

A SPIRITUALISTIC OUTLOOK IN VALUING NATURE *

PINKI DAS

In the ancient spiritual traditions, man was looked upon as part of nature, linked by the eternal spiritual and psychological bonds to the elements around him. This is very much marked in the Hindu tradition, the oldest living religious tradition in the world. The Vedas, the oldest hymns composed by great spiritual seers and thinkers which are the repository of Hindu wisdom, reflect the vibrancy of an encompassing world-view which looks upon all objects in the universe, living or non-living, as being pervaded by the same spiritual power. Hinduism believes in the all-encompassing sovereignty of the divine, manifesting itself in a graded scale of evolution. The human race, though at the top of the evolutionary pyramid at present, is not seen as something apart from the earth and its innumerable life forms. India is a vast network of sacred places. There are seven sacred rivers; seven sacred mountains, sacred trees and plants, sacred cities. The sacredness of the land of India gives a sense of unity to this country of so many religions, cultures, races and languages. The Indian tradition is strongly cosmo-centric, where man lives as a part of a system in which everything is related to everything else. Creation and destruction take place simultaneously. But today, rapidly drifting from our traditions of sustainable use and co-existence, we seem to be entering a man-centered world that implies the decimation of nature.

The civilization of India had grown up in close association with nature. That's why a good environmental sense has been one of the fundamental features of India's ancient philosophy. There has always been a compassionate concern for every form of life in the Indian mind. This concern is projected through the doctrine of *Dharma*, preached by every religious school that flowered in our land. The Hindu *R̥sis* of the Vedic era perceived the value of maintaining a harmonious relationship between the needs of man and

* This paper is a subsection of my doctoral dissertation for which I am thankful to my supervisor Prof. Kanti Lal Das.

spectacular diversity of the Universe. To them, nature was not only the mother that sustained their life; it was the abode of divinity. Sanctity of life to them included not only the efforts to seek salvation, but to seek it by developing a sacred attitude towards spiritual significance of nature. Man, in Hindu culture, was instructed to maintain harmony with nature and to show reverence to the presence of divinity in nature.

An Indian's relation with nature differs from that of a Western man. In the West, human has separated himself from nature, mastered it, he believes, and used it to serve his own purpose. Love of animals and of nature in the West is a personal attitude, not a natural law. As the vine embraces, the tree, and cloud not live without it, so the Hindu unites himself with nature. From nature he came; to nature he returns, as ashes. The relationship between a Hindu and nature is one of adaption and co-existence rather than of mastery and subjection. Hinduism is a remarkably diverse religious and cultural phenomenon, with many local and regional manifestations. Within this universe of beliefs, several important themes emerge. The diverse theologies of Hinduism suggest that: The earth can be seen as a manifestation of the goddess, and must be treated with respect. The five elements - space, air, fire, water, and earth - are the foundation of an inter-connected web of life. *Dharma* - often translated as "duty" - can be re-interpreted to include our responsibility to care for the earth. Simple living is a symbol for the development of sustainable economies. Our treatment of nature directly affects our *karma*. *Pan̄ca Mahābhuta* (the five great elements) create a web of life that is shown forth in the structure and interconnectedness of the cosmos and the human body. Hinduism teaches that the five great elements (space, air, fire, water, and earth) that constitute the environment are all derived from *pr̄kṛti*, the primal energy. Hinduism recognizes that the human body is composed of and related to these five elements, and connects each of the elements to one of the five senses. The human nose is related to earth, tongue to water, eyes to fire, skin to air, and ears to space. This bond between our

senses and the elements is the foundation of our human relationship with the natural world. For Hinduism, nature and the environment are not outside us, not alien or hostile to us. They are an inseparable part of our existence, and they constitute our bodies. Denuding, polluting, or otherwise damaging the environment was considered such a serious offense in Hinduism a person could be excommunicated for killing trees. Hindus have worshipped trees, we have tied sacred threads around them, and we have taken shelter under them, have held social ceremonies around these, offered this water, milk and sometimes even cow dung. Development destroys trees, these are often chopped mercilessly, and the eternal search for firewood threatens their limbs.

