



### **Review article**

## **A Study of Environmental Awareness in Ancient Vedic Literature**

**Madhu Lata Sharma and Mahendra Kumar Dhakad \***

School of Education, Suresh Gyan Vihar University, Jaipur, India

### **Keywords**

Environmental  
Awareness  
*Rigveda*  
*Atharva Veda*  
*Samaveda*  
*ManuSmriti*

### **Abstract**

Today, all over the world there is a growing concern about the deteriorating quality of environment and a considerable amount of efforts are being made to put a stop on the widespread abuse of environment and improve its quality. 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.” Everything in Earth's system has been placed into one of four major subsystems: land, water, living things, or air. These four subsystems are known as ‘spheres’. Specifically, they are the ‘lithosphere’ (land), ‘hydrosphere’ (water), ‘biosphere’ (living things), and ‘atmosphere’ (air). Starting with Vedic period, India has a long tradition of harmonious co-existence between man and nature. Human beings here have regarded fauna and flora as part of their family since then. It has been considered that every living and non-living body is made up five basic, gross elements of Nature, called ‘*Panchamahabhuta*’; the nature has maintained a balance between and among these elements and living creatures; and any change or disturbance in the natural balance causes lots of problems to the living creatures in the universe. The paper attempts to highlight some ancient Vedic scriptures that make human beings aware of their environment by showing the utmost reverence for the entities of nature and regarding them as deities (*Devata*). These scriptures also propound that human beings must have harmonious relations with each aspect of nature in order to live a fulfilling life.

### **Introduction**

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.” (Saundarya Patil, 2020)<sup>1</sup> Everything in Earth's system has been

placed into one of four major subsystems: land, water, living things, or air. These four subsystems are known as ‘spheres’. Specifically, they are the ‘lithosphere’ (land), ‘hydrosphere’ (water), ‘biosphere’ (living things), and ‘atmosphere’

\* Corresponding author's e-mail  
addresses: madhuanshu11@gmail.com  
Received: 28 June 2022; Accepted 30 June  
2022

(air). Starting with *Vedic* period, India has a long tradition of harmonious co-existence between man and nature. Human beings here have regarded fauna and flora as part of their family since then. It has been considered that every living and non-living body is made up five basic, gross elements of Nature, called '*Panchamahabhuta*'; the nature has maintained a balance between and among these elements and living creatures; and any change or disturbance in the natural balance causes lots of problems to the living creatures in the universe.

Keeping the modern definition and classification of the environment in mind, we can find its explicit expression in *Vedas*. The Hindu classical religious thought has been classified under two groups, viz. "*Shrutis* and *Smritis* including *Dharmashastra*. *Shrutis* which include *Vedas* and *Upanishads* contain knowledge of 'Reality as It Is' which can be verified and is universal in its character." (Gandhi, 1996 p.vi)<sup>2</sup> They are the oldest monumental scriptures and represent fountain of wisdom and knowledge. The *Vedas* are four in number – *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* and the other ancient scriptures include – *Brahmans*, *Upanishads*, *Smritis*, *Samhitas*, *Aranyakas*, *Puranas*. UNESCO in its memory of world register 2007 stated, "The *Vedas* are generally known as the scriptures of the Hindu community. However, being among the first literary documents in the history of humankind, they transcend far beyond their identity as scriptures." (unesco/memory)<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we have to locate and explore all those aspects of the *Vedas* that are valuable for us, the cosmic existence as well as harmony among all orders of the existence. *Vedas* make human beings aware of their environment by showing the utmost reverence for the entities of nature and regarding them as deities (*Devata*). It can

be noted that the Sanskrit word for the environment is *pariyavarana* which is different from the word *vatavarana* (atmosphere) as the *pariyavarana* includes the *vatavarana* and everything that is present around us. The distinguishing aspect of Vedic philosophy is the inter relations within various aspects of nature. The *Vedas* propound that human beings must establish harmony with each aspect of nature as they are the overtly conscious ones among all living beings.

### ***Rigveda***

While the *Vedas* don't deny the attitude of indulgence and gratification towards nature, they do instruct that this attitude should be restrained. Human beings must take and enjoy only as much as they need but not more than that as no amount can ever satiate their greed. Mahatma Gandhi held the same conviction that the earth has enough resources to support all of humanity; however, it cannot support a luxurious lifestyle for all. The main idea is to have a reciprocal approach towards the cosmic existence. In other words, we must approach it with reverence and not only as a resource. Reference to this could also be found in *Vedic mantras* which clearly states that exploitation of natural substances is paingiving (Acharya Vedanta Teerth, *Rigveda* – 10.86.5 p.397)<sup>4</sup>. Another aspect that the *Vedas* emphasize is enjoying nature with *tyaga bhava*. The wealth of natural resources does not belong to one individual and it must be shared with everyone.

