



The Environmental Responsiveness of Vedic Societies

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ABSTRACT

Vedic societies, which existed in ancient India between 1500 BCE and 500 BCE, had a unique relationship with the environment. They developed a complex system of rituals and beliefs that emphasized the interconnectedness of all living beings and the importance of maintaining balance and harmony in the natural world. This included practices such as using natural resources sustainably, conserving wildlife, and protecting sacred groves and rivers. The Vedic literature also contains many hymns and prayers that express a deep reverence for the natural world and its ability to nourish and sustain human life. Overall, it can be said that the Vedic societies had a strong sense of environmental responsibility and a holistic understanding of the environment as an integral part of their religious and cultural beliefs. The ideas of *jaladevatā*, *vanadevatā*, *varunadevatā*, *vāyudevatā* etc. crept in to our tradition and the Earth has been considered as the mother. Today for personal comfort and enjoyment, man destroys the natural elements and thus, the forest and the soil is decreased, the water and the air get polluted and as a great threat before the present world. Therefore, I discussion regarding issues of environment this paper for mass-awakening is needed to apply the Vedic policies for the eradications of environmental pollutions in today's context. These papers refer to the Environmental Responsiveness of Vedic Societies

The Vedic people had a strong connection to the natural environment. They believed in the sacredness of nature and the interconnectedness of all living beings. The Vedic literature, such as the R̥gveda and the Atharvaveda, contain hymns and prayers addressing various natural elements, such as the sun, the sky, the rivers, and the plants. The Vedic people also practiced rituals and ceremonies, such as the Agnicayana and the Aśvamedha, that were closely tied to the

natural world. Additionally, the Vedic societies had a strong tradition of conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, as evidenced by the practice of shifting cultivation and the establishment of protected forests.

The present world is concerned the environmental pollution can be of many kinds such as airpollution, water pollution, sound pollution, vehicular pollution, thermal pollution, radiation pollution, marine-pollution, industrial pollution, waste-pollution, waste-water-pollution and so on. In fact, the concept of pollution started with the creation itself. Air got polluted even with the process of breathing as the animates breathed the oxygen in while breathing out the carbon dioxide. That is why the Vedic seers had to do many sorts of *śāntipātha*'s.¹

The term *paryāvaraṇa* is popularly used in contemporary Sanskrit to represent and denote the concept of environment. As the term environment consists of two words: 'environ' and 'ment', similarly the word *paryāvaraṇa* is also consisting of two words, namely- *pari* and *āvaraṇa*. In fact, the word environment has equal meaning with the word *paryāvaraṇa*. The science of environment is known as Ecology i.e. *paryā varaṇa-vijñāna*.

The compound word *paryāvaraṇa* is derived from the root 'vr̥ṇ' meaning 'to cover' proceeded by two prefixes: *pari* and *ā* with the addition of suffix *lyuṭ*. The term *paryāvaraṇa* is not that old as it is not available in ancient literature. *Atharvaveda (AV)* uses the term '*paridhiḥ*' to denote environment. As it says '*paridhirjīvanāyakam*' In the ancient *kośas* and *Āpastambaśra-utasūtra* etc. *paridhi* is used to denote the branches of sacrificial trees such as *palāśa*, *śami*, *khadira* etc. as well as the circumference around the sun. In *Amarakośa* the meaning of *paridhi* is given as: *paridhiryajñīyataroḥ sākhyāmupasarjake*.² The *Medinīkośa* as well as the *Haimakośa* also supports this view.³ Elsewhere in *Amarakośa* itself the term denotes *pariveśa*: *pariveśastu paridhirupasarjakamaṇḍale*.⁴ Kālidāsa has also used the term *paridhi* in the sense of *pariveśa* as he says in his *Raghuvamśa*: *anṛṇatvamupeyivān babhau paridhermukta ivoṣṇadidhitih*.⁵ It appears that the *kośa*-meaning of *paridhi* is nearer to the meaning of *paryāvaraṇa*. Since the term *paridhi* is derived from the root '*ḍudhāñ*' meaning to nourish and to maintain preceded by the prefix *pari* with the addition of suffix *ki* by *pāṇinian* rule: *upasarge ghoḥ kiḥ*⁶ the etymology of the *paridhi* can be accepted as: *Paridhīyate anena iti or paritaḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni dhīyante iti 'paridhi'*. That means, *paridhi* is that where all the beings live ('*sarvo vai tatra jīvati*'). Thus, it appears that the meaning of environment can be obtained from the ancient terms like *āvaraṇa* or *paridhi*. In modern times however, two more words are used to denote environment i.e. *paristhiti*

