

Environmental Ethics and Ecology in Traditional Sanskrit Texts

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Abstract

A good and healthy environment is important for human survival on the earth. All components of the environment i.e. Water, air, soil, noise etc. seem pure in their natural form. But due the fulfillment of human needs, they become polluted and harmful for the health of the mankind.

Today, globalization is running on a high speed. Many industries are being established in the remote areas. As various housing projects are spreading in each city of each state, the area farming land is decreasing day by day. As production of the new medicines and liquids going on in the factories, water is also being polluted. Due to the use of urea and pesticides in the agricultural lands everywhere, soil is losing its real capacity of fertilization. Burning of parāli in various states of the country and smoke of the increasing quantity of vehicle, air is also getting harmful for the breathing of man, animals, birds and others. In metropolitan cities, this is a big challenge to get pure water, milk, flour and other things.

In this situation, there is need to understand the importance of the purity of all these components by man living in the society. He should know the benefit of the consumption of pure water, air and food. For a good health, this is very important for man to eat healthy food and drink pure water and live on a pollution free place.

In Indian traditional texts like Vedas, purāṇas, Upaniṣads and other texts written in Sanskrit language, there are various mantras and ślokas which convey a message to the mankind that this ecological system is the base of human survival. Man is not the head of that system rather he is also a part of that. Bhūmi Sūkta Atharvaveda says “Yat te bhūmi vikhanāmi kṣipram tadapi rohatu”. Kalidāsa also gave many motivational quotations in his works. Western thinker Fritjof Capra has also written about the ecological system in his book. So, all these thoughts will be discussed in this article.

Keywords: Water Pollution, Air, Soil, Pesticides, Fertilization, Ecological System

A good environment is important for human to survive with a healthy life. When a person plans to shift on new place, he is very keen to know the environmental condition of that place. He explores the source of water which is going to drink. He searches the air quality of that place, on which is going to breath. Even he tries to know the fertility of the soil upon which grown harvest will be eaten by him. Thus, water, air, soil etc. are the main components which create a suitable environment.

In ancient times, the sources of living standard were limited. Man was habitual to live with the limited sources of life. There was neither electricity, nor electrical instruments were there. The water was natural and man was habitual to drink that directly without any water purifier. As most of the land area was covered by trees; the air quality was good. There was no need to any air purifier in the houses. Man was not depended on the air conditioned offices to work with. The means of transportation were also very limited.

Today, man is very excited to use the technology in his work. He uses computers and technologies in each of his work. To get the advanced features in his computer based work, he uses different softwares. In transportation, he wants to reduce the time of travelling. He uses motorcycle, car etc. to get comfort. To live in a civilized society, he wants to purchase his house far from the noisy areas of city.

To achieve all these goals, he consumes the Nature beyond the limits. Today, covered area with trees, is reducing day by day. Water level is going down rapidly and many areas are going to be dry on some places. Consequently, man is facing so many problems in his daily life. There are various deceases came in metropolitan cites which are beyond the reach of doctors. Today, needs of a man are too much in the quantity and thus he becomes excited to earn a lot of money to fulfill his needs. He competes with his neighbours and relatives. He tries to be richer than

them. In this endless race, he forgets his health. And day by day, he invites many problems and deceases for his body. In the starting, he ignores the symptoms and in future, he suddenly comes to know that a particular problem is harming him slowly.

Man and Environment

Both man and environment are two phases of the same coin. To fulfill his selfish requirements, man consumes the environment beyond the limit. And in the same way, environment becomes harmful for him with no limit. So, this is important that the relation between man and environment should be caring for each other. Man should know the importance of good environment. An environment also should be as caring for man as a mother for her child. Both man and environment are included in the ecological system. To maintain balance in the ecological system, both these components should be caring for each other.

Environmental ethics in Sanskrit

Starting from the Vedic literature, there are so many quotations in Sanskrit texts which convey message to a social person to make a combination with the environment. He should know the value of a good environment. In all situations, a man's progress depends upon the status of environment. Thus, in Vedas, a strong relationship is discussed between man and environment. Bhūmi Sūkta of Atharvaveda says that

Mātā bhūmi putro ahaṁ prithivyāḥ. Parjanyaḥ pitā sa u na pipartu.¹

The land is my mother and I am her son. The cloud is my father, may he nurture me.

