



A VISTA OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN IN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship as is evident in the works of poets and other writers down the ages in almost all cultures of the world. Today, environmental issues have become a matter of concern for many departments and disciplines of knowledge and development. It is an interesting study for a literary critic to study the texts of writers who have discussed the close relationship between man and nature. Literature well known for reflecting the contemporary issues couldn't have remained unaffected from this theme. The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature not only in the modern times but also in the olden ages.

Indian society right from the beginning is founded on Vedic philosophical tradition and has established itself in tune with the nature and surroundings. Ancient saints, sages gave importance to protection of flora and fauna and emphasized on protecting *panchmahabhuts*, emphasized on performing *Yajnas* and enacting rules related to environment. It is interesting to know that the ancient Vedas have several references in them on environmental protection, ecological balance, weather cycles, rainfall phenomena, hydrologic cycle, and related subjects that directly indicate the high level of awareness of the seers and people of that time. The present paper analyzes these aspects, with a glance of ancient Indian Vedic literature with a focus, how literature has been an effective vehicle to create awareness from Vedic times to the present modern era.

Keywords: *Nature, Literature, Environment, Vedas.*

**VEDIC LITERATURE AND NATURE**

"The poetry of earth is never dead" Poets die; genres change or modify; writing style sees many changes over time; literary trends might change usually... however, the poetry of earth did never die; cannot die ever! This belief of John Keats was justified. Earth has seen ages; the earth has seen civilizations emerging and dying; the earth has seen bombings; the earth has seen disasters... it still stays.

As everybody is aware of the thing "The earth can provide every man's need but not the greed", the nature has a boon of self-balance between and among various constituents and living creatures and hence itself is a boon to mankind. A disturbance in percentage of any constituent of the environment beyond certain limit 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 of 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 man wanted to know about it for self-protection and benefit. But unfortunately, today human beings are in the stage of questioning the natural relationship of man with the other creatures and five basic gross elements of environment (*Panchamahabhoota of 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 Manusmriti. 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. All four Vedas 'the *Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva*' recognize the importance of maintenance of the seasons' cycles that are likely to get altered due to the climate change owing to inappropriate human actions. It is remarkable that the people in *Vedic* times regarded nature and the environment in a holistic manner and revered each of its constituents and entities by carefully preserving them. "Do not harm the environment, do not harm the water and the flora, earth is my mother, I am her son, may the

waters remain fresh, do not harm the waters----. Tranquility be to the atmosphere, to the waters, to the crops and vegetation. "'*mātā bhūmih putruhaṇ prthivā*:" This Vedic prayer invokes divine intervention to bliss and protect the environment.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN VEDAS

Vedas command the knowledgeable to keep the environment free from all impurities and that can be done by Yagnas. Ancient treasures of vast knowledge reveal that there is an integral balance in man, nature and the God. The protection of environment includes the protection of 'Dyaus' or 'Heavens' and 'Prithvi' or 'Earth'. Paryavaran, which we refer to as 'Environment' lies between these two. The Prithivi Sukta of the Atharvaveda advocates close relationship between man and Nature. Vedic Hymn related to the Earth is unquestionably the oldest and considered to be the most reminiscent environmental supplication. Not only Atharvaveda many of the Rig Vedic hymns lucidly describe the Dyava Prithvi (Heaven and Earth together).

In addition, in Rigveda all entities of Nature including mountains, lakes, heaven and earth, the forests or the waters are worshipped as deities like Mitra, Varuna, Indra, Maruts and Aditya, that they are responsible for maintaining the requisite balance. Many hymns highlight the importance of the five basic gross elements or the pancha mahabhoota of Nature: akash or firmament, vayu or air, agni, tejas or fire, apah or water, and prithvi or earth and seek their blessings. Vedas insist that the well-being of Mother Earth depends on the preservation and sustenance of the environment.

