

# VEDIC ETHOS AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

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## **1. Introduction**

Environment degradation has become one of the most serious global catastrophes. It has reached a point that could threaten the survival of humanity as well as other species. Individuals as well as groups of people are to be held responsible for the issues of environmental pollution and depletion of natural resources. It is true that many recent discoveries have brought undeniable benefits to humanity. However, it has become clear that the application of these discoveries in the fields of industry and agriculture has produced long-term harmful effects.

The most profound and serious indication that underlies the environmental problems is the lack of respect for life in its various forms. This is evident in many patterns of environmental pollution. Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, and economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and the common good. On the other hand, delicate ecological balances are upset by the uncontrolled destruction of animal and plant life or by a reckless exploitation of natural resources. It should be pointed out that all these, even if carried out in the name of progress and wellbeing, ultimately lead to humankind's disadvantage.

As a consequence of two centuries of pollution, the earth has an insulating blanket of carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which finally acts in the manner of greenhouse, allowing heat from the sun in, but hindering its escape back out of space. This results in global warming and climate change. As a result of global warming, the seas, which have become warmer, expand; this contributes enormously to the rising sea levels. Glaciers, ice and snow cover have decreased rapidly all over the world as a result of the increased temperatures. Widespread changes in the patterns of rainfall, wind, ocean salinity and extreme weather, including waves, drought, intensity of tropical cyclones and very heavy rainfall also have been established. The gradual depletion of the ozone layer and the related "greenhouse effect" have now reached crisis proportions as a consequence of industrial growth, massive urban concentrations, and vastly increased energy needs.

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Industrial waste, burning of fossil fuels, unrestricted deforestation, the use of certain types of herbicides, coolants and propellants, all these are known to harm the atmosphere and environment. The resulting meteorological and atmospheric changes range from damage to health to the possible future submersion of low-lying lands. While in some cases the damage already done may well be irreversible, in many other cases it can still be halted.

Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people understand the fact that we cannot continue to use the good of the earth as we have done in the past. The public in general and the political leaders in particular are concerned about this problem, and experts from a wide range of disciplines are studying the causes. There is a greater awareness and increasing recognition of the value of ecosystem services and environmental problem among the people.

Ecology studies the relationship among organisms and between them and their environment. Its primary concern is the relationships between people, other organisms such as plants and animals and the natural environment. Ecology deals with populations, communities, and ecosystems. The term comes from two Greek words, *oikos*, meaning 'home', and *logos*, meaning 'understanding'. Ernst Haeckel, a nineteenth-century German thinker, who invented the term, described ecology as "the domestic side of organic life."<sup>1</sup> There are two prominent ecological movements, such as 'deep' and 'shallow' ecological movements. Shallow ecologists are of the view that we have to protect nature and avoid environment degradation for the sake of human benefits. It is a view based on anthropomorphism. They believe that nature exists for the convenience of human beings. On the other hand, deep ecologists want to preserve the integrity of biosphere for its own sake, irrespective of the possible benefits to human beings that might follow.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Environmental Ethos in the Vedas

Long before the emergence of ecology as a science, the ancient Indian heritage had already provided a spacious spiritual home for the environmental ethos. Throughout trackless centuries, India has provided an ample expanse of friendly space for an open and ongoing discourse of

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<sup>1</sup>J. L. Chapman and M. J. Reiss, *Ecology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 3.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 280.

ecological ideas. In the west, the early rallying cry for environmental action came from scientists and social activists, with theologians only taking interest in the issue of late; on the other hand, in India, from the outset, there has been an appeal to traditional religious sensibilities in support of environmental issues. When we look at Indian society from a historical perspective, we realize that protection and preservation of environment has been integral to cultural and religious ethos of ancient Vedic people. The Vedic seers regarded the Earth as a sacred space for consecrated endeavours and aspirations of humankind and for the practice of restraint and responsibility. The ancient religious literature of the Vedas enshrines a holistic and poetic cosmic vision. They represent the oldest, the most carefully nurtured, the most elaborately systematized, and the most lovingly preserved oral tradition of the world. Their evocative poetry is a joyous and spontaneous affirmation of life and nature. The Vedic man established a harmony with environment because neither the world was perceived as heading towards an imminent environmental disaster or destruction nor any immediate utilitarian exigency, but through their quest for spiritual and physical symbiosis, synthesized in a system of ethical awareness and moral responsibility.