Both land and cloud are treated as mother and father here. As father co-operates mother to nurture their children. They take care of them day and night. In any kind of need, they become ready to fulfill their desires. In the same way, land is considered as "patiīrośadhīdhinām" means "mother of various medicines". In daily life, human needs all of them. Cloud provides water to those medicines with raining to grow up. So, both land and cloud should be regarded by man.

When a farmer digs the land for harvest, Veda says

Yat te bhūmi vikhanāmi kṣipraṁ tadapi rohatu.²

He prays to the ultimate power that the land upon which he is going to dig, that should be fertilized quickly.

This is a natural capacity of the agricultural land that dug area gets fertilized itself. This is the creational power of that 'Ādiśakti' which brings greenery again on the dried area.

This mantra says

Mā te marma vimṛigvarī mā te hṛdayamarpipam.³

The land is capable to provide foods and medicines for us. In growing of any plant on the agricultural land, it takes a few months long process. Thus, that land should not be got injured on any step. In cultivation, in digging, in watering or in using manure on the land each and every work should be done with good care. Similarly, the farmer, who gives his time and works very hard in the field, also should not be in the trouble.

In other mantra, Veda says

Nānā vīryā ośadhīryā bibharti pṛthivī na prathatām rādhyatām naḥ.⁴

¹ Atharvaveda 12.1.12

² Atharvaveda 12.1.35

³ ibid 12.1.35

⁴ ibid 12.1.2

The land consists with various kinds of powers and medicines which are beneficial to keep healthy human body. The food which we all eat, that is used in the form of medicines too. In various deceases, ginger, black pepper, clove, cardamom, turmeric etc are used as medicines.

Veda says

Yasyām pūrve pūrvajanā vicakrire yasyām devā asurānabhyavartan.⁵

It means that our forefathers also survived with their precious life on this land. They used to eat the agricultural plants which grew up on this land. They came to know the value of the environment in which they were living. They studied Śāstras and acquired the knowledge of those traditional texts of knowledge. After study of Sanskrit texts, they become succeed to win upon bad habits. Here, the word “Asurān” is used for the bad habits, existing in their own body. After getting knowledge of the śāstras, they became “devāh” and won over the “Ausrās”, means bad habits and behaves.

Gavāmaśvānām vayasaśca viṣṭhā bhagaṃ varcaḥ pṛthivī no dadhātu.⁶

This agricultural land is more suitable place to live for cows, horses and birds. As human lives in the houses built on the land with concrete, while these animals and birds live on that natural area which is beneficial for them. May that land provide knowledge, power and popularity to all of us.

Veda says

Tvajjātāḥ tvayi caranti martyāstvām bibharṣi dvipadastvam catuspadaḥ.⁷

Man says to the land that we born upon you and survive on your surface. And finally will be merged in you after the life. All men having two legs and animals with four legs take your support. In this way, you are base of all the creatures those live on the earth.

This mantra is similar to the another verse which came in tattirīyopaniṣad as

Yato vā imāni bhūtāni jāyante yena jātāni jīvanti
yatprayanti abhisamviśanti tad Brahman tad vijñāsva.⁸

On another place, Atharvaveda says

Sa no bhūmirādīṣatu yaddhanam kāmāyāmahe.⁹

The wealth which we want should be provided by the land to us. As land has wonderful capacity to make a man healthy and wealthy. So, if land will become good for a farmer, he will be happy and free from various kinds of problems in his life.

In Abhiñānaśākuntalam, written by Kālidāsa, there are some ślokas through which kālidāsa has shown the startling attachment of Śakuntalā with the environment. Through his drama, this fact comes to us that in Āśrama system, there was a strong relationship between man and environment. They were depended on each other. The residents of Āśrama subsumed the care of environment in their daily routine. Vice versa, environment also took care of those residents of Āśrama.

⁵ ibid 12.1. 5

⁶ ibid

⁷ Atharvaveda 12.1.15

⁸ Tattirīyopaniṣad- 1/1

⁹ Atharvaveda 12.1.40

In fourth chapter, when Śakuntalā (daughter of Ṛṣi Kaśyapa) gets prepared to go to the state of king Duśyanta, all the components of environment got sad and they provided ornaments and clothes for her. Śakuntalā accepted those gifts and wore all those at the time of departure.

Kālidāsa wrote

Kṣaumarī kecit indupāṇḍu tṛṇa māṅgalyamāviṣkritam.