The seers befittingly prayed for forgiveness for unintentional actions of human leading to over-exploitation-"Whatever I dig from thee, O Earth, may that have quick recovery again. O purifier, may we not injure thy vitals or thy heart". The seers of Rig Veda praised earth for its replenishment "You give me and I give you". They look at every entity of Nature with the eyes of a friend and sympathiser: "Mitrasyaaham chakshushaa sarvaani bhootaani sameekshe."

EARTH AS MOTHER IN VEDAS

The concept of the form of the earth in the Rig-veda is most fascinating. It is mostly addressed



along with the heaven into a dual conception (Rodasi, Dyavaprithivi). There is one small hymn addressed to Prithivi, while there are six hymns addressed to Dyavaprithivi. Prithivi is considered the mother and Dyau is considered the father in the Vedas, and they form a pair together. One of the most beautiful verse of the Rig-veda says, 'Heaven is my father, atmosphere is my navel, and the great earth is my mother.' Rigveda 1.164.33

Heaven and earth are parents: Matara, Pitara, Janitara in union while separately called as father and mother Rigveda 1.159,160. They sustain all creatures. They are parents of all gods. They are great (Mahi) and widespread. Earth is described as a goddess in Rig-veda. In the Atharvaveda, the earth is described in one hymn of 63 verses. This famous hymn called as Bhumisukta or Prithivisukta indicates the environmental consciousness of Vedic seers. The seers appear to have advanced understanding of the earth through this hymn. She is called Vasudha for containing all wealth, Hiranyavaksha for having gold bosom and Jagato Niveshani for being abode of whole world: Atharvaveda 12.1.15; 12.1.45. The hymn talks about different energies which are generated from the form of the earth.—'O Prithivil thy centre, thy navel, all forces that have issued from thy body-Set us amid those forces; breathe upon us.' Atharvaveda 12.1.12.; She is invested with divinity and respected as mother—'The earth is my mother and I am Her son.' Atharvaveda, 12.1.12.

WATER AS PURIFIER IN VEDAS

The text of Vedas created a greater awareness regarding the conservation of water which is one of the most important environment resources. Because of its indispensable nature it is to be of divine nature and the following Rig veda verse (VII: 49: 2) is a good example of this idea "the water from heaven, the water from the spring, the bright pure water which tends to the sea, may these divine waters protect us here."

Atharvana Veda considers water to be the milk of the Mother Earth which fosters the growth of all its offsprings and makes them pure in 100 ways. Rivers are the source of power for life and water is the symbol of dignity Atharvaveda, 12.1.12.

FOREST: THE ABODE OF THE GODS

A Verse From Rig-Veda Says, "thousands and hundreds of years if you want to enjoy the fruits and happiness of life then take up systematic planting of trees." The *Vṛkṣāyurveda* says that planting a tree is equally beneficial as having ten sons—**"dasakūpa sama vāpi dasa vāpi sama hradah-dasahrada samah putro dasaputra sama drumah"** (*Vṛksayurvedah*-5). *Tulshi*, *Pippala* and *Vatavṛkṣha* have great importance in our culture. About the importance of *Tulashi*, *Vatavṛkṣha* there are many *slokas* found in the *vedic* literature. Some of them say- He will live in Heaven for so many years as the *Tulsi* Plant will be in his house for the equal numbers of days. About the *Pippala* and *Vatavṛkṣha*, *Atharvaveda* says 'it was prohibited to cut *Vatavṛkṣha* because gods live in this tree and no disease where this tree is situated'. This is also supported by Shrikrishna in the *Shrimadbhāgavadgītā*—"asswathu sarvavṛkhanam".

Now a day's according to modern scientist the *pippala* and *Vatavṛkṣha* consume carbon dioxide from the air and give us oxygen and thus balance the air. The *Oṣodhi sukta* of *Rig-veda* addresses to plants and vegetables as mother, 'O mother! Hundreds are your birth places and thousand are your shoots. The Atharvaveda prays for continuous growth of herbs,— 'O Earth! What on you, I dig out, let that quickly grow over.' And another prayer says, 'O Earth! Let me not hit your vitals.'

