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Research Article

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS & ECOLOGY AS REFLECTED IN ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Now a day's environment is a most discussant topic. The later days of nineteenth century the adverse effects of Industrial Revolution and misuses of technology during the time of Second World War created a huge damage of environment. Though this type of occurrence was absent in ancient India, like any other civilization, till the people of that age had some perceptions and awareness on this particular issue. Hence there was no ancient text composed exclusively for environment but the people of that particular period presented an overview of the society and culture through their various thoughts. This study will explore the different components of nature along with the then people's conception and concern on environmental ethics and perceptions on ecology, which is quite relevant at present and has modern outlook.

This study purely stands on few Vedic texts and Polity literatures and also eminent scholars innovative research based articles and several internet links which help to make the study complete. It may be concluded that the modern people presently revolve around the basic concepts of environment through their movements, the idea for which we get from the ancient texts. So it can be said that modern environmental concerns can be addressed by an embryonic form of ancient Indian texts.

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INTRODUCTION

It can be said that the first uttered verse of *Valmiki* in Ramayana was the first footstep of environmental consciousness towards the path of modern civilization. Though in ancient India there were no such environment related problems like the modern world but till the people of that particular age had enough awareness about the precious gifts of the nature. Hence no such exclusively environment related texts were found in ancient literature but all the ancient texts whatever their subjects of study be, presented an overview of the society and culture through their various thoughts. As there was no world war, no industrial hazards still it is indeed very impressing that in ancient India people had realized the great value of natural resources. Though there was no pollution factors but the people appreciated the true significance of the utilization of natural resources and its importance. They were concerned about the preservation of their natural resources for the sustenance of human life. These natural resources are trees, air, wind, water, soil etc.

Purpose

Through the study it is observed that from Vedic age (circa 1500 B.C to 800 B.C) to *Manusamhita* (circa 200 B.C to 200 A.D) then later up to *Arthashastra* (circa 400 A.D) the perceptions and concerns about environmental components are changed. This study will explore the different components of nature by explaining the examples through which the conception and concern of the ancient Indian people as it was reflected in the above mentioned texts can be traced back.

METHODOLOGY

This study is purely based on the original texts of ancient Indian Literature i.e. different *Vedas*, *Upanisads*, *Manusamhita*, *Arthashastra* etc. Along with these texts several innovative articles of different authors and some available resources sited in the social media websites help to design the study more strong and compact.

Objectives with Findings

Earth

Since the last two centuries due to the industrialization and colonization the civilization developed and spread out rapidly

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resulting to deforestation for making room for human use of the lands. So the concept of preservation of forest to maintain the equilibrium of natural resources is a new concept, which was absent in Vedic ages. But the people of that age felt that they were the children of earth. In *Athrvaveda* we find an unbreakable bond with men and nature¹. The sage poet considered himself as a son of earth². Similarly in *Taittiriyaopanisad* the sage poet asked to the earth like his mother for shelter³. In *Athrvaveda* it was also cherished by the sage poet that they would be remain intact, if anyone dinged up any part of it should be filled up soon so that the earth not to be suffered due to any injury⁴. The poet realized the earth as a storehouse of great treasure⁵. The Vedic people didn't want to destroy the resources of earth as it could be the cause of their own destruction. They urged not to destroy the earth and the earth also not destroys them⁶.

Trees

Earth is the dwelling place of human beings along with the animals, beasts, demons etc. So Vedic poets wanted a peaceful co-existence of all and their prayer was to keep all the evil doers far from them and everybody should live happily in each delightful place⁷. It should be mentioned that the people of Vedic age always prayed not only for their prosperity but for all living beings like trees, animals, atmospheric regions etc.⁸. From *santivacanas* we come to know how the sages worshiped for peace of all spheres of universe⁹. They wanted to maintain the golden balance of universe which is very prone to the modern concept of equilibrium.

In *Manusamhita*, the famous polity literature declared that the feelings of trees the weal and the woe¹⁰. Similar observation find in Mahabharata, *Santiparva*¹¹ where forests and wild animals were considered as prized possession so the composer of Mahabharata prohibited cutting off trees and killing tigers infested forest¹².

We find in the age of *Kautilya* the preservation of forest became a principle of the state¹³. The aim for the conservation was mainly for the economy not for ecology. *Arthashastra* coined the word *abhayavana*, broadly means a sanctuary. There mentioned different types of sanctuary according to their characteristics i.e. viviparous means grazing ground, kept in reserve for purpose, *brahmasomaranya*, secluded for hermitages and one part of this kind of *Vana* (forest) kept for royal amusement. The trees having fruits maintained carefully and cutting off such kind of trees was punishable. Several types of fines were mentioned for cutting trees¹⁴.

The king was advised to keep some portion of the forest for the state welfare as well as expenditure¹⁵.

Animals

In Vedic age people were punished for making injury to animals and bear the expenses of treatment of that particular animal. In *Arthashastra* some guidance were given for maintaining the stables for cattle, horses, elephants etc. A particular place was identified for the stable in the town. *Kautilya* prescribed for separate bins for the fodder of the animals for avoiding contamination of food. *Kautilya* wrote three chapters on this particular topic where a vivid description was given for the maintenance of the cattle etc.

