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## Environmental awareness in the vedic literature: An assessment

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### Introduction

Environment plays a very significant role in human civilization. Human beings have close relations with the biosphere in which they live. The whole environment and ecology consisting of earth, air, water, plants and animals provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for sustaining human life.

Today, the environmental crisis is a tremendous problem for the whole world. Developing countries and developed countries alike are all suffering from environmental pollution. Therefore, today environmental problems have been the object of discussion everywhere from village to parliament. Pollution is by far the most rapidly growing problem of the modern technological society. The condition in India is pretty serious. It is no longer, feasible to ignore the alarming nature of India's environmental conditions. Seventy percent (70%) of all the available water in India is polluted (23<sup>rd</sup> June, 2006, The Tribune). During the last decade, there has been five- fold increase in the incidence of blood cancer and lymph node cancer. Nearly fifty three (53%) percent of Indian's total land area is subject to serious environmental degradation. Deforestation, siltation, water, air and noise pollution, insanitation- all these are posing a serious threat not only to the quality of life in India, but also to its basic survival. There are many diseases like which are transmitted through water. Examples are typhoid, cholera, jaundice, etc. According to an estimate more than eighty percent Indians suffer from water-borne diseases.

The *sanskriti* (culture) of every country depends on its environment, climatic conditions and human behavior. Literatures reflect in their own culture, geographical conditions, climatic influences and environmental aspects. Therefore, from this point of view the *vedic* literature is of great utility to us and to the world society at large. Accordingly if we study the environmental conditions of our society and the world, we shall be greatly benefitted in our living and healthy life.

The Indians Saints prescribed acts for avoiding environmental pollution. But we neglected the instructions of the scriptures, sometimes out of total ignorance of the contents of these works and at other times out of incapability to follow the real intention of the authors of these scriptures.

In this article we would like to present a brief outline of the awareness for maintenance of balance in our environment and concern for the acts polluting nature, as we find it in *vedic* literature.

### Objective of the Study

- ❖ To identify and classify the environmental issues depicted in Vedic literature.
- ❖ To explain the relevance of four Vedas in present time.
- ❖ To explain the Vedic dictum, like plentiful scientific elements, love-piety, non-violence.
- ❖ To extend ample scope of research for the interested students of modern time.
- ❖ To know about types of solution to environmental crisis of Vedic period.
- ❖ To look for the scope of implementing the Vedic knowledge to the current scenario.

### Methodology

The descriptive and analytical methods are used in this study. Both primary and secondary data have been used in this study. The secondary data have been collected from various books,

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different research reports, articles, journals, websites etc. The primary data are mainly collected from the original books of Sanskrit literature.

### Significance of the Study

Sanskrit is the vehicle of civilization and culture of Bharatvarsha, i.e. India. Sanskrit has been serving the human race from the time immemorial. The Vedas are treated to be the oldest literature of the world. When the people of the other continents were in darkness (under developed) our vedic seers contributed to science, Technology, Mathematics, Astrology, and high philosophical order at all. They built the treasure house of India full of human wisdom, social welfare, unity, peace and prosperity, instead of personal gain or internal prosperity at large. Therefore, from this point of view the Vedic literature is of great utility to us and to the world society at large. Accordingly if we study the environmental conditions of our society and the world, we shall be greatly benefitted in our living and healthy life. We are crying for a better environment now and the Vedas for the first time, teach us to take steps for the protection of our clean environment. Therefore the study lays its significance on the need and validity of India traditions on creating a friendly and healthy environment at present era.

### Major Discussions

Sanskrit literature is the oldest literature of India. Sanskrit has been serving the entire world in humanistic efforts like unity, fraternity, peace, social harmony and prosperity. The Sanskrit scholars, instead of caste, creed and regional feelings utter the message “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” for the human community, which is not available in any other language of the world. This has the resemblance in present day context, which is full of terrorism and turmoil. Vedas is the only treasure house of knowledge of our present thought. By standing upon the old iron pillar, i.e. our thoughts, we the present generation above to go upwards day by day in every aspects of our life. One can be proud of the fact that Sanskrit is not merely a language, but a collection of knowledge, a vast treasure house of various disciplines like linguistics, mathematics, astrology, architecture and natural sciences like physics, chemistry, biology, botany, medical science, engineering, agriculture, horticulture, cosmology, ecology, aeronautics, navigation etc. We are crying for a better environment now and the Vedas for the first time, teach us to take steps for the protection of our clean environment. 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 putruahan pṛthivyā:”**

This *vedic* prayer invokes divine intervention to bliss and protect the environment. To protect environment the *Rig veda* says----

**“madhu vātāḥ ṛitāyate madhu kṣaranti sindhavaḥ  
mādvih naḥ santuṣadhi.**

**madhu naktamutusāsu madhumatpārthiva rajah  
madhu kṣorastu suryah  
mādhirgābo bhavantu naḥ”**

(*Rigveda*,1/90/6,7,8)

(Environment provides bliss to people leading their life perfectly. Rivers bliss us with sacred water and provide us health, night, morning, vegetation. Sun bliss us with peaceful life. Our cows provide us milk).

The plant ecology has a great importance to keep the environment in balance. The *Rig-vedic* people exploited nature in a very judicious way, making full use of the Indian psyche, the 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).

The *Vṛkṣāyurveda* says that planting a tree is equally beneficial as having ten son-----

**“dasakūpa sama vāpi dasa vāpi sama hradah  
dasahrada samah putro dasaputra sama drumah”**

(*Vṛksayurvedah*-5).

