

Saving the Environment in the Light of Ancient Indian Thought

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The wisdom of ancient India recognized the importance of nature and natural resources. The Vedas are dedicated to various forces of nature that are evoked for the benefit of man. Everything that was created was regarded as sacred—trees, plants, animals, mountains, forests, rivers and water bodies and in order to protect them, the ancient *rishis* deemed all of nature to be sacred. Unfortunately, all of this took a turn for the worse in the medieval period when sanctity was denied and destruction took place on a massive scale, and in the desperation to survive, Indians forgot their heritage of regarding the environment with its biotic and abiotic properties as sacred. In the colonial period, the destruction became exploitative and Indians became part of the exploitation.

In Vedic literature, all of nature was in some way divine and it was part of an indivisible life force uniting the world of humans, animals and plants. The gods of the Vedas were all forces of nature—Indra was rain; Agni was fire; Vishnu was the Sun; Pushan was agriculture and Prithvi was Mother Earth. So the concept of the sacred environment was as established as the most sacred of our books—the *Vedas*.

The Supreme Being pervades all creation: forests and groves, trees and plants, animals, rivers, water bodies, mountains, gardens, towns

and precincts, and seeds. Nature is venerated all over India. Every village has a sacred grove presided over by a local deity; every temple has a sacred garden and sacred tree; rivers and lakes are revered; and mountains are the dwelling place of the gods. Nature is a manifestation of the divine. In the *Bhagavad Gita* (4.7-8), Krishna says, “I am the earth, I am the water, I am the air.”

At the beginning and end of every Hindu ritual, a *Shanti mantra* is invariably recited, such as this stanza from the *Yajur Veda Samhita* (36:17):

*Aum dyauh shantir antariksham shantih Prithivi shantir aapah
shantir aushadhayah shantih Vanaspatayah shantir vishvedevah
shantir brahma shantih Sarvam shantih shantireva shantih sa ma
shantiredhi Aum shanti shanti shantih*

*May peace radiate in the whole sky and in the vast ethereal space, May
peace reign all over this earth, in water, in all herbs and the forests,
May peace flow over the whole universe, May peace be in the
Supreme Being, May peace exist in all creation, and peace alone,
May peace flow into us. Aum—peace, peace and peace!*

All the *Shanti Mantras* which are recited at the beginning or after every ritual are meant to calm the environment, without which there can be no peace among people.

Dharma or righteousness, incorporating duty, cosmic law and justice, is the basis of all the religions of Indian origin. Environmental protection is a *dharma*. It is *sanatana*, or eternal, without beginning or end. Every person must act for the general welfare of the earth, humanity and all creation: “*Dharma* is meant for the well-being of all living creatures. Hence that by which the welfare of all living creatures is sustained, that for sure is *dharma*” (*Mahabharata*, XII.109.10)

In the Vedas, nature was part of an indivisible life force uniting the world of humans, animals and plants. The Vedas celebrate

pantheistic deities called *Devas*, or the Shining Ones, representing forces beyond human knowledge or control, who were invoked to win their cooperation: the winds and rains; to prevent earthquakes and forest fires and other natural disasters. Nature is revered as a mother, obeyed as a father and nurtured as a beloved child. Natural phenomena are the manifestations of the gods and not the gods themselves. They express the principles that govern the world and the cosmic order, *ṛta*.¹

Drought was feared then as now. In the *Rig Veda*, Vritra is a serpent or dragon called Ahi, the personification of drought and an adversary of Indra, the god of rain and thunder. Vritra keeps the waters captive until he is killed by Indra, who destroys Vritra and liberates the imprisoned rivers. While Indra does the actual destroying, Vishnu is his friend

and helper (I.6.1; II.22.1; VI.20.2). The war against Vritra was an anthropomorphic representation of the diverse forces of nature which these gods represented.² Vedic religion was pantheistic, celebrating nature as divinity.

