



International Journal of Sanskrit Research

अनन्ता

ISSN: 2394-7519

IJSR 2020; 6(3): 25-27

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www.anantaajournal.com

Received: 16-03-2020

Accepted: 18-04-2020

Dr. Binima Buzarbaruah

Associate Professor, Deptt. Of
Sanskrit Gauhati University,
Guwahati, Assam, India

Environmental awareness in ancient sanskrit literature and sustainable development

Dr. Binima Buzarbaruah

Abstract

The sustainable development is the development where the quality of human life is upgraded without degrading the environment. Every generation of human being has the right to have the benefit from the past generation and also has the obligation to preserve cultural and natural heritage. With the planning of development of a nation, side by side proper care should be taken to preserve the natural resources and also to save the environment. In ancient India people were very much conscious for the protection of environment and there was a very cordial relationship between man and environment. The evidence of this can be noticed in different scriptures like Vedas, epics, Purāṇas etc. During that time, different natural objects like the earth, trees and animals had got a special position. Those were shown proper respect and so, it was not so easy to harm the elements of nature. The ancient people were very much concerned also for the purity of air and water. Thus, the awareness shown by the ancient people for environmental protection was very significant and in today's circumstances if with such awareness the development activities can be continued, then only the theory of sustainable development will be successful.

Key words: *Veda, purāṇa, mahābhārata, sustainable development.*

Introduction

Development is a process of reorganisation and reorientation of the whole economic and social systems of a nation. It is an innovative process that leads to the structural change of the social system and improves the living condition of the people. Development is interlinked with the protection of environment. The development activities should be done by adopting suitable precautionary measures for the protection of the natural resources. For the sake of saving the environment the development process cannot be stopped ^[1]. Thus the concept of sustainable development arose and this principle was one of the major themes of the Stockholm Declaration resulting from the UN Conference of Human Environment, 1972. It was brought into common use by World Commission on Environment and Development in its 1987 Report. There it is stated that "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs." ^[2] "The primary objective of sustainable development" According to E. Barbier, a senior scholar in the school of global Environmental Sustainability ^[3] "is to reduce the absolute poverty of the world's poor through providing lasting and secure livelihood that minimises resource depletion, environmental degradation, cultural disruption and social instability." ^[4] It is very important that if development is to be the goal then it should not be only for the benefit of the present generation. The fate of future generation also should be kept in mind in this regard. So, adequate environmental protection is required side by side with the development of a nation.

Discussion

Right to have a healthy environment is so significant that nowadays it has been included in the third generation of human rights ^[5]. According to the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 "the word environment includes land, air, and water and the inter relationship which exists among and between water, air and land and other living creatures" ^[6]. In ancient India people were very much conscious for the protection of environment. They very carefully preserved various components of Nature and showed great honour to those. Each and every element of nature

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Binima Buzarbaruah

Associate Professor, Deptt. of
Sanskrit Gauhati University,
Guwahati, Assam, India

had got special importance in those days. Earlier in the time of *Rgveda* divine presence was recognised in different elements of nature. The ancient people had extraordinary awareness regarding the nature and ecological equilibrium.

It is a great declaration of the Vedic sages that the land or earth is the mother of all and all creatures are her children ^[7]. As the earth i.e. *bhūmi* holds, nourishes and protects all creatures, so she is called as the mother. The Vedas declare that like a mother the earth is for the welfare of all ^[8]. In the Vedic time the earth was so revered that even for keeping steps forgiveness was asked from her ^[9].

Trees are considered as the Lord of the forest. It is the duty of all to preserve the trees. Much importance was given in the *Rgveda* for the protection of the trees. It is stated there that trees are for the happiness of all. Those are the very abode of creatures. Trees are expected to be favourable and beneficial ^[10]. In the purānas also many references are there about the conservation of trees. The necessity and importance of the trees are noticed in those treatises. According to *Matsyapurāna* one tree is like ten sons ^[11]. Earlier, a son was given utmost importance as with the help of a son only, a person could attain the highest goal i.e. salvation. Comparing a tree with ten sons how much value a tree was given in those days can be easily understood. It is very much worth mentioning that earlier, when the plants were dug out for the purpose of medicine or other needs forgiveness was asked by the doer ^[12].