The *Rig-vedic* people exploited nature in a very judicious way, making full use of the Indian psyche, they compared trees to human beings, Gods etc. They prayed to *Indra* (God) not to separate trees from the forests and the sons from their fathers (Rig-veda, 8/1/13).

RIVERS WORSHIPPED AS GODDESSES

To protect environment the *Rig veda* says, Environment provides bliss to people leading their life perfectly. Rivers bliss us with sacred water and provide us health, night, morning, vegetation. Even now the present community is trying to implementing these as 'Punya snana' or 'Pushkar'

REFERENCE OF ATMOSPHERE IN VEDAS

The Rig Veda makes a clear reference to the presence of a protective layer 'which we know now to be the ozone layer' that filters the harmful rays of the



sun and protects the earth and praises the radiation that enters the atmosphere that is responsible for the health of environment. The vedic sages also know that mountains cause rains and fresh air and also provide medicines----“*parvatesubhesajam*”(Rig-veda-8/20/25). Therefore they gave importance to save mountain and said that it is better to live in the forests or mountains than the villages—excessive solar flare that also affect earth's temperature.

PROTECTION OF FAUNA IN VEDAS

All three types of living creatures found in the universe have different environments and every living creature has an environment of its own. But when we look from man's perspective all of them constitute his environment. There is a general feeling in the vedic texts that animals should be safe, protected and healthy. Protection of birds, animals is a norm of Hindu religion. The Hindu mythology believes in avatars (incarnations of God) of the godlike Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Nrisingha etc. which signifies the divine form. The environmental education had by the ancient Indians from their formative years helped in instilling in them awe, respect, wonder, gratitude and a sense of belonging and awareness of living life in harmonious balance with natural surroundings. In ancient scriptures, the Vedic scholars have not only explained the usefulness of trees and plants but also depicted their beauty and charm, as in such animals and thereby making their life secure. The most common example of our traditions and religious customs is our cow which provides us milk and worshipped as 'Gomatha'.

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 Ishavasyopanishad 'One should enjoy with renouncing or giving up others part. Vedic message is clear that environment belongs to all living beings, so it needs protection by all.

NATURE OUT OF LITERARY MARGINS

There has been a close relationship between nature and literature. This relationship has been reflected through writers and poets throughout different cultures across the world and even in India.

A variety of novels, poems and other expressions of literature been depicted on the backdrop of issues concerning nature. Today, environmental issues have become a matter of concern for many departments and disciplines of knowledge and development. Many authors have expressed their concern for nature due to the cupidity of human beings and growing population. The transformations in the social and cultural environments of the world have completely changed the representations of man's attitude towards nature in literary expressions. There are many ways that authors have explored environmental issues. In some books it is central to the book, while in others, it is secondary to the narrative and other themes.

Earlier, the writers such as R. K. Narayan, Manohar Malgonkar, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, and Anita Desai have invoked Nature and nature-elements for expressing their views, their contemporary regional and social atmospheres. R.K. Narayan is a very famous regional novelist. He is well known for his imaginary creation *Malgudi*. He has used nature as the setting and background in his novels and short stories. It can be noted in his stories and novels such 'Malgudi Days', 'Man Eater of Malgudi', 'The English Teacher', and 'The Guide' etc. In other words he used landscape as an important theme.

Raja Rao has also applied/invoked Nature and nature elements in his novels. He has portrayed the co-relation between mankind and Nature. His 'Kanthapura' projects the role and importance of Nature beautifully in the human life. Through the depiction of rivers, mountains and other natural elements, he has proved value of this co-relationship. Anita Desai is a very prominent and popular woman Indian novelist in English. Nature which includes animals, plants and birds, has a strong presence in almost all her works. The connection between nature and man is pivotal in 'Cry', 'The Peacock' and 'Fire on the Mountain'. The other renowned environment conscious novelist is Kiran Desai. She received the Man Booker prize for her famous novel, 'The Inheritance of Loss'. Her novel starts with the delineation of the natural beauty of mount Kanchenjunga. She delineates the beautiful mountain, and the changing seasons charmingly. The