Vedic people were one with nature. ‘One is that which manifests in all’ (*Rig Veda*, I.164.46) meant that everything is related to everything else. He who sought nature’s laws was rewarded: ‘Those ancient sages, our ancestors, observant of truth, rejoicing together with the gods, discovered the hidden light, and, reciters of sincere prayers, they generated the dawn.’ (*Rig Veda*, VII.76.4)³

Nature was the reflection of God’s essence, rooted in the transcendental Creator, and the various types of existence,

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1. Nanditha Krishna. 2017. *Hinduism and Nature*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. pp. 3-4.
 2. Nanditha Krishna. 1980. *The Art and Iconography of Vishnu Narayana*. Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. p. 24.
 3. B.B. Lal. 2002. *The Saraswati Flows On: The Continuity of Indian Culture*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International. p. 75.

phenomenally produced by nature, are reflections of divine qualities. Nature or *prakriti* means “making or placing before or at first, the original or natural form or condition of anything, original or primary substance”. While *purusha* is the masculine aspect of creation, *prakriti* is the feminine. *Prakriti* is dynamic, causing change, the “primal motive force”, an essential part of the universe and the basis of all creation.

God is called Brahma, the creator of the universe, Vishnu, the all-pervading preserver and Rudra, the punisher of the wicked. The idea is that ‘God is one; Gods are differently named concepts of the One Being’ (*Atharva Veda*, II.1.3). This primordial or cosmic matter of nature is made up of five elements - *prithvi* (earth), *vayu* (air), *agni* (fire or energy), *aapa* (water) and *akasha* (space) - better known as the *pancha-maha-bhuta*. Their proper balance and harmony are essential for the well-being of humankind, and maintenance of this harmony is a *dharma*, or righteous duty. The *Maitrayani Upanishad* has a beautiful analogy of Brahman as a tree with its roots above and its branches below, the branches being earth, water, air, fire and space. This is likened to the five senses: space is sound, air is touch, fire is colour, water is taste and earth is smell. Nature is thus an indivisible part of the existence of all beings. The earth and its inhabitants are part of a highly organized cosmic order called *rita* and any disruption results in a breakdown of peace and the natural balance.

Agni and water are givers and sustainers of life, they are ‘affectionate mothers . . . givers of all, givers of life’ (*Rig Veda*, IX.2). ‘Waters, verily are medicinal; waters are the dissipaters of disease; Waters are the medicines for everything; May they act as medicine to you’ (*Rig Veda*, X.137.6), ‘Waters are the most excellent . . . Agni is the most excellent . . . Earth declared the third . . . praised is the lightning cloud’ (*Rig Veda*, I.161.9). Soul and body are fire and water, the pair that enables life to go on (*Rig Veda*, X.11).

Life is an expression of the gods, second only to Agni, the ‘giver of life’ (*Atharva Veda*, II.29). There would be no life without Agni. Thus,

the Vedic people recognized the presence of god in everything in the universe. The production of fire by *ghee* - by shedding water - represents a sacred process. Trita, an ancient Vedic water deity living in remotest places, guides the priest Agni in the process (*Rig Veda*, X.115).

The need to protect and conserve biological diversity is exemplified in the representation of the family and habitat of god Shiva, his consort Parvati and his two sons Karttikeya and Ganesha. His habitat is Mount Kailash, with snowy peaks representing the cosmic heavens. The crescent moon on his forehead denotes tranquility; the constant stream of Ganga's water from the lock of hair on his head indicates the purity and importance of water; Nandi, his bull mount, represents the world of animals; serpents signify the presence of toxicity in nature; the lion used by his consort Parvati represents wildlife; the peacock, the mount of Karttikeya, represents the avian species; and the mouse, the mount of Ganesha, represents small underground animals. Different types of animals and birds inhabit the holy abode of Lord Shiva. Another significant aspect is the harmonious relationship between natural enemies. In Lord Shiva's household, natural enemies live in harmony with each other. The carnivorous lion's food is the vegetarian bull, the peacock is the enemy of the serpent and the mouse is the serpent's food; nevertheless, all live together. Thus, when a devotee worships the family of Lord Shiva, he or she observes this coexistence and is influenced by what in contemporary times might be seen as analogous to the concept of ecological harmony and respect for biological diversity.⁴