In the Vedic period the Vedic Aryans were children of nature. They studied nature's drama very minutely. Sand-storm and cyclone, intense lightening, terrific thunderclaps, the heavy rush of rain in monsoon, the swift flood in the stream that comes down from the hills, the scorching heat of the sun, the cracking red flames of the fire, all witness to power beyond man's power. The Vedic sages felt the greatness of these forces. They respected these activities. They valued these forces. They worshiped and prayed them due to regard, surprise and fear. They realized instinctively that action, movement, creation, change and destruction in nature are the results of forces beyond men's control. And thus they attributed divinity to nature. *Rigvedic* hymns could be divided into many parts, but their main part belongs to natural hymns, the hymns related with natural forces. Yet Vedic gods are explained in different ways by the scholars in India and West, but speaking generally, the hymns addressed to the deities are under the influence of the most impressive phenomenon of nature and its aspects. The word deity or *Devatā* means divine, dignity which is bright, strong, donor, and powerful. In these hymns we find prayers for certain natural elements such as air, water, earth, sun, rain, dawn etc. The glorious brightness of the sun, the blaze of the sacrificial fire, the sweep of the rain-storm across the skies, the recurrence of the dawn, the steady currents of the winds, the violence of the tropical storm and other such

natural energies, fundamental activities or aspects are glorified and in material form as divinities (*Devatā*). The interaction with nature resulted in appreciation and prayer but, indeed, after a good deal of observation. Attributes assigned to deities fit in their natural forms and activities, as soma is green, fire is bright, air is fast moving and sun is dispenser of darkness. The characteristics of these forces described in the verses prove that Vedic seers were masters of natural science.

The *Vedas* are the first texts in the library of mankind. They are universally acknowledged to be the most precious Indian Heritage. The antiquity to the Vedic civilization is debated to a great extent but indeed there is no civilization known to humanity with such antiquity as Vedic Aryan civilization. In Vedic view, this world consists of *Agni* i.e., fire or heat and soma i.e. water. *Surya* is the soul of all which is moving and also of which is not moving. Vedic seers pray boldly to these natural forces and aspects for bestowing plenty and prosperity on them. *Aditi* is praised as *Devamātā*, the mother of all natural energies and she symbolizes the Nature. The *Vedas* deal with knowledge, the knowledge of all sorts. They cover knowledge both physical and spiritual. They are source of all knowledge according to *Manusmṛti*. Especially the Vedic views revolve around the concept of nature and life. The visions of the beauty of life and nature in the *Vedas* are extremely rich in poetic value. Perhaps nowhere else in the world has the glory of dawn and sun-rise and the silence and sweetness of nature, received such rich and at the same times such pure expression. The symbolical pictures projected there remain close to life and nature.

The *Vedic* hymn to the Mother Earth, the *Pr̥thvi Sukta* in *Atharva Veda* is indisputably the oldest and the most evocative environmental invocation. The Hymn is redolent with ecological and environmental values:

Earth, in which lie the sea, the river and the other waters, In which food and cornfields have come to be, In which lives all that breaths and moves, May she confer on us the finest of her yield. Earth, in which the waters, common to all, Moving on all sides, flow unfaillingly, day and night, May she pour on us milk in many

streams, And endow us with luster. May those born of thee, O Earth, Be for our welfare, free from sickness and disease, Wakeful through a long life, we shall become, Bearers of tribute to thee, Earth, my Mother, set me securely with bliss, in full accord with heaven, O wise one, Uphold me in grace and splendor.