Niṣṭhuyataścaraṇopabhogaśulabho lakṣarasaḥ kenacit.¹⁰

Some trees gave her clothes which were shining like moon. Another trees offered her mahāvar to paste on the surfaces of legs.

Anyebhyo vanadevatā karatalairāparvabhāgotthitaiḥ.

Dattanyābharaṇāni tatkisalaya udbhedāpratidvandvibhiḥ.¹¹

Another tree gave her different ornaments which were competing with those of new leaves of various new trees.

In the next śloka a wonderful attachment of man and environment presented by Kālidāsa as

Pātuṁ na prathamam vyavasyati jalam yuṣmāsvapīteṣu yā.

Nādatte priyamaṇḍanāpi bhavatām snehena yā pallavam.¹²

She, who doesn't drink water without watering you. Though she is interested in wearing botanical ornaments made by your leaves but she didn't want to let go your leaves off. This is the example of strong relation between man and nature. Next says

Ādye vaḥ kursumprasūtisamaye yasyāḥ bhavati utsavaḥ.

Seyam yāti śakuntalā patigṛham sarvairanuñāyatām.¹³

Kālidāsa wrote that when new leaves come on the trees, Śakuntalā celebrates that moment like festival. And today, She Śakuntalā is going to the house of her husband. Thus all of you should give your kind blessings to her. As all of you are as elders for her as elders in a joint family.

Ecology

Today, the term “ecology” becomes important to know by the people. In ecology, all the components of ecological system come into one category. There mutual dependency is the base of ecology. In ecology, this is a basic principle that one should not satisfy his need with diminishing the needs of others. The community which survives on the basis of this principle is called as “Sustainable society”. As brown wrote

A sustainable society is one that satisfies it's needs without diminishing the prospects of future generations.¹⁴

Fritjof Capra in his book “Web of life” talks about holistic worldview of ecological system. He says that according to holistic worldview, all the individuals are depend mutually and if one come into a problem than whole community gets disturbed. In that way, all the members of the community are deeply connected to each and other. And the process which runs among them, is called as cyclic process and this is the famous saying of modern scientific community that

¹⁰ Abhiñānaśākuntalam 4.5

¹¹ Ibid 4.5

¹² Ibid 4.9

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Quotation, Capra Fritjof, Web of life, p. 4

Cyclic process is well interconnected.¹⁵

Today, in ecology, the type needed to understand by the community of intellectuals is “Deep ecology”. In seventeenth century, a Norwegian philosopher “Arne Naess” categorized the term ecology into two parts as one is “shallow ecology” and another is “deep ecology”. This division of ecology is accepted by a large community in the area of environment and society.

Shallow Ecology

Shallow ecology is human-centric. In this, man takes care of his own family members, friends and relatives. He gives them value and whenever anyone of these comes into trouble, then he becomes ready to help and cooperate. He provides him the as support as possible he can.

Deep Ecology

Deep ecology is earth-centric concept. It doesn't separate man and nature. In fact, it combines all the components of ecological system. According to this, all components are mutually depended on each other. If one is in trouble, then another will also be affected. If all those are working properly, then the ecological chain will run properly.

Fritjof Capra in his book, says this kind of ecology as spiritual and religious awareness.¹⁶ Spirituality also says that one should take care of another. We all are the members of one family. Though, we have different shapes, thoughts, habits and ways of livings, yet we are connected to each other. This is the deep ecological concept of ecology.

In these days too, this concept has appeared as a new paradigm in area of environment and sociology. In this, one consumes the natural resources with the thought in his mind that another creature also needs them. His needs are also same as his own. Capra says that it motivates a man to ask deeper questions to himself.¹⁷

Deep ecological ethics are the need of the hour. If we all will come to grasp this ethical thought, we will remain peaceful and happy. This should be included as a habit in our daily life. For this, we widened our thought and living system. As Capra quotes Arne Naess that we should expand our self to achieve the goal of deep ecological ethics. We end this article with this saying Arne Naess

“Care flows naturally, if ‘self’ is widened and deepened so that protection of free Nature is felt and conceived as protection of us. Just as we need no morals to breathe; if your ‘self’ in the wide sense embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care. If reality is like it experienced by the ecological self, our behavior naturally and beautifully follows norms of strict environmental ethics.”¹⁸

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