In different Sanskrit works a deep sensitive feeling for trees and animals were narrated where the poets mentioned that the wild animals took grasses and water from the forest without harming anybody and nothing received from the people¹⁶. Though killing animals and cutting trees were very much in practice in ancient days till their affections and worries reflected towards them in different verses. Sometimes they treated trees like their sons as they had a strong believe that a son can help them in the next world. But they also admitted that a tree can be equated with ten sons of a man. It was also found that if a person contemplated to go to heaven but for cutting trees and killing animals he would be left for hell. This incident indicates the protesting attitude against the Vedic culture and at the same time a section of people's deep compassion and concern for trees and animals can be traced back.

Water

Water is the most important natural resource that supports life therefore most of the civilization was developed besides the great river. That's why Vedic civilization was called often river based civilization. In most of the Vedic mantras we find that our sages uttered their sincere devotion, gratitude to the rivers. The pivotal role of rivers in general life of human being always led them to create numerous of mantras for invoking rivers. *Methathi*, *Kanva* and such sages found the medicinal values of water¹⁷. Almost same sort of idea we find in *Athrvaveda*¹⁸ and *Taittiriya Samhita*¹⁹. Like earth the Vedic seers considered water as their mother who could give support to their lives. So they expressed sustenance to the water like a kid who seeks protection from the mother²⁰. In *Rigveda* the water offered bliss, strength, power to the seer like a mother²¹. The people of ancient India realized the importance of water lies in the plantations²².

We find different sources of water in *Rigveda*, such as *divya* (rain water), *sravanti* (naturally flowing water or springs water), *khanitrima* (digging up through earth, water of well or manmade tanks), *svayamja* (natural lakes), and *samudratha* (rivers flowing towards the sea)²³. The sage poet emphasized on the purity and refinement of those waters. In *Athrvaveda* we also find the medicinal values of different types of waters²⁴.

In different Vedic texts water cycle was also found. Vaporization and again precipitation of water proves the dynamic equilibrium of nature. In *Rigveda* the sage observed that the water moves from earth to sky and again falls down from sky to earth in form of rain²⁵. In *Chandogyopanisad* different forms of water like *dhuma*, *abhra*, *megha*²⁶ were mentioned. In *Nirukta* by *Yaskacarya* it is stated that rain originated from the mixture of water and heat²⁷. The world survives due to rain fall this and this were there in the views of the ancient sages. Sufficient amount of rain fall keep the people of earth happy because of the abundant of the crops²⁸.

The most noticeable thing we find in *Taittiriyaopanisad* that one might not discharge urine or ordure or spittle in the water and anything which are unclean should not be thrown to the water²⁹. This was the best observation made by the sages of ancient India. These things are the main causes of pollution. In one of a *Purana* we find in a verse that the king advised not to take contaminated water even by a tip of grass. It shows the awareness of the king for the health of the people of his

kingdom. The royal endeavors maintaining the cleanness of water is highly noticeable.

In *Manusamhita* it was stated clearly that if anyone polluted the water should be punished by dropping him in the same because at that time the main source, rain water was reserved only by pouring water in the old reservoirs or to build new one.³⁰ *Kautilya* stated in *Arthasastra* that royal initiative was not enough for water preservation so he advised to appoint private entrepreneurs for undertaking such works.³¹ It proves that they maintain to keep water unpolluted and clean for adverse situation.

Air and Wind

The people of Vedic age found purity and refinement in air, so they presented the medicinal quality of it. These observations are found in *Taittiriya Samhita*³² and *Rigveda*.³³ They often imagined air as their father, son, and friend.³⁴ The sage poet expressed his desire that the wind blows and brings happiness and bliss for them.³⁵ The wind brings down the rain - this scientific observation of the people of Vedic age was found in *Kathaka Samhita*³⁶. In *Satapatha Brahmana* it was stated that the wind blows from every directions and become associated with the rain fall.³⁷ In *Nirukta* we find a summing up, here *Yaskacarya* declared that the wind carries the clouds from here to there and brings rain. So it can be said that those observations of the Vedic seers and poets are the proof of indigenous knowledge. In *Susrutsamhita* we find the conception of air pollution. There it was told if the air gets polluted the birds cannot fly, people will suffer from cough and cold, eyes will be affected by irrigation.³⁸ At the time of 4th century A.D these observations make clear that the people of that time were very much knowledgeable and aware of the adverse effect of environmental imbalance.

Sound

According to *Susrutsamhita* too much higher level of sound causes noise as well as too much lower level of sound causes noiselessness both are injurious for hearing and it may become cause of deafness.³⁹ The same observation was also found in *Carakasamhita*.⁴⁰ This tremendous observation at the time of 4th century A.D really proves that how much enriched literature we have in Sanskrit as well as in our ancient India.

CONCLUSION

After a long discussion on the environmental consciousness in ancient India that our ancient ancestors felt very much for the precious natural resources and they always concerned about the preservation of it. Though their lives were dependent on the natural resources but they always wanted to conserve those that turned into a matter of concern. Apart from this we find that a stately administration took an active participation to the preservation and conservation of the natural resources. The concept of hygienic practices and cleanliness was always in the society. The Vedic people used a specific place named *utkara* in the sacrificial ground for the waste to keep the disposal.

The concept of legal enforcement to keep the environment free from pollution came after the urbanization of the society when many people started living in a small area. Beside that technology with its adverse effects were absent in those days, till socially responsible steps and activities of the people are

being reflected through the codification of social behaviour for the inhabitants of a particular society. That is an indication of much deeper thoughts and visualization of future problems. Actually the problems start with the irresponsible behaviour of the people. It may be concluded that at present the environmental movements revolve round these basic concepts. So it can be said that the modern environmental concepts and concerns can be addressed in an embryonic form of the ancient Indian texts.

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