An analogous interpretation of holistic perception is given in the traditional system of *Advaita Vedānta* in India, as the acme of spiritual realization, in which the entire physical world appears identical with oneself and *Brahman*. If, as the cosmology of the Upanishads tells us, everything has come out of *Brahman* and is non-different from *Brahman*, and if *Brahman* has entered into all things as it has entered into all human beings, and has stayed there as the *antaryāmi* of all, then it will be no wonder that all this should verily be *Brahman*. This is the highest knowledge. This is the *summum bonum* for man to be achieved as psychological and epistemological process of apprehension of reality by degrees and by stages. The cosmic vision of our planet earth is based on the fundamental concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. The way forward will require a turn towards restoration and renewal. Vedic profundity re-affirms the importance of justice, prudence, humility and reverence for life and nature. To live within such a holistic relationship requires our rediscovering the spiritual connection that unites us to the land and that nourishes our souls as well as our bodies. The affirmation of the ‘intrinsic worth’ and something like ‘rights’ of each individual person and all animal and plant species and in some ways nature and ecosystems carries the correlate of recognizing our own limits in calming the fruits of the earth and in managing and manipulating nature. The invocation to the *Īśavāśya Upaniṣad*, while stressing upon the intrinsic value of nature, emphatically declares. *That is Whole, This is Whole, The Whole comes out of the Whole, Taking the Whole from the Whole, The Whole remains.*

The Vedic hymns are full of statement, ideas and unusual images which contain truths of all sciences. Here, knowledge is couched in symbolic language and unless the symbols are decoded, the real purport of the *mantras* cannot be understood. The only point is that *Vedas* need to be studied and

interpreted, not in a pedantic manner, but in their proper perspective and in relevant context. The tripartite model of knowledge at the basis of the hymns helps in their understanding. Generally indication of most of the principles is there in their earliest form. Often expressions of ideas are enveloped with the shade of symbolism. The approach of Vedic seers is truly comprehensive. They do not visualize in parts. They do not elaborate subjects as is done in current education. But at the same time, grandeur and brevity of the *Vedas* are not found in the disciplines of modern science. The *Vedas* and disciplines of modern science are rather complementary and not contradictory. In recent days, environmental science and ecology are disciplines of modern science under which study of environment and its constituents is done with minute details. As science, they are established in 20th century, but their origin can be seen long back in the Vedic and ancient Sanskrit literature. The concepts of environment differ from age to age, since it depends upon the condition, prevalent at that particular time. In this paper, an effort is made to find out the awareness of ancient Indian people about the environment. As Sanskrit literature is so wide we refer here mainly to Vedic texts, particularly the *Vedic Samhitās*. The Environment Protection Act in 1986, defines the environment as follows: ‘Environment includes water air and land and the inter-relationship which exists among and between water, air and land and human beings, other living creatures, plants, micro organisms and property’. From the above definition, it can be briefly said that environment consists of two components namely biotic and abiotic factors. The living organisms can be grouped into three types - those living mainly on land, in water and in air. The non-living materials of the environment are land, air, water, property etc.

In modern Sanskrit, the word *Paryāvarāṇa* is used for environment, meaning which encircles us, which is all around in our surroundings. But in the *Atharva Veda* words equivalent to this sense are used; such as *Vṛtavṛta*, *Abhivarah*, *Avṛtah*, *Parivṛta* etc. Vedic view on environment is well-defined in one verse of the *Atharva Veda* where three coverings of our surroundings

are referred as *Chandamsi*: ‘Wise utilize three elements variously which are varied, visible and full of qualities. These are water, air and plants or herbs. They exist in the world from the very beginning. They are called as *Chandamsi* meaning ‘coverings available everywhere.’ It proves the knowledge of Vedic seers about the basic elements of environment. According to one indigenous theory established in the *Upaniṣads*, the universe consists of five basic elements viz. 1. Earth or land, 2. Water, 3. Light 4. Air, and 5. Ether. The nature has maintained a status of balance between and among these constituents or elements and living creatures. A disturbance in percentage of any constituent of the environment beyond certain limits disturbs the natural balance and any change in the *natural balance* causes lots of problems to the living creatures in the universe. Different constituents of the environment exist with set relationships with one another. The relation of human being with environment is very natural as he cannot live without it. From the very beginning of creation he wants to know about it for self protection and benefit.

