

Man and Nature in Indian Thought

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Abstract

Indians have a vivid concept about the spiritual and material dimensions of man from time immemorial. It has originated from the precious treasures of Indian culture, namely the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* epics and *Puranas*. Indian philosophy elaborates on the ultimate objectives of human birth, human beings duties to environment, society and family etc. Man is an indispensable and integral component of universe. The utilization of natural resources is based on human restraint, confined to desirable needs and necessities. Nature is not a commodity to be consumed for human fulfilment. Western concept of conceiving environment as a utilitarian agency was alien to India. Indian worshipped the natural object as personifications of Gods and Goddesses. Ancient bards put forwarded balanced and comprehensive philosophy of nature as is revealed in the study of epics, *Puranas* and the

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works of Kalidasa etc. The greatest danger to contemporary society is ecological catastrophe. Globalization has accelerated the pace of ecological disequilibrium on an unprecedented scale. An urgent return to the purity of principles practiced in ancient India is the call of the hour. This return should not be in the form of fundamentalism of nature with a revivalist mindset. This paper explores in detail the different dimensions of environmental philosophy practiced by Indians.

Introduction

Indian philosophy has always had a unique concept about the spiritual and physical life of human beings from time immemorial. It originated from the *Vedas*, *Puranas* and epics of India. Indian culture clearly defines the duties and responsibilities of man to nature and other creatures in the universe. This concept originated not only from *Vedas* and epics but also from the great Indian classical literary works of *Kalidasa* and *Bhasa*. In Indian concept there is no separate existence for man apart from nature. Man and nature are not radically different entities in Indian thought. It is much relevant a debate about on so a serious topic in the context of environmental crisis.

Vedic concept

Rig Veda the first literary work of ours presents the noble concept of man nature relationship in the universe. The hymns of Rig Veda view man only as the manifestation of the same reality of cosmos with equal importance. It is deeply rooted in the Indian philosophical concept of Monism (*Advaita*). “Nobody thought of an existence that was apart from nature, which is the basis of man’s existence. His duty is to protect nature and accept what nature offers”. (V. Rajeev: 2008). In our ancient tradition and in literature Nature was worshiped with same importance given to other deities. “Man and nature were in perfect harmony, enjoying the abundance and the bliss of the supreme. The sacred rivers like *Ganga, Yamuna Saraswathy and Kaveri* were worshiped as mother goddesses from ancient time. According to Vedic Tradition the cause of existence of man in the universe is due to the blessings of nature and the compassion of mother earth and her prosperity. The majority of Vedic hymns are the prayers of man to nature goddess. Rig Veda refers mainly the Sun God (*Savithav*) the source of energy, Water (*Varuna*) the god of water and other gods like *Ushas, Yama, Rudra, Puusha, and Agni* also were the manifestations gods. “In the incipient golden era, the spiritual vision, thoughts and actions of mankind were not contaminated by corruption of any kind. Man and nature were in perfect harmony, enjoying the abundance and the bliss of the supreme”. (Swami Gururethnam Jana Thapaswi: 2010). Human beings pray for the blessings and abundance of harvest and prosperity. “The Veda wants every member of a society to have

a vocation and to work not only for one’s livelihood but also to achieve noble ends. *Ushas*, the Goddess of Dawn, is associated with men’s active life.” (*Avinash Chandra Bose: 1965*)

Many of them are fertility Goddess also. Rig Veda narrates the spiritual transition of man to a stage where man and nature are one and same. This is already pointed out in the last chapters of *Eashavasya Upanishad of Shuklayajurveda*. Here it explains that all the micro and macro materials in the universe are preserved by the spirit of God. This cosmos is God itself. All the living and inanimate objects are the manifestations of God. The earth is the limbs of God, Atmosphere is the abdomen, sky is the head, sun and moon are eyes and four corners are the years. Universe & Physical mass are the two stages (phases) of the Almighty. That means all the organic and non organic substance in the universe is the manifestations of God. Worship them; live with them, because these two are one and same. This unique spiritual relation of man and nature is the core concept of Indian ecology.