Plantation of the trees was also highly welcomed in ancient days. It is stated in the *Rgveda* that it is necessary to plant trees for the welfare of people ^[13]. Mentioning the different benefits by a tree to the creatures, the *Matsyapurāna* states that trees should be protected, produced and donated to the society. Such an activity was regarded as very much pious and even people can go straight to heaven i.e. can obtain the highest position ^[14]. In the *Mahābhārata* also emphasis is given on plantation of trees. It is declared that by planting trees one acquires fame in this world and auspicious reward in the world hereafter. Departing from this world such a man ascends to heaven. A tree is said to be the son of the planter. Such a tree rescues in the next world as the son rescues his father ^[15]. Like some other elements of nature certain trees are mentioned as the embodiment of God. Much importance has been attached to the worship of the *Aśvattha* tree. It is said to be the incarnation of Lord Kṛṣṇa Himself ^[16], where there is the worship of this tree it is actually the worship of Lord Kṛṣṇa ^[17]. Declaring the sacredness of the trees people are restrained from doing any kind of harm towards the trees and thus, environment is also protected.

In those days, to harm the trees in different ways was discouraged and condemned. So that people would fear to destroy trees, the *Bhaviṣyapurāna* linked the felling of trees with facing calamities, disorder and sin. ^[18] The *Padmapurāna* also declares the cutting of trees to be an offence and punishable in hell ^[19]. Censure is made by *Skandapurāna* for such an activity ^[20]. In the *Mahābhārata* cutting down of trees was supposed to be heinous action and necessary measures for atonement was mentioned. A man who committed crime by felling trees he had to declare his guilts publicly and had to go on fast for three days ^[21]. In the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* penalty for harming the trees has been mentioned. There, penalty for the cutting of branches, the trunks and the complete ruin of huge trees and those which are produced for livelihood is said as twenty, forty and eighty paṇas in order ^[22].

The animal which also is a part of our environment should be protected. They should be prevented from being killed. In the

Manusmṛti great emphasis is given on nonviolence. Killing animals for food is also prohibited. It is stated there that one should avoid taking non-vegetarian food as without killing animals it is not possible ^[23]. The Purānas also made people aware in this regard. Killing animals was regarded as a sin which led to hell. Sacrifice of cattle is condemned in the *Padmaurāna* and it is stated that he who sacrifices cattle is doomed to perish. Yājñavalkya has prescribed the penalty for the harm made towards different animals. For cutting small animals, shedding their blood, cutting horns etc. one should have to pay a sum of two paṇas, four paṇas, six paṇas and so on. Penalty is stated as double for offences relating to big animals ^[24]. Although people in ancient time used to go for hunting in the forest it was regarded as a sinful act in the *Mahābhārata*. Killing of animals in the sacrifice is also condemned ^[25]. Non violence is stated to be the supreme dharma and the best *tapas* ^[26]. Necessary atonement for killing animals is also mentioned for the removal of the sins ^[27].

Water is very essential for the life of organisms. It is important for human living and it is useful only when it is unpolluted. It is known from different ancient scriptures that the protection of the water resources was of great importance for the people of ancient India. They were very well aware of the fact that for the ecological balance it was essential to protect the original nature of water. In the *Rgveda* water is compared with a mother. It is expected to have pure water for drinking. It is also declared that water has medicinal value ^[28]. The water should be for the welfare of the people. It is wished to remove pollutants of the water of the river. It stated that there is nectar inside the water and also medicine which removes disease. It is also stated that water is the very basis of happiness ^[29].

That pure water can purify the whole atmosphere and make the earth heaven, is a great declaration of the *Atharvaveda* ^[30]. Spitting and discharging any dirty material in water have been highly condemned ^[31]. For the well availability of water the Purānas are in support of construction of ponds etc. and declare it to be a very pious activity. The construction of lakes, digging wells etc. is glorified as charitable acts in *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāna*. It is stated that beautiful benefits would be brought to those who construct them. In the *Mahābhārata* It is stated that one who causes a tank to be dug becomes entitled to the respect and worship of the three worlds. The excavation of a tank contributes to the aggregate of three viz. righteousness, wealth and pleasure ^[32]. It is warned in the *Garuḍapurāna* that one who pollutes well, ponds and tanks goes to hell ^[33].

Regarding the sacredness of the river Ganges and also certain other rivers there are various statements which are available in different scriptures. It is stated that one who drinks the water of the river Ganges he becomes purified and goes to heaven. The river Ganges sanctifies meritless men by hundreds and thousands ^[34]. Description of many rivers, lakes, tanks found in the *Mahābhārata* depicts the benefit and sacredness of water. About the sacredness of the river Ganges it is stated that this auspicious and celestial river is accessible to all times. That water of the Ganges has external value, so one should take a dip into it ^[35]. The worship of different rivers and sowing regards towards those restrained people from making them polluted.