Mother Earth is acknowledged as the world itself: 'O Mother Earth! You are the universe and we are but your children. Grant us the ability to overcome our differences and live peacefully and in harmony, and let us be cordial and gracious in our relationship with other human beings' (*Atharva Veda*, XII.1.16). The *Prithvi Sukta* advises us

4. O.P. Dwivedi. 2000. 'Dharmic Ecology'. In *Hinduism and Ecology*, ed. C.K. Chapple and M.E. Tucker. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p. 8.

to behave in a suitable manner towards nature and defines our duty towards the environment.

The *Atharva Veda* gives us a beautiful description of the relationship between human beings and nature: ‘The earth, which possesses oceans, rivers and other sources of water and which gives us land to produce food grains and on which human beings depend on for their survival - may it grant us all our needs for eating and drinking: water, milk, grains and fruit’ (XII.1.3).

Rajapati, the lord of creatures, is the creator and the protector of the sky, earth, oceans, people and animals. Humans have no authority over animals. Rather, they have duties and obligations towards all creation. The Hindu belief in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth requires Hindus to give all species equal respect and reverence, for they may be reborn as an animal, bird or insect in another life. The doctrine of *ahimsa* or non-violence is India’s unique contribution to world philosophy. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, one’s actions (*karma*) determine one’s future life. Not only man, even God Himself has incarnated in several forms: Lord Vishnu’s first four incarnations are as the fish (*Matsya*), tortoise (*Kurma*), boar (*Varaha*) and man-lion (*Narasimha*). He is also associated with several animals, such as Hanuman, the companion-devotee of Rama, and the cows, which are Krishna’s companions, and thereby sacred. Every deity has a *vahana* (animal vehicle), who is his or her companion.⁵ Every plant, too, is sacred. The worship of plants is an ancient phenomenon in India and is probably the oldest form of worship, with evidence in the Indus-Sarasvati civilization.⁶

The most important aspect of Indian tradition is that of *karma*, associating all species with birth, death and rebirth. As the Supreme Being himself has been incarnated in several forms, people are

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5. Nanditha Krishna. 2010. *Sacred Animals of India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. pp. 6, 15-16.
 6. Nanditha Krishna. 2014. *Sacred Plants of India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. pp. 4, 6-7.

advised to treat all species alike: ‘One should look upon deer, camels, monkeys, donkeys, reptiles, birds and flies as though they were one’s own children; what is that which distinguishes these from those?’ (*Srimad Bhagavata Purana*, 7.14.9). One may be human in this life but may be reborn as an animal due to one’s *karma* or actions (*Bhagavad Gita*, 14.15). Personal duty and actions, especially those that lead to goodness, are *sattva*. A life of action is *rajas*. And a wasteful or evil existence is *tamas*. Life is a journey through four *ashramas* or stages: *brahmacharya* (studenthood or celibacy), *grihastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (preparing for renunciation) and, finally, *sanyasa* (renunciation) itself. Nature offers the right path leading to renunciation and *moksha*, or liberation of the soul.

In Hinduism, there are no dos and don’ts, no god who sits in judgement. It is all cause and effect: one has to bear the consequences of one’s behaviour, good or bad. God is kind and loving, not judgemental.

People are responsible for their behaviour and one’s *karmas* or actions lead to their own consequences in a future life. There is a very strong and intimate relationship between the biophysical ecosystem and economic institutions. The two are inextricably held together by cultural relations. Hinduism has a definite code of environmental ethics. According to it, humans may not consider themselves above nature, nor can they claim to rule over other forms of life. Hence, traditionally, the Hindu attitude has been respectful towards nature.