The concept of the *Pr̥thivi* form of the earth in the *Ṛig Veda* is most fascinating. It is mostly addressed along with the heaven into a dual conception. There is one small hymn addressed to *Pr̥thivi*, while there are six hymns addressed to *Dyavapr̥thivi*. *Pr̥thivi* is considered the mother and *Dyau* is considered the father in the *Vedas*, and they form a pair together. One of the most beautiful verses of the *Ṛig Veda* says, ‘Heaven is my father, brother atmosphere is my navel, and the great earth is my mother.’ Heaven and earth are parents: *Mātara*, *Pitara*, *Janitara* in union while separately called as father and mother. They sustain all creatures. They are parents of all gods. They are great and widespread. Earth is described as a goddess in *Ṛig Veda*. In the *Atharva Veda*, the earth is described in one hymn of sixty-three verses. This famous hymn called as *Bhumisukta* or *Pr̥thivisukta* indicates the environmental consciousness of Vedic seers. The seers appear to have advanced understanding of the earth through this hymn. She is called *Vasudhā* for containing all wealth, *Hiraṇyavakṣa* for having gold bosom and *Jagato*

Niveshani for being abode of whole world. She is not for the different races of men alone but for other creatures also. She is called *Visvambhara* because she is representative of the universe. She is the only planet directly available for the study of the universe and to realize the underlying truth. This is wide earth which supports varieties of herbs, oceans, rivers, mountains, hills etc. She has at places different colours as dark, tawny, white. She is raised at some place and lowered at some places. The earth is fully responsible for our food and prosperity. She is praised for her strength. She is served day and night by rivers and protected by sky. The immortal heart of earth is in the highest firmament (*Vyoma*). Her heart is sun. 'She is one enveloped by the sky or space and causing the force of gravitation. She is described as holding *Agni*. It means she is described as the geothermal field. She is also described as holding *Indra* i.e., the geomagnetic field. The earth is described then as being present in the middle of the oceans (sedimentary rocks) and as one having magical movements.' The hymn talks about different energies which are generated from the form of the earth. 'O *Prithivi*, Thy centre, thy navel, all forces that have issued from thy body- Set us amid those forces; breathe upon us.' Thus, the earth holds almost all the secrets of nature, which will help us in understanding the universe. She is invested with divinity and respected as mother i.e. 'The earth is my mother and I am Her son.' The geographical demarcations on this earth have been made by men and not by nature.

Modern Indian scientists should be astonished and also feel proud of our ancestors for their knowledge and views about environment. Ancient seers knew about various aspects of environment, about cosmic order, and also about the importance of co-ordination between all natural powers for universal peace and harmony. When they pray for peace at all levels in the '*Shanti Mantra*' they side by side express their belief about the importance of co-ordination and interrelationship among all natural powers and regions. The prayer says that not only regions, waters, plants trees, natural energies but all creatures should live in harmony and peace. Peace should remain everywhere.

The *mantra* takes about the concord with the universe peace of sky, peace of mid-region, peace of earth, peace of waters, peace of plants, peace of trees, peace of all-gods, peace of *Brahman*, peace of universe, peace of peace; May that peace come to me.

According to *Gītā*, he who prepares food for himself, he who seeks nourishment from his own selfhood - he verily eats sin. Such is the beautiful exhortation of Sri Krishna to Arjuna. According to Him, it is the sacrifice, which is the sustaining force of all creation. One has only to turn to *Agnipurāṇa* to have an insight into the minds of the ancient seers for their curiosity and anxiety to preserve the forests and wild life. *Agni Purāṇa* says: *Equal to ten wells is a tank, Equal to ten tanks is a son, and Equal to ten sons is a tree.*

The verses are devoted to glorifying Earth as sacred and inviolable. *Prithvi Sukta* talks about the human dependence on nature and the respect for the same that follows naturally.