*Tulshi*, *Pippala* and *Vatavṛkṣa* have great importance in our culture. About the importance of *Tulashi*, *Vatavṛkṣa* there are many *slokas* are found in the *vedic* literature. Some of them are---

**“jābadināni tulashi rūpitāpi jad grihe grihe.  
tābadvarsha sahasrāni vaikunthe sa mahīyate”**

(*Vṛkṣāyurveda*-9).

(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 *Vatavṛkṣa*, *Atharvaveda* says,---

**“aśwathu devasadanastrītyashamityo divi.  
tatramṛitayasyo śakhan deva kushthamavanwat”**

(*Atharvaveda*,5/4/3).

(It was prohibited to cut *Vatavṛkṣa* 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 *Vatavṛkṣa* 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.

**“satan bu ambā dhāmoni sahashramutta tu ruhaḥ”**

(*Rig-veda*,10/97/2).

Similarly the Hindus have worshipped the *Bilva*, *Kadamba*, *Rudrāksha*, *Champaka*, *Bakula* etc. In the *Maitrāyani Samhitā*, the earth has been described as “*devajayani*”, adorable by deities and *ausadhinam mulam*, the source of all kinds of medicinal plants. So the Indian sages, like *Manu* suggested punishment for him who cuts down such valuable trees. During the *vedic* age *yajnas* were conducted for purification of the environment. Perfumed haven material and ghee were used during these *yajnas*.

The *vedic* sages also know that mountains cause rains and fresh air and also provide medicines----“*parvateṣu bhesajam*” (*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—

**“iman jibebhyah paridhin dadhāmi meshaṇ nu  
gādaparu arthametat.  
satan jibantu saradaḥ puruchirantamṛstun  
dadhatan parvatena”.**  
**tuje nastane parvatah santu svaitavo na virah.  
panita aptyoada no vardhannah sansan naryo  
ahistou”.**

(Rig-veda,5/81/9).

The fire and Sun play the most significant role in the purification of environment. Animals and birds are part of nature and environment. The *vedic* seers have mentioned about their characteristics and activities and have desired their welfare. *Rig-vedic* seers classifies them in three groups sky animals like birds, forest animals and animals in human habitation—

**“tasmāt yajnat sarvahutah samvrtan pṛsadajyan  
pasuntansakre vayabyanaranyan grāmyasca ye.”**

(Rigveda,10/90/8)

All three types of living creatures found in the universe have different environments and every living creatures 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 the *vedic* texts that animals should be safe, protected and healthy—

**“bhūrbhūvah svaḥ suprajabhīh svasthya subese  
viraih suposah posaih  
nārya prajan me pāhi sacchya paśunme  
pahyartharya pitun me pāhi  
tubhyamaranyaḥ paśabo mṛga vane hita haṅsa  
suparnah śakuna vayansi  
tava yakṣa paśupate apsantastubyan kṣaranti divya  
abo vṛdhe”**

(Yajurveda, 3/37)

Protection of birds, animals is a norm of Hindu religion. The Hindu mythology believes fourteen avataras (births) of the god like Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Nrisingha etc. signify the divine forms in such animals and thereby making their life secure. The cobra is worshipped on the eve of Nagpanchami and cows are offered adoration on the occasion of the Balabhadrapuja. Killing of certain animals and birds who acted as scavengers by feeding on carcasses and filth was religiously banned according to the Vedas. It is need of the day to follow in the root steps of the ancient period---

**“kincideva tu vipryāya dadyadasthimatan vadhe.  
Anasthanancaiva himsayah pranayamena śudhyati.”**

(Manu -samhita-11/142)

### Conclusion

From the above detailed discussion, some light is thrown on the awareness 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 far wider and much comprehensive. The Vedic sages realized that the pure water, air etc. are the roots of to good health and happiness and hence they considered all these as gods. The *vedic* people desired to live a life of hundred years-

**“taccakṣurdevahitaṇ purastacchukamuccarat  
pasyema śaradah śatan jivema saradah**

**śatan śṛnuyam śaradah śatan prabravam  
śaradah śatamadinah śyāma śaradah  
śatan bhuyahca śaradah śatāt.”**

(Yajurveda-36/24)

And this wish can be fulfilled only when environment will be unpolluted, clean and peaceful. Now a days various types of environmental laws like Forest act 1972, Wildlife protection Act 1970, Water protection and pollution act 1980, Environmental protection Act, 1986 have been enacted for the protection and preservation of environment. But about 3000 years ago, the sages recited the following verse--

**“dyauḥ śāntirantarīkṣan śanti pṛithivī  
śāntirāpaḥ śāntirośadhayaḥ  
vanaspatayaḥ śāntiviswadevah śāntibrahma  
śāntiḥ sarva śāntiḥ śāntireva śāntiḥ sā mā  
śntiredhi”**

(Sukla yajurveda 36-17)

“Let there be balance in the space !

Let there be balance in the sky !

Let there be peace on the earth !

Let there be calmness Let there be !

Let there be growth in the plants !

Let there be growth in the tree !

Let there be grace in the Gods !

Let there be bliss in the Brahman !

Let there be balance in everything !

Let there be peace and peace !

Let such peace be with everyone of us !”

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’ –

**“īśhāvāshyamīdan sarvan yatkinchan jagatyan jagat  
tena tyaktena bhūnjithā mā grīdhaḥ kashyacid  
dhanam”**

(Ishopanisad-1).

From this *vedic* message it is clear that environment belongs to all living beings, so it needs protection by all, for the welfare of all.

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