description of Gurkha movement reflects the political atmosphere. The movement has become the cause of eco-disturbance. Through this, the novelist has focused the harmful effects on environment due to the irrational behavior and the reaction of the mankind. Ruskin Bond is one such Indian short story writer whose stories particularly gyrate around nature and its aspects, which articulates his concern for the green layer of the earth. In his story 'The Kitemaker' he expresses his analogy between man and tree and presents a beautiful and picturesque idea. Plants and trees need amorousness like a child for their appropriate growth and development. In 'My Father's Trees in Dehra' he mentions that as soon as his father comes and sit in the verandah the plants movements were motivated simply by affection for his father. The natural scenic hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie almost invariably form the setting of his works and reflect his ardent faith in the healing powers of nature. He shows his worry for the unthoughtful actions of man towards nature. Through his short stories for children he has tried to convey an important message to everyone, that is, the importance of nature in our life.

'No Room for a Leopard' is about deforestation and its accompanying aftermath. It presents the pathetic condition of the animals after deforestation. In 'Copperfield in the Jungle' he shows abhorrence towards hunting for pleasure which can never be justified. 'The Tree Lover', 'The Cherry Tree', 'All Creatures Great and Small' and many others are all about the chain which binds man and nature, as in the chain of ecosystem, showing interdependence. He has always emphasized on the friendly relationship between man and nature and has brought before us our need for each other.

The other writer in whose work also we witness a reference to the Bengal famine is Kamala Markandya in her novel 'Nectar in Sieve'. 'The Flood', which is taken from her novel, 'Nectar in Sieve', has very well described the control of nature over human beings. She writes "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless and forgetful, and it has you by the throat."

India has a rich body of regional literature on the environment, such as the work of Sambalpuri poet and writer Haldhar Nag, the Kannada poet Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre or the Malayali poet and activist Sugathakumari. Many of these works are an outcome of environmental movements of the 70's and 80's like the *Chipko Movement*, *Silent Valley Protests* and the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, that struck the collective imagination of common people, especially those living in the heart of such strife. Unfortunately, their writing was not in English and, hence, it was not widely available or discussed. However, the problem is not limited to translation from the regional languages into mainstream languages, especially English. It also extends to making the large body of environmental literature in English available to the masses in their native languages." Sivaramakrishnan says, "Much before Rachel Carson wrote 'Silent Spring', obscure writers in India had already been writing on environmental struggles in their native languages. Unfortunately, their writing was not in English and, hence, it was not widely available or discussed." Prominent voices, such as M Krishnan, Ramachandra Guha, Madhav Gadgil, Amitav Ghosh and Mahesh Rangarajan have greatly enriched and impacted literature on the environment.

CONCLUSION

Environmental problems reflected in world's literary work can prompt more concern, provoke attitude and inspire action. Perhaps our literature — like many other things in our diverse and dynamic society should be viewed as part of a great wave of influences quietly shaping our attitudes to the natural environment. The whole world today runs after controlling the man made pollution by various means of scientific processes but if the world community learns the basic values of Vedas which our seers gave us thousands years back it will work in a great extent in the field of protection of the environment. From the beginning the writers have shown interest towards nature, culture and landscape. It is remarkable that the people in Vedic times regarded Nature and the environment in a holistic manner and revered each of its constituents and entities by carefully preserving them. For writers like Narayan, Manohar Malgonkar, Raja Rao and



Kamala Markandaya, landscape was the part of the theme or the characters which showed growth with time. Apart from this the natural calamities that the country faced from time to time also served as themes for novels of writers like Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamla Markandya, Anita Desai and Kiran Desai. The fundamental concept of ecology is that everything is interrelated and nothing is separate. Ecological concerns have been the subject of literature for a long time without the writers focusing on them, and the readers becoming aware of them. However, the ecological movement in the last few decades has gained considerable momentum and has drawn the attention of the intellectuals, academics, writers, and scientists to the grave issue of man-land (nature) relationship. The first law of Ecology is this: everything is connected to everything else.

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