“*Mātā bhumiḥ putro ahaṃ pṛthivyāḥā*” - *Prithvi Sukta, Atharva Veda* (12.1.12)

Here the *Prithvi Sukta* proclaims Earth as the mother, and humanity as her children. 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. The concept of the motherland pertaining to Earth is unique to the *Vedas*. According to *Prithvi Sukta*, Mother Earth is adorned with mountains, hills, plains, heights, slopes, forests, plants, herbs and treasures. She takes care of every creature that breathes with, things strength-giving and nourishing. She gives shelter to all the seekers of truth, who are tolerant and have understanding. She gives us joy, health, wealth, prosperity, and glory. The source of the creative spirit, we depend upon Mother Earth, The Vedic Hymn to the Earth, the famous *Prithvi Sukta* in the *Atharva Veda* (XII.I), is unquestionably the oldest and the most evocative environmental invocation. It is rightly called the first national anthem in the history of mankind. In one of the hymns, a prayer is sung for the preservation and conservation of nature and

its gifts. A covenant is made that humankind shall secure the Earth against all environmental trespass and shall never let her be oppressed.

Not only in the *Vedas*, but in later scriptures, such as the *Upaniṣads*, the *Purāṇas* and subsequent texts, the Hindu viewpoint on nature has been clearly enunciated. It is permeated by a reverence for all life, and an awareness that the great forces of nature - the earth, the sky, the air, the water and fire - as well as various orders of life including plants, trees, forests and animals, are all bound to each other within the great rhythms of nature. The divine is not exterior to creation, but expresses itself through natural phenomena. Thus, in the *Mundaka Upaniṣad* the divine is described as follows:

“Fire is head, his eyes are the moon and the sun; The regions of space are his ears, his voice the revealed Veda, The wind is his breadth, his heart is the entire universe, The earth is his footstool, Truly he is the inner soul of all.”

The *Mahābhārata*, *Ramāyaṇa*, *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Purāṇas* and *Smṛti* contain the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance. Nature has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. In fact, man is forbidden from exploiting nature. He is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. The *Mahābhārata* hints that the basic elements of nature constitute the Cosmic Being - the mountains His bones, the earth His flesh, the sea His blood, the sky His abdomen, the air His breath and *Agni* His energy. The whole emphasis of the ancient Hindu scriptures is that human beings cannot separate themselves from natural surroundings and Earth has the same relationship with man as the mother with her child. Therefore planting and preservation of trees are made sacred in religious functions.

From the above detailed discussion, some light is thrown on the awareness of our ancient seers about the environment, and its constituents. It is

clear that the Vedic vision to live in harmony with environment was not merely physical but was far wider and much comprehensive. The Vedic people desired to live a life of hundred years and this wish can be fulfilled only when environment will be unpolluted, clean and peaceful. The knowledge of Vedic sciences is meant to save the human beings from falling into an utter darkness of ignorance. The unity in diversity is the message of Vedic physical and metaphysical sciences. Essence of the environmental studies in the *Vedas* can be put here by quoting a partial *Mantra* of the *Īśavāsyopaniṣad* ‘One should enjoy with renouncing or giving up others part’. From the above Spiritualistic messages it is clear that environment belongs to all living beings, so it needs protection by all, for the welfare of all. Thus, the study proves the origin of environmental studies from the *Vedas*.

References:

- Callicott, J. B. (1989). “The Metaphysical Implications of Ecology.” In *Nature in Asian Traditions of thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*. (ed.) J. Baird Callicott and Roger Ames. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chatak, G. (1992). *Paryavaran aur Sanskriti*. Takshila Publications, New Delhi.
- Evans, J. C. (2005). *With Respect for Nature: Living as Part of the Natural World*. New York: State University Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- George, R. (1998). *Making Men Moral*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gill, S. (1987). *Mother Earth*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gorbachev, M. (1997). ‘Nature Is My God’, *Resurgence: An International Forum for Ecological and Spiritual Thinking* 184:14-5.
- Helminiak, Daniel A. 1996 *The Human Cove of Spirituality*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Roszak, T., Gomes, M. E. and Kanner, A. D. (1995). *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco.
- Schweitzer, A. (1923). *Reverence for Life: Civilization and Ethics* trans. A Naish, Blackwell: London.