From Him too are the Gods produced manifold, The celestials, men, cattle, birds . . . (*Mundakopanishad*, 2.1.7)

Those who are wise and humble treat equally the Brahmin, cow, elephant, dog and dog-eater (*Bhagavad Gita*, 5.19)

Five thousand years ago, the sages of the *Atharva Veda* said, ‘The earth’s attributes are for everybody and no single group or nation has special authority over it’ (XII.1.18). The hymn also describes the earth as the mother of all species living on it. ‘Let the whole of humanity speak the language of peace and harmony and let all living beings live in accord with each other’ (XII.1.16).

Karma can be considered the moral equivalent of the law of conservation of energy or the equivalence of action and reaction in the field of natural sciences. While it is true that what we are today is the result of our past deeds, it also follows that we are the makers of our future by the way we act at present. Thus, far from implying fatalism as is often wrongly believed, *karma* gives tremendous responsibility to the individual and places in his own hands the key to his future destiny. Naturally, the unerring law of *karma* can work itself out only over a sufficiently long period of time; therefore, the Hindu belief in reincarnation.⁷

Nature is the creation and manifestation of the Supreme Being. God is everywhere, says the *Bhagavad Gita* (13.13). Another reference in the *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana* (2.2.41) says that all the elements such as space, air, fire, water, earth, planets and even animals and plants, directions, trees, rivers and seas are but organs of god's body.

Pradushana (pollution) of any sort was abhorred: it was once a punishable offence. 'Punishment . . . should be awarded to those who throw dust and muddy water on the roads . . . A person who throws inside the city the carcass of animals . . . must be punished' (Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, 2.145). Environmental pollution (*vikriti*), a much-discussed problem of our times, was identified several millennia ago. 'From pollution two types of diseases occur in human beings. The first is related to the body and the other to the mind, and both are interrelated . . . coolness, warmth and air—these are three virtues of the body. When they are balanced in the body, it is free from disease' (*Mahabharata*, XIII.16.811).

The great medical scientist Charaka was prescient when he predicted, 'Due to pollution of weather, several types of diseases will come up and they will ruin the country. Therefore, collect the medicinal plants before the beginning of terrible diseases and change

7. Karan Singh. 1995. *Essays on Hinduism*. New Delhi: Ratna Sagar. p. 140.

in the nature of the earth' (*Charaka Samhita*, 'Vimanasthanam', 3.2). With the advent of modern medicine, Charaka has been forgotten.

India has a long tradition of conserving nature by giving it a spiritual dimension, but a fast-changing world, growing consumerism and population and the consequent pressure on land and natural resources have changed our value systems. The urgency of global warming and climate change calls for a greater response from the world's religions. Every aspect of nature is sacred for the Indic religions: forests and groves, gardens, rivers and other water bodies, plants and seeds, animals, mountains and pilgrimage centres. The sacred is still visible in modern India in several aspects of people's lives and in rural areas, especially among communities like the Bishnois, and many tribes, and in the many festivals which celebrate nature and the environment in so many ways.⁸

Tamil Sangam literature belonging to the period between 300 BCE and 300 CE describes a scenario where people were seen as one of the components of five different ecosystems. Each ecosystem had its own unique habits of hunting, gathering, cultivating and worshipping deities. The ancient deities of Tamil Nadu continue to be worshipped in villages under different names. Although some of the deities may not be associated with an extensive forest cover any longer, most are found in intimate association with at least a small grove of plants or sacred groves. Sangam literature describes the *aindu tinai*, the fivefold division of the geographical landscape. These landscapes are *kurinji* (mountains), presided over by Lord Murugan or Karttikeya; *mullai* (forests), whose reigning deity was Lord Krishna; *marutham* (agricultural lands), ruled by Lord Indra; *neithal* (coastal regions), the world of Lord Varuna; and *paalai* (wasteland/desert), which was the region of Goddess Kotravai (Durga). Each *tinai* has its own characteristic flowers, trees, animals, birds, climate and other geographical features. Of these, trees have played an important role