The whole of *ṛgveda* reflects a religion of nature, where human being is conceived as part and parcel of its natural dynamics. Vedic man was nature-centred for whom the natural phenomena arose from a divine source. Behind the wide spectrum of gods and immensely intricate ritual techniques of sacrifice, there was an insight into the natural laws of nature. The *ṛgveda* resonates with praise hymns to the deities of the sky, earth, atmosphere, thunder, rain, sun, and wind. As the children notice and learn the events of nature without being taught, the early human beings were gifted with special inquisitive minds with which they must have started to observe closely, to make correlations among the natural phenomena by taking measures in time and space, seeking precision and accuracy. The seers who formulated the Vedic hymns lived one with nature. Nature is understood as a friend, revered as a mother, obeyed as a father and nurtured as a beloved child.

Nature is sacred because human being depends entirely on it and because of this everything is sanctified. Human being is not on the earth to conquer, dominate, and exploit, but to be an integral part of the organic whole. The gods, men, and nature formed one organic whole. None is superior or inferior. All these categories of beings were corporately

responsible for maintaining and promoting the cosmic harmony. Energy and matter as well as the essence of God and human are one, the same interchangeable and when bodily life ends, human beings like every other movable and immovable thing, merge with infinity or, in modern ecological terms, matter recycled and energy are one under many interchangeable forms. In fact, even human mind is part of the cosmic soul or energy. As the Vedic seers were aware of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things and events, their experience of phenomena in the world were taken to be manifestations of a fundamental oneness. All things are seen as interdependent and inseparable parts of this cosmic whole, as different manifestations of the same ultimate reality. Thus, for them, the one reality is that which is manifest in all, which, in contemporary ecological terms, is expressed in the following dictum: “everything is related to everything else.”<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The Vedic Attitude towards the Earth

The Vedic seers regarded the earth as a ‘sacred space’ for the consecrated endeavours and aspirations of humankind and for the practice. As no activity, whether biological, natural, human, or metaphysical, can exist outside the sphere of earth, the Vedic attitude toward earth spring from mans primal experience of being an offspring of the earth. The Vedic hymn to earth, the *Prithvi Sukta*, in the *Atharva Veda*, is unquestionably the oldest and the most evocative environmental invocation. In it, the Vedic seer solemnly declares the enduring filial allegiance of the humankind to Mother Earth. “*Matha Bhumiḥ Putroham Prithivyaḥ*,” i.e., “the Earth is my mother, I am her son.”<sup>4</sup> Mother Earth is celebrated for all her natural bounties and particularly for her gifts of herbs and vegetation. Her blessings are sought for prosperity in all endeavours and fulfilment of all righteous aspirations. A covenant is made that humankind shall secure the earth against all trespasses and shall never let her be oppressed.

The earth is the foundation, the basis out of which emerges all that exists and on which everything rests. The earth is the basis of life and, when considered as divine being, she always occupies a special place among the Gods. Human being is of the earth and is earthly, but the earth is not simply nature, is not merely geographical or material, it is part of human being; so, human being can no more live without the earth than

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<sup>3</sup>M. Vannucci, *Ecological Readings in the Veda*, New Delhi: D. K. Printworld Pvt. Ltd., 1994, 64.

<sup>4</sup>*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.12b.

he/she can live without a body. A significant poetic description about the earth, found in the *Atharva Veda*, is as follows:

The earth is the supreme, loving, life sustaining mother. She is beautiful, fertile, nurturing and generous. She is close to humans as their own skin. As a person's entire existence depends upon her, man is of earth, part of earth. The earth is his home. She is a merciful compassionate mother whose benign heart pours unconditional love to all, irrespective of their talents and station in life. She carries in her lap the foolish as well as the wise. She bears the death of the wicked and the wise.<sup>5</sup> She is the gracious leader and protector of the world.<sup>6</sup>

The Vedic people believed that God is immanent in the world and one can find Him in water, fire, and also in trees and herbs. Every being in this world is in reality an embodied manifestation of the external reality. Ultimately, all the differences that perceive are only apparent, because we are ignorant about the identity of all beings. For them, earth is an object of worship and not of exploitation. Investigation of the earth is of the same nature as personal introspection. To harm earth is a masochistic vice. Their worship addressed to the earth is not adoration of a creature as an absolute; rather it is the veneration of the highest value in the hierarchy of existence. Vedic people were aware of the fact that the earth as such is rich and the owner of treasures. Man's work is not to make a shift in ownership but to enjoy the blessings of the earth, because the earth is his home, his own family, his body.

#### **4. Sacredness of Rivers and Forests**

Our sages and seers stressed the sacredness of rivers, land and forests. Vedic people considered each and every phenomena of earth, such as trees, rivers, mountains, etc., as sacred (deep ecology) and believed that these phenomena are protected by their own presiding gods and goddess.