Imbalance in the quality of air causes ill effect. Human health, animals, plants and atmosphere are found badly affected by polluted air. For the protection of various living beings it is necessary to have pure air. So, air is an inevitable property of

human life. Necessity of pure air is described in the *R̥gveda*. Air is expected to blow for the peace of mankind ^[36]. Air is for the welfare and happiness of all. It should offer longevity. Air is said to be father, brother and friend. Air is asked to bring nectar. It is also asked to bring life ^[37]. Air is asked to take away harmful things. It is also stated as the medicine ^[38]. Earlier, sacrifice or *Yajña* was performed to purify the atmosphere. In *Sr̥madbhagavadgītā*, importance of *Yajña* is well expressed ^[39]. The possibility of abnormally heavy rainfall is mentioned in the purāṇas for non performance of the sacrifice. Performance of different types of sacrifice not only pleases the god, but it is also a main source of environmental purification. The *Mahābhārata* declares that performance of sacrifice is a good source of rain. It is stated that because of the oblations offered in the fire, clouds of fumes go high in the sky due to which water pours down in the form of rain ^[40]. Certain weapons used in the war cause bad effect in the environment. In the *Sauptikaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* Aśvatthāmā and Arjuna were prohibited from using the *brahmāstra* ^[41] as the region where the weapon called *brahmāstra* is baffled by another, suffers a draught for twelve years, for clouds not pouring a single drop of water for this period.

Conclusion

Thus, the people of ancient India were aware of their surroundings in the true sense. They had the knowledge regarding the importance of environment and ecological balance. They led a life which was environment friendly. The presence of divinity in every object of nature was identified and for this it was not easy for them to harm the elements of nature, rather there was a feeling of respect for those. The great thinkers of ancient India, thousands of years ago, made such effort for the protection of the environment, so that the lives of the creatures would not fall in danger in future. In the modern time people have become conscious about protection of environment only in the recent past. Now a days environmental degradation is a global issue which has adverse affect to the entire community of the world. Exploitation of environment is noticed everywhere in the name of development. Though growth and development are essential for a nation to solve the basic problems like poverty, unemployment etc., yet, development should not be so dominant that environment gets ignored. So, there should be sustainable development where development process continues without destroying the environment, or else there would be adverse impact upon the future generation. That is why, the future generation's right also should be taken into account in this regard. So, this is the need of the hour now to bring out the tenets of environmental protection available in the scriptures, realise their importance and apply those in today's circumstances to make the concept of the sustainable development a successful one.

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11. Daśakupasamā vāpī dasavāpīsamohradaḥ. daśahradasamaḥ putro daśaputrasamodrumaḥ. Matsyapurāṇa, 154.512
12. Taittiriyaṛanyaka, 4.2.6.
13. *R̥gveda*, 1.161.11
14. Matsyapurāṇa, 59.159.
15. Anuśāsanaparvan, XXIII
16. Aśvatthaḥ sarvavṛkṣāṇām. Bhagavadgītā, X26
17. Āśvamedhikaparvan, LXVII.
18. Bhaviṣyapurāṇa, Madhyamaparva, 16.60
19. Śṛstikhaṇḍa, 56.40-41
20. Skandapurāṇa, 520.83
21. Śāntiparvan, XXXVI,30
22. Prarohiśākhinām śākhāskandhasarvavidāraṇe. upajīvyadrumāṇṇīm ca viṁśaterdviguṇo damaḥ. Yājñavalkyasmṛti, 2.227
23. Nākṛtvā prāṇinām hiṁsām māmsamutpadyate kvacit. na ca prāṇivadaḥ svargyastasmānmāmsam vivarjayet. Manusmṛti, 5.48
24. Yājñavalkyasmṛti, 2.225-226
25. Śāntiparvan, CVII
26. Anuśāsanaparvan, XLVII
27. Śāntiparvan, XXXVI.30
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33. Garuḍapurāṇa, 4.33
34. Garuḍapurāṇa, 9.26
35. Anuśāsanaparvan, XII
36. Saṁ na iṣiro abhi vātu vātaḥ, *R̥gveda*, 7.35.4.
37. *R̥gveda* 10.186.1-3
38. *R̥gveda* 10.137.3
39. Sahayajñāḥ prajāḥ sṛstvā purovāca prajāpatiḥ. anena prasaviṣyadhvameṣa vo' stviṣṭakāmadhuk. Śr̥madbhagavadgītā, 3.10
40. Śāntiparvan, CVI
41. Sauptikaparvan, VIII