposed on the offender depending on the types of injury. Emphasis was given particularly on those which bear fruits, flowers or provide shades.<sup>16</sup> The environmental issues described in Arthashastra are very much relevant in modern society. In 1972, the conference on human environment in Stockholm mentioned about some principles which were very much similar to the edicts of Arthashastra. Even in India, some of the environmental laws like water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1974. The Forest Conservation Act 1980 and the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 show amazing similarity with forms and contents of Arthasashtra.

#### **Conclusions**

So, we have seen how the ancient Indian scholars were concerned about the balance of the environment - though, then there were no questions of global warming - or chemical or nuclear pollutions like those of today. The Sanskrit and Pali literatures reassert that : The general attitude of ancient Indians, towards environment was one of love and togetherness. This attitude was echosed through the message of the Vedanta - 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' i.e. "all living beings in this universe are relatives." The very basic idea behind the need for conserving our environment is captivated in Suttapitaka by the Buddha, which is equally true for our contemporary ages, for all times and places - Easy living being whether it is small or large or medium tall or short visible or invisible, living near or far, born already or to be born, let live in happiness.

It is a need of the hour to secure the right to save food, water, air and all other natural ingredients in particular and environment in general. To get rid of the emerging environmental and ecological problems of modern civilized societies, there is an increasing trend of consciousness growing among us. There are many policies in many countries for environmental protection, but they are all directly or indirectly dependent on the traditional knowledge developed in ancient age which teaches us the concept of the value of a simple life, we can follow the simple policies of our forefathers, who probably had much better

understanding of the environment than we currently have.

#### References

1. Ratnagar, S., *Understanding Harappa - Civilization in the greater valley*, National Book Agency, New Delhi (2003).
2. *Ibid.*,
3. Dasgupta T., Chattopadhyay R.N., *Journal of Human Ecology* 16(3) (2004) Pp. 197-201.
4. Gupta S.P. D., *Environmental Science in Ancient India*, *Geographical Review of India*, 60(2), Pp.101-103, 1998
5. *Ibid*, p.104.
6. Pandey D.N., *Ethnoforestry: Local Knowledge for Sustainable Forestry and Livelihood Security*, New Delhi, India (1998).
7. Folke C., *Ecology and Society* 9(3) (2004), Pp. 7.
8. Henning D.H., *A Manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology*, Buddha Dharma Education Association, 2002.
9. Gore, A, *Earth in the Balance*, "Ecology and the Human Spirit", Penguin Publications, New York, p. 231, 2006.
10. Moris R., Hardy E., *Anguttara Nikaya*, A.N. Vol. 1, London (1885-1900) Pp. 160.
11. Jamieson. D., *Jainism and Buddhism*, In *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, p.58,2001.
12. Gadigl M., Guha R., *The Use and Abuse of Nature: Incorporating This Fissured Land : An Ecological History of India and Ecology and Equity*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p.137,2000.
13. Romila Thapar, *Asoka and The Decline of the Mauryas (Second Edition)* Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 264, 1973.
14. Anon, *Irrigation in India through the ages*, Central Board on Irrigation and Power, New Delhi, India, (1965).
15. Kangle R.P., *The Kautilya Arthashastra*, Second Edition, University of Mumbai, part 1 and II (1986).
16. Rangarajan L.N., *Kautilya - The Arthashastra*, Penguin Classics, India, (1992).