

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AT THE TIME OF VEDAS

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Environmental degradation is a great problem of the modern world. Protection of Environment is a burning problem all over the world. Every country of the world has showed a deep concern in the protection of the environment. But this concept of the protection of the environment was already present in Vedic literature. In Vedic literature we find that during the Vedic period the society was very much concerned about the protection of the environment. But during the last century unfortunately in the name of industrial development our environment becomes degraded in a very alarming rate. The ancient Vedas have several references 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 Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 defines the environment as follows: 'Environment includes water air and land and the inter-relationship which exists among and between water, air and land and human beings, other living creatures, plants, micro organisms and property'. From the above definition, it can be concisely said that environment consists of two components namely biotic (living organisms) and abiotic (non-living materials) factors. The living organisms can be grouped into three types - those living mainly on land, in water and in air. The non-living materials of the environment are land, air, water, property etc.

In the Atharvaveda Veda (Prithvi Sukta, slok no.- 12), the Vedic seer solemnly declares the enduring filial allegiance of humankind to Mother Earth. "Mata Bhumi Putroham Prithivyah" : Earth is my mother, I am her son.'. It can be understood that Vedic society was the first Environmental Protection Society in the history of mankind. In Veda we find the concept that everything in the world has life in it whether it is living or non-living. Veda begins with the worship of Gods of Nature, viz. the terrestrial Gods like Prithvi, Agni, Brihaspati and Soma, the atmospheric Gods like Indra, Rudra, Maruts, Vayu and Parjanya and the celestial Gods like Dyaus, Varuna, Ushas and Asvins. This

clearly reveals that in vedic period the Humankind had clear concept of their surroundings.

The Rig Veda explains deities' viz. Mitra, Varuna, Indra, Maruts and Aditya that are responsible for maintaining the balance in functioning of all entities of nature like hills- mountains, lakes, heaven and earth, forest or the waters. The Indra, Surya and Agni are the personification of the Watery atmosphere, the source of heat and light and fire. Likewise the dawn, the wind, the assemblage of moving power and some of the natural phenomenon are personified as Ushas, Vayu and Maruts etc. Vedas perceive that any change in the nature caused due to indiscreet human activities could result in imbalance in weather, rainfall patterns, and crops and may pollute earth, air and water. There are so many hymns seeking the blessings of the five gross elements of life or the Pancha mahabhoota of nature: akasha or firmament, vayu or air, tejas or fire, apahh or water and prithvi or earth. People were careful to refrain themselves from any activities which could cause harm to the nature's bounties. It was understood that the well-being of Mother Earth dependant on the preservation and sustenance of the environment.

The Vedas viz. Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva Vedas perceive the importance of maintenance of the season's cycles that are likely to get altered due to the climate change owing to inappropriate human actions. It is noticeable that the people in Vedic Period regarded Nature and the Environment in a holistic manner and revered each of its constituents and entities by carefully preserving them. Respect to the nature and to all natural resources such as land, water, hills. Forest, other animals etc. was the first message of Vedic philosophy. Environment has been perceived as a friendly abode in the Vedic literature. For any inadvertent action leading to earth's excessive exploitation the seers prayed for forgiveness, 'Whatever I dig from thee, O Earth, may that have quick recovery again. O purifier, may we not injure thy vitals or thy heart', (Hymn No- 12 ,slok No.- 34, Atharva Veda, Prithvi Sukta). The text of vedic period always 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 Rigveda 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." The significance of water for life was well-known to Vedic seers. They knew the water cycle that can be perceived by the following hymn- " Waters

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from the ocean to the sky they carry up, they who pour from the sky upon the earth...”(Atharva Veda 4:27:4). They mention -Waters are nectars. Waters are source of all plants and giver of good health. Waters destroy diseases of all sorts. Waters are for purification. It seems that later developed cultural tradition of pilgrimage on the river-banks is based on the theory of purification from water. The ancient Indians knowing water as a vital element for life were very particular to maintain it pure and free from any kind of pollution.

Regarding the awareness about the plant life one verse of the Rigveda is very much relevant in which the deity of the forest is praised for her gifts to the mankind and also for her charm (Rigveda 10.146). They wished that forest should be kept green with trees and plants. Oshadhi Sukta of Rigveda addresses to the plants and vegetables as mother, “ O mother! Hundreds are your birth places and thousands of your shoots (Rigveda, 10.97.2). Rigveda advocates that forests should not be destroyed (Rigveda, 8.1.13). The Atharvaveda mentions some medicinal plants which are useful for treatment of various diseases of human being. For example Tulsi, turmeric, vilva, peppal etc. The Tulsi plant is worshiped by every Hindu family and one Tulsi plant is a must in the court yard of every family. The elders pour water on it so that it grows every day. The Tulsi plant is regarded the holiest of all plants. The tulsi plant is considered as the threshold point between the heaven and the earth. It is also believed that Brahma resides in its branches all Hindu pilgrimages reside in the roots. This clearly shows the environmental awareness of the people of vedic period towards the nature. The ‘Avi’ element of Atharvaveda referred as the cause of greenness in trees is considered generally by the vedic era scholars as ‘Chlorophil’. Besides, the flowers, fruits, bark and seeds of trees were also used in medicine and as protective talismans right from the time of Atharva Veda. The term ‘Avi’ derived from the root ‘Av’ and thus gives the direct meaning of protector. Hence, plants were considered as a part of the environment and their protection was the prime concern of the vedic seers. (Atharvaveda 10.8.31)

In Vedic texts the ‘Yajna’ or ‘Sacrifices’ is considered to be an important concept. It means selfless sacrifice for noble purposes. According to ancient seers Yajna contains the key to ideal maintenance of the earth system and environment of life. Manusmṛti defines Yajna that refines the body, mind and inner-self. Yajurveda and Rigveda describe the process of ‘Yajna’ as the ‘navel (nucleus) of the whole world. (Yajurveda 13.62, Rigveda 1.164.35). In the Purushasukta the creation of this universe is considered as a kind of ‘Yajna’. The

view that *Yajna* cleans atmosphere through its medicinal smoke, and provides longevity, breath, vision etc., is established in Yajurveda. (Ayur Jainena Kalpatam, Pranajainena kalpatam, Saksurjainena Kalptam : Yajurveda 9.21). Vedic texts believe that 'Jajna' helps in increasing the crop production, controls the air pollution, protects the surroundings from air born disease etc. This belief shows that the seers of vedic period knows about the effects of gases which were evolved by burning of specific substances like ghreeta, vilva etc.

The seers of Rig Veda on behalf of the earth for its principle of replenishment "You give me and I give you". They look at every entity of Nature with the eye of a friend and sympathizer. *Mitrasyaaham Chakshushaa Sarvaani Bhootani Sameekshe*". 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. In a hymn of Rig veda the seer prays to the Ashvin for their indulgence for protection against any excessive solar flare that also affect earth's temperature.

The whole world today run after controlling the man made pollution by various means of scientific processes but if the world community learn 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. Let us complete this presentation with an appeal to the whole world to take the Vedic values by heart, rejuvenate it and spread it than only our mother earth can be saved to our future generation.

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