8. Nanditha Krishna. 2017. *Hinduism and Nature*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India. pp. 15-16.

in the social, cultural and religious aspects of ancient anthologies. Flowers are associated with gods and goddesses and the tradition of offering it to them finds mention in Sangam literature.⁹

The river was the source of life and the earliest civilizations were found along its banks. The Ganga is the holiest of rivers and a dip in the river is believed to wash away one's sins. She is worshipped as a goddess, with the crocodile as her vehicle. She comes cascading down the hills from Lord Shiva's top knot. Even her presence on the earth is a divine response to the penance of King Bhagiratha.

But long before Ganga attained that status, the Sapta Sindhava (seven rivers) (*Rig Veda*, II.12; IV.28; VIII.24) played an important part in Vedic hymns. They are located in north India/Pakistan. They include the Sarasvati, Sindhu and the five major tributaries of the Sindhu—Shutudri, Parushni, Ashkini, Vitasta and Vipasa. The Sapta Sindhava were bounded by the Sarasvati in the east, Sindhu in the west and the other five in between. The 'Nadistuti Sukta' of the *Rig Veda* (X.75) contains a geographically ordered list of rivers, beginning with the Sarasvati in the east. Even after the river disappeared, probably due to seismic activity in the region, she continued to remain sacred and is remembered as the Goddess Sarasvati of learning and wisdom. In later literature, all the rivers of India attained sacred status.

The mountains are the homes of the gods. These awe-inspiring rocks have magical qualities that set them apart, such as the Kailash, the home of Shiva, in Tibet; the Vindhya, which stopped growing at the request of Agastya, whose return they still await; Sheshachala, the home of Lord Balaji-Venkateshwara, and many others that dot the Indian countryside.

—9. Nanditha Krishna (ed.). 2005. *Ecological Traditions of Tamilnadu*. Chennai: CPR Publications.

These are but a few examples of the sacred in nature. Animals, flowers, rivers, seeds and even entire cities are sacred, given their intimate association with nature.

The tradition of the sacred environment lives on to this day, from the sacred forests which may not be destroyed, to the sacred animals which may not be killed, to the sacred rivers which give life and the sacred mountains that inspire awe and reverence.

Heritage may be defined as the cultural, social and spiritual values of our ancient past, which still have relevance and which we must bestow on the coming generations. Indian culture is noted for its deep respect for Mother Nature. Even today, ancient traditions, customs and practices continue to flourish in our day-to-day life. Hinduism is noted for its deep respect for all forms of nature and the unique role that each life form plays in the ecology of the earth. The celestial River Ganga, the pristine Himalayas, the imposing Mahabodhi tree at Bodhgaya, the sacred blackbucks of the Bishnois of the Rajasthan desert, the *ki law kyntang* (sacred forests) of Meghalaya and the numerous sacred forests and gardens, rivers and *kunds*, animals and plants are all examples of our rich ecological heritage.

The *Atharva Veda* says it is up to us progeny of Mother Earth to live in peace and harmony with all others. Justice S. Vaidyanathan, while disposing of a writ petition filed by the owner of a commercial building in Chennai, observed that religious beliefs are protective of human civilization and the environment. “Our tradition and values, passed down to us from our ancestors, are not wrong beliefs. They are scientific, rational and logical. That is why they worshipped nature. Even now, many of them who follow our ancestral beliefs continue to do so as they have got abundant sanctity.” Referring to people worshipping soil, fire, water, space and air, the learned Judge said: “It is not at all irrational. When nature gets the sanctity, it will not be ruined... Thus, nature was protected in those days. However, in the name of rationality, religious taboos were violated, the result of which we suffer these days” (*The Hindu*, 27 August, 2017).

How true. It behoves us to relearn from the past and protect the environment.