Review article

A Study of Environmental Awareness in Ancient Vedic Literature
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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) Everything in Earth's system has been
be noted that the Sanskrit word for the environment is *parivarana* which is different from the word *vatavarana* (atmosphere) as the *parivarana* 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). 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:

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\text{यत्रे मध्यं पृथिवि पञ्च नमः पाण्डु ऊर्जस्तनः संभूधु।}
\]
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 Suktta, 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.

In the above verse, the 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.

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 vegetation is capable of nourishing the human beings of whole world (Atharva Veda – 12.1.27 p.27). The whole Aranyakayi Suktta (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. 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.

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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) an 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.

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

अध्यापन ब्रह्मयज्ञः पितृयज्ञःकृत्ययज्ञम् ||
होमी देवो बलिभीःमृत:स्तिथिपूवनम् || 3.70 ||

(Manusmriti)
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, pithri 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.13 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 Ritam Ugram’, the severely
exact 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 होऽ: शान्तिरश्रिरंशाल्यः शाश्न्तिः: ||
पूतिवै शान्तिरश्रिरंशाल्यः शाश्न्तिः: ||
वनस्तत्त्वः: शान्तिरिष्क्षेदेवः शान्तिरिष्क्षेदेवः: ||
सत्वशाश्न्ति: शान्तिरिष्क्षेदेवः: सा मा शाश्न्तिरिष्क्षेदेवः: ||
ॐ शाश्न्ति: शाश्न्ति: शाश्न्ति: || 36.17 ||

(Yajurveda
p.466)

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.

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