##### **4.1. Rivers**

A river for the Vedic people is a form of water, yet it has a distinct (subtle) body; there dwells a hidden energy. There is an enormous amount of material to show the antiquity and popularity of the intimate connection of goddesses with waters. In the |gvedic hymn, the waters, referred to as

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<sup>5</sup>*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.48.

<sup>6</sup>*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.57.

'*Apah*' appear as a goddess, young maidens, and wives and life sustaining mothers, of *Agni*. The rivers also appear as independent goddesses. River Ganga is conceived as one who descended on this earth by some special grace. She is the mother of all rivers. The text categorically asserts that there are innumerable rivers and that all are uniformly divine. All rivers in India that meander through the land, plains, and hills embody the fecundating element that renews life. An early invocation celebrated the river goddess:

The waters of the sky or those that flow (on the earth), those that are dug out, or those that arise from themselves, those pure and clear waters that seek the ocean as their goal – Let the waters, who are goddesses, help me here and now.<sup>7</sup>

The Vedic Aryans regarded water as the great cleanser and great purifier. The life-giving role of water and the importance of agriculture are expressed in the following verse. "Waters have a healing power, they drive disease away; they have a balm for all. Let them make medicines."<sup>8</sup> This reminds us the fact that water is a substance that has the greatest dissolving power.

#### 4.2. Trees

From the very beginning of humankind, trees came to be revered; only later, the idea of God and worship originated in the human mind. Trees are considered to be the symbols of different gods or deities. Trees and plants are considered as living creatures endowed with personality. Various trees, plants, and groves are worshiped by Indians even today. The importance given to trees and, consequently, to the forest is obvious. The tree is a symbol of life that always regenerates itself and is immortal. The concept of "sacred forest" was significant in the Vedic period. A whole hymn is dedicated to the lady or goddess of the forest. "*Aranyani*" is "the mother of all forest beings who tills not but has stores of food."<sup>9</sup> The hymn also shows that flora and fauna were studied carefully to this day as the deity of sacred groves and goddess.

The Vedas warn us against the destruction of useful trees. The ancient people of India not only worshiped tree, they also realized the medical value of many trees and plants. They protected various trees and

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<sup>7</sup> /gveda, 7.49.2.

<sup>8</sup> /gveda, 10.137.67.

<sup>9</sup> /gveda, 10.146.

plants not because of their sacredness but also because they are necessary for the wellbeing. They protected them, worshiped them, and used them as cosmetics and medicine. Traditional medicine is made out of these trees and plants and the use of these medicines and cosmetics is something suitable for ecological system. Much of *Atharva Veda* is directly related to the use of many different plants, some of which still bear the same name and use.

### **5. Sacredness of Animal Life**

The Vedas have meticulously described and recorded the wildlife that surrounded the human habitation and laid down rules that would guide the interaction between man and nature. According to the Vedas, animals are not inferior creatures, but manifestations of gods on the lower scale of evolution compared to man, each containing a spark of divine, capable of becoming human and achieving salvation like the rest of us. Spiritually, there is no distinction between human beings and other forms of life. All forms, including plants and animals, are manifestations of god as limited beings (*jivas*). Even microorganisms are *jivas*, having souls of their own.

Among the animals, the more awesome ones like tiger, elephant, and snake and the ones with which interaction was more, like monkey, got a more godlike status. The rest, however, did not go unnoticed, for almost every animal, big or small, was under the benevolence of a god. The tiger has been loved, feared, and worshiped in Vedas. It is seen as a brother, a protector, a fertility symbol, a destroyer of all evil, and the guardian of the jungles. Another animal that has an overwhelming presence in the Vedas is elephant. It has also secured a predominant status in the Vedic religion. The elephant god Ganesa (who has a human body and the head of an elephant), the son of Siva (the Destroyer), is worshiped as the powerful god who helps the devotees in the removal of obstacles. It is believed that the elephant-head of this god makes him one of the most intelligent gods and a great patron of knowledge. The ‘*naga*’ or the serpent (mostly the cobra) is one of the most popular figures that are frequently mentioned in the Vedas. The snake is seen as a guardian of the earth and all its secrets, including the biggest secret of all, the secret of creation. Creatures like fish, boar, and tortoise might sound irrelevant to many but, according to the Vedas, they are divine. Visnu has been credited with as many as ten incarnations that he assumed to assist man in his struggle against evil. Of these ten incarnations, the first three were that of Matsya (the fish), Kurma

(the tortoise) and Varaha (the boar), respectively. Animals treated like gods are still alive through religion in India, giving enough reason to the believer to protect them.