The *Purushasuktha* in Rig Veda is the scientific truth of the structure and components of the cosmos. The prime cause of Vedic history is that, all the living and non living creators and natural phenomenon in the planet are the part of the divine power. “It has been believed that the very sound of the Vedic hymns, called ‘*Sabda Brahman*’, The Veda as a mere succession of sounds, sets in to motion blissful vibrations in the atmosphere and works for the wellbeing and peace of the whole world. The invocation of universal peace forms

a solemn close to *Yajnas*” (Avinash Chandra Bose: 1965).

The river, mountain, stars and trees are divine and sacred to Indians. Like Rig Veda, The Atharva Veda is also filled with prayers to nature and man’s organic relationship with the eco-systems. Among this *Bhoomisukatha* is also has equal importance. It is also known as *Mathrubhumisukthom*, as mother earth is considered as the mother of all the organic and inorganic substance in it. In Atharva Veda the earth is the holy mother and all the creatures in the universe are the offspring of the earth; the eternal sky is the universal father. The mother earth is to be worshipped as Adithi, the goddess. The noble sky is the brother and it dissolves all the sins and showers blessings on creatures. Make it remain lively as it is, this is the duty of human being. Man must not become an obstacle in the course of Nature’s journey forward. This is the holy message the Atharva Veda gives.

“*The Hindu system worship was not confined to the propitiation of Gods and demigods, for the whole of the nature were in some sense divine. Not only men, but animals and plants were and still are holly, notably the cow.*” After cow, Snake was perhaps the most revered animal of ancient India. (Basham, A. L., 1992) Even the mountains and rocks were also considered as divine. Trees were also worshipped. Each village had its sacred tree and sacred groves where supernatural powers and Goddess were present. Sacred groves are very common in South India where Serpent Gods were worshipped. To Indians, everything in the universe is divine with religious sanctity. This

shows the cult of deep eco- consciousness of our ancient people and their harmonious life with nature.

The four Vedas were brought to earth by Gods. The *Agnideva* brought Rig Veda, *Aadithya* brought *Yagurveda*, *Vayudeva* brought Samaveda and Seer *Angiras* brought Atharva Veda to earth. It is nowhere available in Indian classical literature like the *Bhoomisuktha* in Atharva Veda with a balanced ecological consciousness. The chief deity of this Veda is Mother Earth. She is cute; she is the only dependent to all the creatures in the universe. She is the never-ending resources of abundances and prosperity. The divine Vedic hymns came in to being through the worship of nature. Man also has a sense of humble dependence on nature. The Vedic hymns give the best illustrations of ecocentrism. His duty is to protect Nature and to accept what nature offers. The Vedic society was not dependant on agriculture only. “Rg Vedic society was essentially pastoral. This did not preclude agriculture although agrarian activities are more frequently described in the later session of the text.” (Romila Thapar: 2006) The Vedas emblazon that the mother earth and its eco systems should be nourished and protected. “The Hindus have received their religion through revelation, the Vedas. They hold that the Vedas are without beginning and without end....The moral, ethical and spiritual relations between soul and soul and between individual sprits and the father of all sprits”. (Swami Vivekananda: 2002) The Vedas and Vedanta philosophy are the basis of Indian thought.

