

Facets of Environmental Awareness in Mythology

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1. Introduction

Environment plays a significant role in human civilization. Human beings have close relations with the biosphere in which they live. The whole environment and ecology consisting of earth, air, water, plants, and animals provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for sustaining human life. Today, the environmental crisis is a tremendous problem for the whole world. Developing countries and developed countries alike are all suffering from environmental pollution. Therefore, today the environmental problems have been the object of discussion everywhere from village to town. Pollution is by far the most rapidly growing problem of the modern technological society. The condition in India is pretty serious. It is no longer, feasible to ignore the alarming nature of India's environmental conditions. Much of the current environmental problems – greenhouse effect, ozone layer depletion, emission of toxic gases, deforestation, energy crisis etc. were created by industrialized civilization. Environmental problems which we face today are largely the by-product of our scientific achievements. Forests have been felled; animals have been killed. The soil, water, air, and foods have been polluted. The natural imbalance caused by cutting trees more than required and hunting wildlife for enjoyment and for luxurious skin coats etc. has long term serious effects. The greediness and carelessness of few have threatened some species of animals and birds to extinction. With regard to environmental awareness, we must look at our cultural values and moorings contained in sacred scriptures. Living in harmony with nature is the recurrent theme of Indian culture based on Indian mythology in Sanskrit literature. The Sanskrit (culture) of every country depends on its environment, climatic conditions and human behaviour. Literatures reflect in their own culture, geographical conditions, climatic influences, and environmental aspects. Therefore, from this point of view the Vedic literature is of great utility to us and to the world society at large. Accordingly, if we study the environmental conditions of our society and the world, we shall be greatly benefitted in our living and healthy life.

The present article will carry available environmental facets from the selected mythology which bear vast description of nature.

2. Environment of Vedic Period

The Vedic Aryans were children of nature. They studied nature's drama very minutely. Sand-storm and cyclone, intense lightening, terrific thunderclaps, the heavy rush of rain in monsoon, the swift flood in the stream that comes down from the hills, the scorching heat of the sun, the cracking red flames of the fire, all witness to power beyond man's power.

The Vedic sages felt the greatness of these forces. They adored these activities. They appreciated these forces. They worshiped and prayed them due to regard, surprise, and fear. They realized instinctively that action, movement, creation, change and destruction in nature are the results of forces beyond men's control. And thus, they attributed divinity to nature.

3. Vedic Gods

The word *Devata* means divine, dignity which is bright, strong, donor, and powerful. In these hymns we find prayers for certain natural elements such as air, water, earth, sun, rain, dawn etc. The glorious brightness of the sun, the blaze of the sacrificial fire, the sweep of the rain-storm across the skies, the recurrence of the dawn, the steady currents of the winds, the violence of the tropical storm and other such natural energies, fundamental activities or aspects are glorified and personified as divinities (*Devata*). The interaction with nature resulted in appreciation and prayer but, indeed, after a good deal of observation. Attributes assigned to deities fit in their natural forms and activities, as Soma is green, fire is bright, air is fast moving, and sun is dispenser of darkness. The characteristics of these forces described in the verses prove that Vedic seers were masters of natural science. A famous geologist S.R.N. Murthy has written on the earth sciences in the Vedas. He has somehow a different opinion about Vedic gods and hence states, 'the natural geological aspects have been described as Indra, Agni, Vayu, Varun, Usas, etc. Devamata, the mother of all natural energies and she symbolizes the Nature.'

4. Water (Apah)

Water is essential to all forms of life. According to Rig-Veda, the water as a part of human environment occurs in five forms:

1. Rainwater (Divyah)
2. Natural spring (Sravanti)
3. Wells and canals (Khanitrimah)
4. Lakes (Svayamjah)
5. Rivers (Samudrarthah)

There are some other classifications also in the *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* as drinking water, medicinal water, stable water etc. Chandogya Upanishad describes about qualities of water 'The water is the source of joy and for living a healthy life. It is the immediate cause of all organic beings such as vegetations, insects, worms, birds, animals, men etc. Even the mountains, the earth, the atmosphere and heavenly bodies are water concretized.' The cycle of water is described. From ocean waters reach to sky and from sky come back to earth. Rainwaters are glorified. The rain-cloud is depicted as Parjanya god. The fight between Indra and Vritra is a celebrated story from the Rig-veda. It is explained in many ways. According to one view, it is a fight for waters. Indra is called Apsu-jit or conquering the waters, while Vritra is encompassing them. Vritra holds the rain and covers waters and thus being faulty is killed by Indra through his weapon called Vajra, i.e., thunderbolt. The Indra-Vritra fight represents natural phenomenon going on in the aerial

space. By the efforts of Indra all the seven rivers flow. The flow of water should not be stopped and that is desired by humanity. The significance of water for life was well-known to Vedic seers. They mention - Waters are nectars. Waters are source of all plants and giver of good health. Waters destroy diseases of all sorts. Waters are for purification. It seems that later developed cultural tradition of pilgrimage on the river-banks is based on the theory of purification from water. The ancient Indians knowing water as a vital element for life, were very particular to maintain it pure and free from any kind of pollution. The Manuscript stresses on many instances to keep water clean. The Padma Purana condemns water pollution forcefully saying, 'the person who pollutes waters of ponds, wells or lakes goes to hell.'