The association of man with forest was an expansion of the field of studies of the immigrant Vedic people. Domestic animals are Vedic people's best friends, intimate partners in good and bad times, companions in joy and adversity. Domestic animals participated in family affairs and in festivals of the community during which they are decorated and exhibited with genuine pleasure. The sacredness of cow had an ecological imposition since in good times the cow was the giver of all, the female of the bull, the mother of the bullock, and she was the symbol of femininity and the generator of the new lives; the cow was the symbol of mother goddess, almost as much. The cow was the embodiment of all that is good in the female world and the giver of the basic needs for the life of the body, including warmth; indeed, mother cow is generous in life and after life. Even in times of adversity, the cow would not be sacrificed since she was the only hope for the future and for the production of new bounties. The greatest praise to *Aditi*, the mother of deities, unbounded, and unfettered mother of infinity is "*Aditi*, the cow, the sinless, injure it not."<sup>10</sup> The bull, on the other hand, was respected as the embodiment of strength and power.

One is often tempted to question the actual influence all these conservation lessons offered by the Vedas. The influence is there and very visible in case of certain village communities who share a special relation with certain birds or animals, especially with migratory birds. This remarkable co-existence of human beings with the wild animals encourages us to see wildlife as an aspect of natural habitat.

The new generation, however, is not very much influenced by traditional Vedic religion and philosophy; it has affected their attitude towards wildlife and conservation. Wildlife is not as safe in India as it used to be. We can only hope that traditional knowledge, if at all it is re-established with the scientific knowledge, will advocate conservation.

## **6. *Rta* and the Environment**

People of the Vedic time saw clearly that there is a relation of cause and effect in everything, even if man and seers themselves could not perceive all the hidden meanings, purposes, and relationships among the

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<sup>10</sup>*Rgveda*, 18.101,15.



multiplicity of natural phenomena that they observed. Nature, for them, was the manifestation or expression of the gods in different forms, not the gods themselves; they are manifestations the principle that governs the world and cosmic order, *Rta*. *Rta* is the social and moral order. It is conceived as correlate to natural order. The vast universe was not strewn about in random chaos, but had an inner order, a unity with an inexorable law and purpose that govern the working of both the macrocosm and microcosm.<sup>11</sup> This is the ordered course of the things. The processes of the earth's seasonal cycles are grounded in *Rta*. The principle of universal order holds the seasonal movements like a hub of a wheel. The earth is held by a regularity of cosmic order: the rising and setting of the sun, cycle of seasons, spring time and harvest. *Rta* is the intrinsic justice and order that sustain the eco-balance in nature.

The two functions of the earth, birth and death, are embodied in the fundamental ecological principle of interdependence. In every environment, the plant and animal species that constitute the biotic community together with soil, air, and water are innately organized so as to form a unified life support system. The Vedic seers see the universe as an inseparable web, whose interconnections are dynamic and not static. The cosmic web is alive; it moves and grows and changes continually. There exists an intricate and extensive network of links. If the single unit of this link is damaged, it would destroy and weaken the whole structure. There is no room for waste in nature. Whatever is used is recycled once again through seasonal flux. The fundamental intuition of the cyclic order of the seasons is celebrated by the seers:

Your circling seasons, night succeeding days,  
Your summer, O Earth, your splashing rains,  
Your winter and frosty season yielding too spring  
May each and all produce for us milk!<sup>12</sup>

Everything in the universe is deeply conceived to have its own worth and predation and is, therefore, morally significant. It is in accord with this moral understanding that each thing or, broadly, each species, consciously or unconsciously, individually or collectively, strives to realize the deeper truth in its own way.

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<sup>11</sup>R. N. Dandekar, *Insight into Hinduism*, Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1979, 15.

<sup>12</sup>*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.36.

The sense of interrelatedness, enjoined so fervently in the Vedas, provides a norm for the ethics of environment. The Vedic vision of geopiety considers man to be a guardian of natural resources who has to replenish the bounties of the earth rather than plunder it. Conservation, thus, means a state of harmony (*Rta*) with the land, forest, waters, and natural environment. Harmony is restored only when the bond between the human beings and nature is consistently strengthened, when human being and nature together are viewed as one biotic community. The earth, therefore, is worthy of adoration. The modern reductionist worldview, value system, and code of ethics are inadequate for a long term survival of our planet. Our last refuge is to revive a caring for the Mother Earth. It is said in the *Atharva Veda* that the earth was revealed to the humankind for joy.<sup>13</sup> In the light of this sensitive attitude, the seers had evolved a strategy to preserve the integrity of the biotic community.