### ***Atharva Veda***

The *Vedic* Hymn to the Earth, the *prithvi sukta* of the *Atharvaveda* is the oldest and the most evocative environment invocation. This is *Sukta* 1 of *Atharvaveda Kanda XII* and contains total 63 verses devoted to the Earth. The *Vedic* seer solemnly declares the filial allegiance of humankind to Mother Earth:

यत्ते मध्यं पृथिवि यच्च नभ्यं यास्त ऊर्जस्तन्वः संबभूवुः ।

तासु नो धेह्यभि नः पवस्व माता भूमिः पुत्रो अहं पृथिव्याः ।  
पर्जन्यः पिता स उ नः पिपतुं ॥12.1.12॥<sup>5</sup>  
(*Prithvi Sukta in Atharva Veda* p.91)

He says that the Earth is his mother, he is her son. Mother Earth is worshipped for all her natural bounties and particularly for her gifts of herbs and vegetation. Her blessings are sought for prosperity in life and fulfillment of all righteous aspirations. Therefore, it is expected that humankind shall secure the Earth against all environmental trespass and shall never let her be oppressed. A soul-stirring prayer is sung in other hymns for the preservation and conservation of hills, snow-clad mountains and all brown, black and red earth, unhurt, unsmitten, unwounded unbroken and well defended by *Indra*. Earth in this hymn is symbolic of everything that grows on it. It invokes all the physical and non-physical aspects of nature within its verse. It depicts not only the forms of nature's aspects but its underlying emotional bonding with them. Three spheres of the universe enumerated in the *Vedic* philosophy have been expressed in the *Prithvi Sukta*, the ground to the solid earth, the intermediary or the mid-space and the uppermost or the celestial. The *Vedas* say that all these spheres exist within and outside of the body.

असंबाधं बध्यतो मानवानां यस्या उद्धतः प्रवतः समं  
बहु ।

नानावीर्या ओषधीर्या बिभर्ति पृथिवी नः प्रथतां राध्यतां नः  
॥12.1.2॥<sup>6</sup> (*Prithvi Sukta in Atharva Veda*  
p.89)

In the above verse, the Seer invokes the Earth that has heights, and slopes, and great plains, that supports many plants and medicinal herbs of various potencies. She is free from the pressure that comes from the midst of men. She shall spread out for humankind, and fit herself for humankind i.e. extend her riches to human beings and make them healthy. *Atharva Veda* declares that, the land flourished with tree and

vegetation is capable of nourishing the human beings of whole world (*Atharva Veda* – 12.1.27 p.27)<sup>7</sup>. The whole *Aranyayani Sukta* (10.146.5) of *Rigveda* is indicative of this fact. The *Sukta* directs not to commit violence towards innocent creatures by giving 'aranya' or forest the divine character and expressing reverence towards it<sup>8</sup>. Vedic Sages were fully aware of the fact that ecological balance could be maintained only with the harmonious co-existence of human beings, animals, birds, plants and material order.<sup>9</sup>

यस्यां समुद्र उत सिन्धुरापो यस्यामन्नं कृष्टयः संबभू  
वुः ।

यस्यामिदं जिन्वति प्राणदेजत्सा नो भूमिः पूर्वपेये दधातु ॥  
12.1.3॥<sup>10</sup> (*Prithvi Sukta in Atharva Veda*  
p.89)

In the above verse the *Vedic* seer invokes the Earth upon which the sea, and the rivers and the waters exist, upon which food and the tribes of men have arisen, upon which this breathing, moving life exists, in her indeed is alive all lives; May She bestow human beings with that Life. Therefore, our ancestors were respectful and mindful towards nature considering the forces of nature as divine. This is something that has been lost in our greed. Nature has two aspects, the benign aspect and the fierce aspect as can be seen in its form of natural resources and natural disasters. Today's natural disasters are not something normal. They are a kind of warning to mankind that the laws of nature have to be followed.

सत्यं बृहदतमुग्रं दीक्षा तपो ब्रह्म यज्ञः पृथिवीं धारयन्ति ।

सा नो भूतस्य भव्यस्य पत्न्युरुं लोकं पृथिवी नः कृणोतु ॥1  
2.1.1॥<sup>11</sup> (*Prithvi Sukta in Atharva Veda*  
p.89)

The above verse states that truth, greatness, universal order (*rita*), strength, consecration, creative fervour (*tapas*), spiritual exaltation (*brahma*), the sacrifice, support the earth and such Earth, the mistress of that which was and shall be, is

invoked in order to prepare a broad domain for us. The *Prithvi Sukta* gives us the six factors that can sustain earth: *satyam brihat* (care for self and others), *ritam ugram* (the cosmic law and rhythm of nature which if crossed or disregarded leads to the fierce form of nature), *diksha* (dedication towards maintaining the balance of nature), *tapas* (concentrated effort towards the mission of *diksha*), *brahma* (the ever evolving dynamic knowledge which has a neutral gender and is derived from the root *bhringah*, that which grows and evolves with time) and lastly *yajna* (it is the key concept of *Vedic* script for maintaining and sustaining the environment. It puts the *Vedic* teachings in practice as rituals, for e.g. planting a tree, watering a particular plant etc. Overall, it is offering oneself for the collective good. It is derived from the root *yaj*, i.e., pleasing the divine, communitarian sharing as well as sharing of resources.