and *parivr̥tti*. Accordingly, Ecology is named as *pāristhikī* and the Ecosystem as *pāristhikītan-tram*.

In totality the term *paryāvaraṇa* denoted whatever that exists around the earth. It may be a botanical, biological or any sort of element. That in which we live and whatever we require for living, is altogether called *paryāvaraṇa*. That means, whatever animate and inanimate objects present around us, like the *pañcamahābhūta*'s, namely- *pr̥thivī*, *āp*, *tejas*, *vāyu*, *ākāśa* etc. along with rivers, ocean, mountains, seasons, flora and fauna etc. which impress our life-style, is known as *paryāvaraṇa*. With the required balance of these ecological elements the living beings of the earth breathe. However, if these elements are imbalanced then the world is forced to come under *pralaya*. This way, the term *paryāvaraṇa* means the balance of surroundings, i.e. of the nature with living being.

No animal can live alone in this world. At least not the social animals like human being. As our experience goes, even some of the animals which are enemies to each other also do live together on this earth. In a broader terminology *paryāvaraṇa* refers to three *maṇḍala*'s, namely *sthalamaṇḍala*, *jalamaṇḍala* *vāyumaṇḍala* present around the living beings. *Sthalamaṇḍala* includes mountain herbs, mineral objects etc. whereas *jalamaṇḍala* includes seas, rivers, lakes, ponds, wells etc. and *vāyumaṇḍala* includes space, clouds etc.

The *Vedic* seers understood and appreciated seers the secret harmony existing between a man and the nature which underlines a definite relationship between man and his environment. Therefore, any change in the later will certainly bring frequent changes in the natural organism. All the basic elements, namely- *pr̥thivi*, *āp*, *tejas*, *vāyu* and *ākāśa* along with flora and fauna are held with reverence by the *Atharvaṇic* seers in fact, the ecological awareness is found in all the Vedic texts including *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda* etc. Not only in the Vedic texts but in epics and *purāṇas* also there are references to emotional balances between the man and the nature. The great sages have advocated the cause of sympathetic understanding, as they realized that the love between man and nature can only lead to life of harmony and rapport. However, my effort in this paper will be to see how these wide aspects of ecology dealt in modern literature, were depicted in the India's oldest literature with a special reference to *AV*. Because of its contents, *AV* is termed as *lokaveda* i.e. 'the *Veda* of the Masses' which highlights the normal necessities of life and the prosperity of the people at large. One can find ample references to ecological thoughts in *AV*.

In the Vedic literature no word is directly used to denote the present concept i.e. ecology. However, in the *Rgveda* the word *okas*⁷ is used denoting shelter, In *AV* also the term *okas* is used to denote house or place.⁸ The term '*Oikologie*' is coined from Greek words '*Oikos*' (home or house) and '*Logos*' (study) which reflects an early concern with humanity. Thus, the term '*oikologie*' stands for the study of house with its surroundings. The eminent ecologist Ernest Haeckel has defined '*oikologie*' as the science of treating reciprocal relations of organism and external world.⁹ Afterwards with a little modification the term '*oikologie*' was replaced by the term Ecology.