5. Air (Vayu)

The observer space is the abode of matter particles, light space is the abode of energy and the intermediate space Antariksha is the abode of field. The principal deity of Antariksha is Vayu. Jaiminiya Brahmana quotes, Vayu brightens in Antariksha. Field is another form of energy and, therefore, Yajurveda says, Vayu has penetrating power. Apparent meaning of Vayu is air. The Vedic seers knew the importance of air for life. They understood all about air in the atmosphere and also about the air inside the body. The Taittiriya Upanishad throws light on five types of wind inside the body: Prana, Vrana, Apana, Udana and Samano Air reside in the body as life. Concept and significance of air is highlighted in Vedic verses. Rig-Veda mentions 'O Air! You are our father, the protector. Air has medicinal values Let wind blow in the form of medicine and bring me welfare and happiness. Medicated air is the international physician that annihilates pollution and imparts health and hilarity, life and liveliness to people of the world. Hilly areas are full of medicated air consisted of herbal elements. Another verse describes characteristics of air The air is the soul of all deities. It exists in all as life-breath. It can move everywhere. We cannot see it. Only one can hear its sound. We pray to air God. Ancient Indians, therefore, emphasized that the unpolluted, pure air is source of good health, happiness and long life. Vayu god is prayed to blow with its medicinal qualities. brightness. The meaning of Vayu is made clear in Shatapatha Brahmana in the following Mantra, 'Sun and rest of universe is woven in string. What is that string, that is Vayu.' This verse clearly shows that here Vayu cannot mean air alone.

6. Ether (Akasha)

Modern environmentalists discuss sound or noise pollution. There is a relation between ether and sound. The sound waves move in sky at various frequencies. Scientist could see the sky which exists only in the vicinity of earth, but Taittiriya Upanishad throws light on two types of ether one inside the body and the other outside the body. The ether inside the body is regarded as the seat of mind. An interesting advice to the mankind is found in the Yajurveda 'Do not destroy anything of the sky and do not pollute the sky Do not destroy anything of Antariksha.' Sun shines in Dyuloka and we get light from sky. The sunrays strengthen our inner power and are essential for our life. Thus, importance and care for ether is openly mentioned in the Vedic verses.

7. Animals and Birds

Animals and birds are part of nature and environment. It is natural, therefore, that Vedic seers have mentioned about their characteristics and activities and have desired their welfare. Rig-Veda classifies them in three groups -sky animals like birds, forest animals and animals in human habitation. All the three types of 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. Domestic animals, as well as wild animals along with human beings should live in peace under the control of certain deities like Rudra, Pushan, etc. 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.

8. Major Discussions in Vedas

One can be proud of the fact that Sanskrit is not merely a language, but a collection of knowledge, a vast treasure house of various disciplines like linguistics, mathematics, astrology, architecture and natural sciences like physics, chemistry, biology, botany, medical science, engineering, agriculture, horticulture, cosmology, ecology, aeronautics, navigation etc. We are crying for a better environment now and the Vedas teach us to take steps for the protection of our clean environment. Vedas recognize the importance of maintenance of the seasons' cycles that are likely to get altered due to the climate change owing to inappropriate human actions. It is remarkable that 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. „Do not harm the environment, do not harm the water and the flora, earth is my mother, I am her son, may the waters remain fresh, do not harm the waters. Tranquillity be to the atmosphere, to the waters, to the crops and vegetation.

“माता भूमिः पुत्रोऽहं पृथिव्याः।।”

This Vedic prayer invokes divine intervention to bliss and protect the environment. To protect environment the Rig Veda says.

मधु वाताः ऋतायते मधुक्षरिन्ति सिन्धवः

माध्वीनर्नः सिन्त्वोषधीः ।

मधुघौरस्तु नः प्रिता

माध्वी गर्वि भवततु निः । (Rig-Veda,1/90/6,7,8)

Environment provides bliss to people leading their life perfectly. Rivers bliss us with sacred water and provide us health, night, morning, vegetation. Sun bliss us with peaceful life. Our cows provide us milk). The plant ecology has a great importance to keep the environment in balance. The Rig-Vedic people exploited nature in a very judicious way, making full use of the Indian psyche, the compared trees to human beings, Gods etc. They prayed to Indra (God) not to separate trees from the forests and the sons from their fathers (RigVeda,8/1/13). The Vṛkṣāyurveda says that planting a tree is equally beneficial as having ten sons.

“दिकुपिम भापि दस भापि सम हादिः

दिहाद समाः पुत्रो दसपुत्र समा द्रुमः ॥” (Vrksayurvedah-5).

Tulshi, Pippala and Vatavṛkṣa have great importance in our culture. About the importance of Tulashi, Vatavṛkṣa there are many slokas are found in the Vedic literature. Some of them are –

“जावदिनानि तुलिशि रुपितापि जद् ग्रिहे ग्रिहे
तावद्भिन्नर्शा सहासरानि वैकुण्ठे स मिहयते॥” (Vrksayurvedah-5)

9. Conclusion

From the above detailed discussion, some light is thrown on the awareness of our ancient seers about the environment, and its constituents. It is clear that 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 and this wish can be fulfilled only when environment will be unpolluted, clean and peaceful. It is clear from the Vedic message that environment belongs to all living beings, so it needs protection by all, for the welfare of all.

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