### ***Manusmiriti* : Five Sacrifices**

The following verse of *Manusmiriti* contains the injunction of the exact form of the Five Sacrifices:

अध्यापनं ब्रह्मयज्ञः पितृयज्ञस्तु तर्पणम् ।  
होमो दैवो बलिर्भौतो नृयज्ञोऽतिथिपूजनम् ॥

3.70 ॥<sup>12</sup> (*Manusmiriti*)

The above verse contains the injunction of the exact form of the Five Sacrifices. These *yajna* have been prescribed for every house holder, *brahma yajna*, i.e., reading and gathering knowledge for the benefit of humanity, *deva yajaya*, i.e., the rituals that signify giving back to nature, *pitri yajna*, i.e., respecting and taking care of the elders in the family as well as the society, *atithi yajna*, i.e., respect to the guests who come into one's home and finally *bhuta yajna*, i.e., respect for all flora and fauna. The performance of these five *Yajnas* is conducive to the spiritual evolution of an individual. He gradually learns that he is not an isolated unit, but is a part of a great whole. In *Samaveda*, the rishi advises to purify the air through *homa*.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the performance

of *Yajnas* not only purifies the atmosphere but also regulates the cycle of nature. It ensures the timely arrival of monsoon. Here the example of *homa* therapy can be cited and the research being done on it by Indian and German researchers, where use of this therapy has shown proven results in the context of agriculture and human well-being.

### ***Yajurveda***

The *Vedic* seers regarded the Earth as 'sacred space' for the worship and aspirations of humankind and for the practice of restraint and responsibility. This affirmative view of the inviolable sacred space in human consciousness is integral to the *Vedas* and the *Upanishadas*. On it rests the *Vedic* vision of a world filled with the purity of the spiritual environment and the sanctity of environmental spirituality and morality. Such a world can only be sustained by 'Satyam Brhat Rtam Ugram, the severely exacting discipline of truth, harmony and rectitude based on a conception of cosmic and comprehensive peace as envisioned in the following *Vedic* hymn of peace.

ॐ द्यौः शान्तिरन्तरिक्षं शान्तिः

पृथिवी शान्तिरापः शान्तिरोषधयः शान्तिः ।

वनस्पतयः शान्तिर्विश्वेदेवाः शान्तिर्ब्रह्म शान्तिः

सर्वं शान्तिः शान्तिरेव शान्तिः सा मा शान्तिरेधि ॥

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

36.17 ॥<sup>12</sup>

p.466)

(*Yajurveda*)

Here Seers invoke and imbibe *Aum*, the primordial sound of cosmic harmony and pray for: peace and harmony in Heaven; peace and harmony in the Sky and on the Earth; peace and harmony in the Waters; peace and harmony in the Herbs; the Vegetation and the Forests: peace and harmony among the people and the rulers of the World : peace and harmony in spiritual quest and realization; peace and harmony for one and all; peace and harmony everywhere and in everything; peace, true and real peace, they

pray that peace repose in their inner space, peace of peace, everlasting peace.

### Conclusion

Thus, it is evident from the above instances that *Vedic* sages and people of ancient ages were very much concerned and aware of environmental protection. They tried to conserve it by worshipping each and every element of nature and showing reverence towards it. They regulated the human behaviour through *dharma* and stressed the righteous use of natural elements. The *Vedic* environmental ethos declares that all aspects and phenomena of nature belong together and are bound in a physical as well as metaphysical relationship. It views life as a gift of togetherness and of mutual accommodation and assistance in the Universe. Implementation of *Vedic* teachings can only be propagated if everyone starts practicing them at an individual level. This will allow us to lead by example and spread environmental awareness at least around us and in turn revitalize our society.

### References

1. <https://legabhyas.com/2020/09/15/overview-of-environment-protection-act/.September>, 2020.
2. Gandhi, M.K. *The Essence of Hinduism*. Compiled & edited by V.B. Kher. Navjivan Publishing House: Ahmedabad, 1996.
3. <https://indianculture.gov.in/unesco/memory-world/rigveda>.
4. Acharya Vedanta Teerth. *Rigveda*. Manoj Publications: Delhi, 2018.
5. Acharya Vedanta Teerth . *Atharva Veda* .Manoj Publications: Delhi, 2018.
6. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. Acharya Vedanta Teerth. *Rigveda*. Manoj Publications: Delhi, 2018.
9. Ibid
10. Acharya Vedanta Teerth . *Atharva Veda* .Manoj Publications: Delhi, 2018.
11. Ibid
12. [https://archive.org/stream/ManuSmriti\\_201601/Manu-Smriti\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/ManuSmriti_201601/Manu-Smriti_djvu.txt)
13. Acharya Vedanta Teerth . *Samaveda*. Manoj Publications: Delhi, 2018.