Every living being in the universe is surrounded by different materials and forces which constitute its environment. The study of environment is of immense interest and is simply termed as environmental biology. Many ecologists have defined ecology differently with variant connotations. Modern scholars define it as the study of the structure and function of nature. The ecology deals basically with the study of organism and the term environment constitutes the things around the organism which have direct influence on them. Thus, the organism depends upon its environments for its survival while the environment accommodates the organisms providing substratum or the medium for their various activities. Ecology is one of the basic divisions of biology which deals with all the specific taxonomic groups of biology such as Ethnology (study of Pisces), Ornithology (study of Birds), Helminthological (study of helminthes), Entomology (study of insects) and Mycology (study of Fungi) etc.

From the above discussion it is clear that all the definitions have a common factor i.e. the inter-relationship between human beings and their surroundings which include plant-kingdom along with other living beings. Some of them have emphasized on the comfort and well-being of the society which is actually the aim of this science.

In the tradition of Indian writing, right from the *Veda*'s through *Samhitā*'s, *Brāhmaṇa*'s, *Aranyaka*'s, *Upaniṣad*'s, epics and *Purāṇas* to present day we find ample references to ecological thoughts, Many ancient writers in Sanskrit described the importance of various natural elements such as *vāyu* (air and gasses), *Jala* (water), *deśa* (topography) and *kāla* (time) in the regulation of life. Similarly the concept of *pañcatattva* (five elements), namely earth, water, fire, air and sky reflect the idea of circulation of materials. If we think of the origin of the man's awareness about ecology, we should go back to the ancient literature where we get huge references to the same. Ever since the time of the *Rgveda*, we find that man had established very

close relationships with various natural elements and he has never treated him as a supreme-being. Even if human-being was blessed with many faculties of intellect, still he was aware of the fact that his prosperity was totally elements dependent upon the natural elements that surrounded him.

The Vedic seers understood and appreciated the secret harmony existing between the man and nature. In Vedic literature we find religious personification and deification of in forces of nature. In *R̥gveda* water in general and rivers in particular, are referred to with great reverence as holy and are deified.¹⁰ One of the hymns of the *R̥gveda* says: *tā āpo devīriha māmavantu*.¹¹ ‘May the divine water protect me’ According to *Taittirīyasamhitā*, all deities are centered in water.¹² The *AV* describes water as holy and purifying, and therefore, it is invoked to confer happiness.¹³ According to the *R̥gveda* the valleys of mountains and the confluences of the river are sacred.¹⁴ In *R̥gveda* and *AV* both it is desired that the water should be beneficial for the living beings.

Dharmasūtra-writers like Gautama, *Baudhāyana* and *Vasiṣṭha* etc. are of the opinion that holy localities (*deśa*’s) like mountains, rivers, lakes, places of pilgrimage, the dwellings of sages (*ṛṣi*’s), Cowpens and temples of the gods are capable of removing sins.¹⁵ A large forest (*aranyaṇi*) is also invoked in the *R̥gveda* as a deity.

According to our indigenous theory, the universe is constituent of five basic elements: *kṣiti* (earth) *āpaḥ* (water) *tejaḥ* (light) *marut* (air) *vyoma* (ether), which are prominent among the existing natural elements. Various relationships between man and nature are reflected in the *AV*. In fact, the natural elements were treated by Vedic people as their family-members. *Vedic* people were desirous of their benediction and they wanted protection from their enemies. In *AV* 1.15.1 the streams are prayed to flow together, whereas in the hymn 5.24, the deities, namely- *savitṛ*, *Agni*, *Varuṇa*, *Mitra*, *Maruta*, *Soma*, *Surya*, heaven, Earth etc. are praised for man’s protection. In *AV* 6.22.3 *Marut* is prayed to send rain and the *AV* 6.24.1 describes water as medicinal. *AV* 6.120.23 describes Earth as mother, Air as brother and *Dyaus* as father of all beings

In *AV* 10.5.22 the water is praised for protection whereas in *AV* 10.5.24 it is invoked for purification. In *AV* 11.1 *Agni* is addressed as a purifier and he is praised to give all auspicious things. In *AV* 11.65.17, the seasons, months, years have been praised by the *Ataharvanic* seers as a protector against enemy. The hymn 12.1 depicts the significance of the terrestrial deity earth that is regarded as mother, bearer and nourished of all creatures, beasts, plants, mountain and water. She has been addressed as our mother and we are her offspring.¹⁶ In another context the

earth is prayed as follows: let the mother earth set us happily in a safety place similar to the heaven along with glory and wealth.