Western concept

(ANTHROPOCENTRISM)

In modern and western concept man and nature are different entities. Man is the supreme and he has the power to interfere in the natural discourse of nature. In India it starts from the intrusion of colonial powers. The western concept of world is anthropocentric where man is the centre of the universe. The western concept of colonial modernity reinforced this man centred philosophy. As a result eco-centrism was replaced by anthropocentrism. “Anthropocentrism is the placing of humanity at the centre of everything, so that other forms of life will be regarded only as resources to be consumed by human beings”(V. Rajeev: 2008). The ancient ecological concept of India which is known as *Vedic or Aarsha* in other terms is the same as eco-centric. The advent of Christianity to India and its man-centred philosophy flourished the dualistic concept of man and nature. According to it man is the supreme power of nature everything in the nature is created for him and for the fulfillment of his requirements. The duty of man is to suppress and rule over all other powers in nature. But in contrary Indian philosophy man has no separate existence among this two. While the western concept of nature is of exploitation, that of India is of surrender. Only after the arrival of Industrial capitalism man starts to loot nature in unprecedented level. Nature and man are the parts of the same organic body in Indian concept. Man does not deserve any importance than other living beings in our universe. He is only a component of nature like other creatures, but when the cult

of *Yajna* was developed for the physical attainments through sacrifice and for the blessings of Gods. “The Vedic activism aimed at both the material welfare and spiritual enlightenment of the individual as well as of the society..... The Veda not only prescribes the acts of sacrificial rites but also advocates activism in general.” (*Kashikar .C. G: 1965*)

Nature in Indian classical literature

Like the Vedas the Indian classical literature also celebrates man-nature relationship. Indian epics and classical literature attributes humanness to natural phenomenon. Among this, renowned poet Kalidasa’s works are the first and foremost to imbibe a deep ecological awareness. Among the works of Kalidasa, *Abhijana Shakunthalam* stands first for the sublime man- nature relationship. All the acts of this drama debate verbally this noble idea of divine nature. There the duties of The King, human being, sages and the duties of women are connected with nature. In *Shakundalam* when Dushiyantha sees Shakunthala the first time, the King describes her beauty of her in terms taken from nature; lips as pretty and tender as tender leaves; arms as the small branches of trees; body as beautiful as a flower dazzling youth, Shakunthala’s beauty bears a close resemblance to the objects of nature. The words of Anasuya in the first act are “*I suspect, Father Kanva likes the Jasmine flowers more than you as he has engaged you for watering them.*” To Kalidasa Man and nature are one organic body. To him nature is not a world apart from the world of man. The order is first nature, then man. The reply of Shakunthala is “*The Bakula tree dazzle in the breeze with her*

tender leaves of fingers retreating back; so let me go to her.” In Shakunthalam in no way the natural objects are separated from human being. The relation of man with nature is brotherly with one sprit. This philosophy of man and nature is spread everywhere in Shakunthalam.

All duties of Shakunthala are in association with the Forest Goddess. When Shakunthala requests them to give her permission to go to her husband’s palace, Kanva replayed this words “Shakunthala never took water without pouring water to the plants and flowers. She never touches and gives pain to the tender leaves because of her affection to them. The first flowering of them is a celebration for her. So she requests permission to go to her husband’s house. When Shakunthala bids to go, she embraces the *Vanagyolsna* (wild Jasmine) and says “*May I bid fair well to this wild jasmine plant who is a sister to me?*” To Kanva Shakunthala and the jasmine plant are his children. She requests Kanva to let her know when the deer abandoned its mother and brought up by her would have its calf. How beautiful is the banks of river *Malini* and its banks that is so gentle and pure! How many beautiful scenes are inscribed in words by the great poet? This is the most sublime picture of man-nature relationship. Here nature and human being are identified.

Ruthusamhara is filled with beautiful pictures of nature that captivates man. What varied feelings, the six seasons of *Greeshma*, *Varsha*, *Sarath*, *Hemanth*, *Shisira*, and *Vasantha* stir deep in our minds! The human minds also undergo transformation as the seasons change.

Which other great poetic work has made all this as human experience?

Conclusion

Not only Kalidasa’s work, but all the poets in India also envisage the concept of an idealistic world of man nature relationship and deep eco-consciousness. The return to this ideological time is the need of the present day of globalization. Let us remember the words of Russo: Back to nature.

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