In ecological terms, the Vedic hymns interweave a number of insights, from a primitive but unique conception of a world in which everything is a part, to a more complex idea of everything being a part of the unity that ultimately constitutes the unique whole that the universe is. Vedas speak of the uncanny unity of creation and, more significantly, the mysterious interconnectedness or interdependence of everything to everything else. In the universe, whether as a whole or as parts thereof, everything needs to be accorded with respect, and deep regard for its beinghood, its mysterious origins, its inner workings, its regulative order, and its future of the humankind and other species alike are inexorably connected. “Everything is sacred by virtue of its own nature because energy pervades everywhere, thus, the lofty tree is worshiped as well as the humble grass on which we sit and the one that helps to ignite fire: all and each one play their role in cosmic symphony”<sup>14</sup>

Vedic seers believed that every being is an embodied manifestation of the eternal self in time and space and in accordance with the karmic law. Ultimately, all the phenomenal and apparent differences will disappear. Differences are caught up in a web of illusion and ignorance from which a human being can escape only through the experiential and intuitive knowledge of his identity with the real Self. This sense of unity of life is also a powerful reason and stimulus to see in all beings one’s own self, and view and respect all beings equally.

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<sup>13</sup>*Atharva Veda*, 12.1.60.

<sup>14</sup>Vannucci, *Ecological Readings in the Veda*, 113.

The “Gaia theory” developed by the scientist James Lovelock over the last twenty-five years is a scientific claim that the earth’s “biota,” acts as a single, self regulating living system in such a way as to maintain the conditions that are suitable for life. The theory proposes that living and nonliving parts of the earth together form a complex interacting system that can be thought of as a single organism. Also recent discoveries on the Wave Structure of Matter show that human beings do not exist in isolation, but are, in fact, structures of the Universe. Thus, they do not have dominion over the earth and all living things by divine decree; on the contrary, human beings are intimately interconnected to all other matter in the cosmos as well as to all other life on the earth.

## 7. Conclusion

From very early times, Indian thinkers employed the image of the loom to explain the interrelated web of life. The universe is imaged as a woven fabric, the warp and woof forming intricate interrelated patterns. The nature is treated with extreme reverence in India. No part of the nature is expected to be desecrated as they all participate in the animated play of *prakrti*. The fundamental motive behind the ancient perception is the belief that nature is conscious, alive and animated.

History records that human attitude towards the environment has been two fold: either of exploitative dominance or pious reverence. The Vedic ethos considers human and nature as twin agents who reshape their environs for mutual benefits. The concern for the environmental conservation and protection is based on natural law of mutual dependence and reciprocity. The way we treat nature determines the way nature will treat us. The Vedic code states that we live in a participatory universe which threads together. Human active actions in nature constitute a causal chain. When there is genuine caring and sharing, they bring about beauty and bounty in the environs and maintain the eco-balance. When human beings look upon nature as an object of exploitation, as a commodity for trading, we do harm to the web or spring of life, in which everything must remain in its integrity. The integral bond between human and nature becomes a basis of the celebrations associated with the returning cycles of seasons. These celebrations, accompanied with prayer, incantations, consecration, and offerings to the Mother Earth reinforce innate links with the natural world.

What is it that holds the earth together? The unequivocal claim of the Vedas is that the eternal bond between man and nature is nourished by the law of universal harmony (*Rta*), truth (*satya*), and prayers. The emerging vision of earth as one organism is only a recent image of an ancient heritage, finally traced to the Vedas. The ancient view of geo-piety and ‘goddess ecology’ contains a remarkable insight for the modern society.

To prevent further degradation of the environment and to enable more informed and participatory environmental management, we need a paradigm shift in our approach. We need to adopt a more holistic model of development, which includes environmental and social factors right from the beginning and is based on a robust ethical framework. To separate development, environment, and social justice, or to present these as conflicting issues, is incorrect. Unless this fundamental shift takes place, all our attempts to protect and conserve the environment are bound to fail in the long run.

Another important fact is to develop models based on local experience with the active participation of local communities that integrate science with traditional knowledge. The Vedic tradition can play a greater role in increasing environmental awareness through education and, to a lesser extent, the communication media. Through the medium of education we must stress the aspects of Vedic wisdom that accord a sense of sacredness to the nature. The modern generations should learn that there is divinity in the nature. They must realize in their higher consciousness that unless the natural environment is protected, the human environment will collapse. We should restate these ideals in a new form in the context of modern technologies and make them more meaningful with our contemporary mental framework. Moreover, we need to incorporate environmental values in our formal and non-formal educational systems. We need a coordinated and orchestrated programme of public awareness through every available medium to build up public opinion in renewing our age-old ideal of living in harmony with every element of the universe.