In another context, the seer deifies *Agni* as father possessing prosperity.¹⁷ In *AV* 16.4.4, the deities, namely- *Sūrya*, *Agni*, *Vāyu*, *Yama* and *Sarasvatī* are praised to protect from day, earth, firmament, day and dwellers respectively. In *AV* 19.1.1 the seer prays the winds and birds to come together. In the hymn 19.2 the seer prays to the deity for making all sorts of water (be it wasted water pool, water or the sprang ground water) sweet.

In *AV* 19.2.3, it is said that the water can prove itself as a better healer than the physicians. In the hymn 19.9, the seer invokes various deities for human-welfare. *AV* 19.9.1 says that let heaven, earth, the spacious atmosphere, water, plants and herbs be gentle to us.¹⁸ *AV* 19.9.6 describes *Mitra* to favor. In addition to that *Varuṇa*, *Viṣṇu*, *Prajāpati*, *Indra*, *Bṛahaspati* and *Aryaman* be gracious. In *AV* 19.9.13 the seer praises all the Gods to protect. *AV* 19.9.14 is benedictory which invokes earth, air, heaven, water, plants, trees and all Gods to be alleviation. By these universal alleviations, all they are terrific, cruel and wicked are wished to be calmed. The calmed earth is praised to be auspicious and favorable.

Earth

It is fascinating to know that the environmental thought of today such as: the earth should be treated as mother, is found in the *AV* at least 4-5 thousand years ago. A long hymn, addressed to mother earth in the *AV*, encodes all loving and tender feelings of the seer towards the earth. He not only considers the earth as mother but his heartfelt highest respect towards her is felt through out the hymn consisting of sixty three verses.

The Vedic people lived in a close proximity of nature. They were no less concerned with nature's impact on human-life and man's indebtedness to nature. In *AV* 12.1.12 it is said that '*mātā bhūmiḥ putro'ham pṛthivyāḥ*'. In fact, this is the highest reverence one may have for mother earth. For a pious Hindu, the earth is not simply a natural object but a loving mother who sustains all beings. The human-being living on this plane, considers he guilty of touching his mother with his less. Therefore, he prays to the mother earth every morning to beg a pardon for his innocent crime:

samudravasane devi parvatastanamaṇḍale/ viṣṇupatni namastubhyam
pādasparśam kṣamasvame//

In this connection the *prthivīsūkta* of *AV*¹⁹ may also be referred to Earth is called *dharā*, *dharāṇi*, *dharitrī* etc.

Water:

Water plays an important cosmic role in our living organism. It is the essential principle of the creation. Because, in the beginning everything was only water having no form.²⁰ It has been later considered not only as a vivifying liquid, but also as one of the primordial elements of microcosmic organism. Thus, it needs no proof that water is an indispensable object life. In fact, Water itself is life. It has been indicated from word *jīvana* used in the sense of water. The health of a man depends much on what type of water he drinks. If it is impure, the man has to suffer from diseases.

Fire:

Fire is prayed in many mantras of *AV* to destroy the enemies. In *AV III.1.1* it is stated that let wise *Agni* recognize our enemies and burn them. Let him bewilder army *prutyetu* and let wise *Agni* recognize our enemies and burn them. Let him make them handless:

agnirnaḥ śatrumn pratidannabhiśastimarātīm /

sa senām vidvān mohayutu Paraiśām nirhastām a kṛṇavajjātavedāḥ //

Fire is described as the giver of long life:

*āyurdā ugne jarasam vṛṇāno ghṛtapratīko //*²¹

AIR

Air is the next element which was most taken care by the *Vedic* people. The importance of pure air and ventilation cannot be denied and the *Vedic* seers also recognized its importance. *Vāyu*, the deity of air, is invoked to become such pure that no impure things will dare to enter the atmosphere. *AV IV.5.25.1* states that wind is the support of all beings. In another mantra it is said that we praise the *Vāyu* and *Sāvitrī* who surround the whole world and protect us. May they free us from sin.

vāyuh saviturvidathāni manmahe yāvātmanvad viśayau /
yau ca rakṣayah yau viśvasya paribhū bubhavayustau no muñcata
*mamhasaḥ //*²²

Sky :

Heaven is described as a cow and the sun as her calf in the AV. Through her calf the heaven may bestow food, strength, desire, best life progeny, nourishment and wealth. In another context, the quarters are also stated as cows and the moon as her calf.²³ *Mitra, Varuṇa, Vivasvān* and the planets on earth, air and heaven may favor us. Powers that seize the moon, with *Rāhu* and *Ādityas* are prayed to be kind. Death and *Rudras* are also prayed for favour.²⁴ The far-seeing sunrise is prayed to bless, the four quarters of the heaven are prayed to be auspicious. The firmly seated mountains, the Rivers and the waters are also prayed to be auspicious.²⁵ Due to the favorable environment people expected to live for hundred years. In *AV* it is said that a hundred autumns may we see, a hundred autumns may we live, a hundred autumns may we thrive, hundred autumns may we be, a hundred autumns may we bide :

paśyemaḥ śaradaḥ śatām /jīvema śaradaḥ śatām /

bhuyemaḥ śaradaḥ śatam /puṣemaḥ śaradaḥ śatam

*/bhūyasīḥ śaradaḥ śatāt //*²⁶

Flora & Fauna:

Awareness about the ecology is seen all over the world from the latter half of the 20th century. Contemporary ecologists give importance to the planting of trees. *Purāṇa's* also describe several aspects of planting trees including ritual of planting, watering, fertilizations and identification and remedy of disease. *Purāṇic* wisdom recognizes both secular and religious merit in planting trees. The secular dimension speaks of the practical advantages gained from planting trees: Viz. food, clothing and shelter, the basic needs of mankind. The religious dimension lays stress on the concept that planting trees is a means of practicing dharma 'righteousness'.

Conclusion:

A healthy society presupposes a healthy life of its inhabitants. Healthy life requires healthy environment to live life. The branch concerned with plants and animals relationships with their environment is called Ecology. Plants animals and micro-organism, together with the environment in which they live, make up an interdependent unit is called the eco-system. Since a definite relationship exists between man and his environment. Any changes in the natural organism. If the harmony and the balance between man and nature are disturbed then the human

existence may be ruined. On the other hand, if it is maintained properly. It may help the society to prosper. The basic five elements namely- *Prthivi, Āp, Tejas, Vāyu and Ākāśa* along with flora (tree, plants, herbs) and fauna (beasts and animals) etc. are the parts of the environment. These elements are treated as deities and they are held with reverence by the *Atharvanic* seers because, they are adorned with divine qualities. The awareness in the Vedic period was out of spontaneity. The man then became overwhelmed with the vast utility of the nature, its splendour, its balance with human life. Then he understood that it is the nature which ensured his birth and living. He went on addressing the earth as his mother (*mātā bhūmiḥ putro 'ham pṛthivyāḥ*). But the present awareness of the environment has been originated from the crisis, from the cutting of forest or from the growing of the global warmth. In conclusion, the Vedic societies of ancient India had a deep respect and reverence for the natural environment. They believed in the interconnectedness of all living beings and the sacredness of nature. The Vedic literature and religious practices reflect this connection to the environment. Additionally, the Vedic societies had a strong tradition of conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, which was demonstrated through practices such as shifting cultivation and the protection of forests. Overall, the environmental responsiveness of the Vedic societies was an important aspect of their culture and way of life.

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4. *Amarakośa* 1.3.32
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6. P.3.3.92
7. *Ṛgveda* I.173.11, 11.58.6 and VII.25.4
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