

## **Environmental Wisdom in Ancient India**

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India is the home to almost every type of habitat - ranging from snow clad peaks of the Himalayas to the hot Rann of Kutch, from the Deserts of Rajasthan to the Tropical evergreen forests of Kerala, and the North East, a number of mountain ranges, plateaus, wetlands, biospheres river valleys, coastal areas and the oceans. This climatic and biological diversity has bestowed India a unique environmental heritage. The vast landmass of 329 million hectares of the country and its water bodies sustain an extremely rich variety of flora and fauna, comprising over 47 thousand plant species and 81 thousand animals' species, contributing to the rich biological diversity of the country.

This biological diversity and Natural Heritage of the Indian subcontinent were considered as nature's gift and protected by our ancestors. The Indian tradition of love, respect and reverence for Nature could be traced back to manu' laws, Vedas, Puranas, Buddhism, Jainism and others. **Historically, conservation was an ardent article of faith in India. Environmental values are an important and integral part of our cultural heritage.**

Water, according to Hindu mythology, is a powerful medium of purification and also source of energy. A narration in **Manuscript suggests** thus:

**One should not cause urine stool and cough in water. Anything which is mixed with these impious objects, blood and poison, should not be thrown into water"**  
**(Manuscript, 4.56)**

Our *Vedic* hymns, some of the oldest spiritual texts in the world, resonate with these values. The *Atbara Veda* has 63 verses of the Hymn to the Earth, the '*Bhumi Suktam*'. They express a worldview that highlights the spirituality inherent in nature and emphasizes a holistic and harmonious relationship between man and nature, and are among the most enlightened thoughts on the environment to be found in any religious literature anywhere in the world. Over the millennia, our sages have stressed the sacredness of five elemental components of our environment - **air, water land, fire and sky**. They had realized, in their higher consciousness, that if we fail to preserve the natural environment's sanctity, the human environment will also collapse.

**We invoke and imbibe aum and pray for ;peace and harmony in heaven; peace and harmony in the sky and on the earth; in water, herbs peace and harmony in among the peoples, rulers of the world, peace and harmony for one and all, peace and harmony , e very where and everything, let that peace repose in my inner space ,peace of peace everlasting peace ,we pray for peace.**

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The ancient science of *Sthapatya Veda* provides extensive knowledge about life supporting building and design principles. It was believed that a properly designed home will promote harmony between parents and children, better physical health, besides financial success.

The word *Sthapatya*, derived from Sanskrit, means establishment. *Veda* means knowledge. Thus **Sthapatya Veda** means the knowledge of establishing a relationship between the owner, house and/or building and the cosmic order..

Ayurveda is an *upaveda* (subsection) of **Atharva**, the fourth Veda composed during the period 3,000 to 2,000 BC. The most fascinating aspect of **Ayurvedic system** of medicine was the diversified method of treatment and cure — yoga (meditation), aromatherapy, use of gems, precious stones and amulets, herbs, diet, *gyotish* (astrology), color and surgery. It is amply evident that each of these methods of treatment had a direct connection with nature i.e. the eco-system around us.

Though *Ayurveda* came into being as a part of *Atharva Veda*, it has close links with other Vedas also. For instance the Yajur Veda, which lays down elaborate rituals to pacify the **panchabhutas** (the five basic elements of nature) for the purpose of healing both the Cosmic Being as well as the individual soul, is related to ayurveda in its principles and regulations of lifestyle.

. It aims at healing not only the body, but also the mind and spirit. Its understanding of the similarities of the laws of nature and the functioning of the human body helps to strike a balance between Man and Nature.

In ancient India, a man's life was assumed to be of a 100 years; it was sub-divided into four stages, each comprising 25 years — *Brahmacharya* (celibacy) *Garhastya* (householder) *Vanprastha* (gradual detachment) and *Sanyasa* (renunciation of the world)

Since they lived in a natural environment, the students as well as their *gurus* were concerned about its preservation. They protected trees and worshipped them as *Vriksha Devta* (tree god), the forest covers as *Van Devta* (forest god) and the rivers as sources of delicious life-giving water. The ancient people cared for wildlife too. Terms and titles such as *Nag Devta* (snake god), *Kamdhenu* (the cow that fulfills your desires) and *Kalpavriksha* (the wish –fulfilling tree) symbolized the benefits that accrued to human beings from nature and their respect for wildlife. Thus pantheism or animism, by whatever name we may call it, eventually pointed to ecological balance and conservation of nature. **Trees symbolized various attributes of Gods to the Rig-Veda seers. Association of trees, plants and animals with various Gods and Goddesses at that time testified reverential attitudes of people towards the environment.**

NEEM - SITLA, MANSA

BANYAN - SHESHNAG

**TULSI - LAKSHMI, VISHNUBELA - SHIVA**

**ASHOKA - BUDHA, INDRA**

**KADAMBA - KRISHNA**

**MANGO - LAKSHMI**

**PIPAL - VISHNU, KRISHNA**

Significance of Plants and trees to human life is further exemplified in **Varahapurana** which advocates regular plantation as a means to achieve heaven. **To be particular it says:**

**One who plants one Peepal, one Neem, one Bar, ten flowering plants or creepers. Two pomegranates, two oranges and five mango trees will not go to hell"**

**/WILD LIFE ASSOCIATED WITH GODS/GODDESSES**

**BULL (NANDI) - SHIVA**

**COW - KRISHNA**

**GARUD - VISHNU**

**ELEPHANT - GANESH, INDRA**

**LION - DURGA**

**MONKEY - HANUMAN**

**SHREW - GANESH**

**SNAKE - SHIVA**

. The festival of '**Nagapanchmi**'-snake worship, is celebrated as a thanks-giving after the harvest season. Sacred groves were maintained for purposes of worship. The love for nature has been handed down the ages, becoming an integral part of the Indian psyche.

One of the earliest, but most eloquent and authoritative conservation laws can be found in **Emperor Ashoka's** edicts of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. The edict reads like a leaf drawn from the present day law on wildlife ordaining that killing of certain animals is banned because they serve a purpose in the subtle balance of natural systems

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On the three chaturmasis, on (these) three days' during the Tisya full-moon (viz.) the fourteenth, the fifteenth, (and) the first (tithi) - and invariably on everyfastday, fish are inviolable and not to be sold.

On these very same days, those other classes of animals, (that live) in elephant parks (and) in fishermen's settlements, are also not to be slain. (Emperor Ashoka: 272-232 B.C)

The edict reads like a contemporary law on wildlife ordaining that killing of certain animals is banned because these animals play a significant role for maintaining the balance in nature.

The history of the recent past tells us that it was not only the kings or rulers of India who showed concern for nature, but even common men were deeply involved in strong environmental practices. For instance, **Bishnois of Rajasthan**, a sect founded towards the end of the fifteen century, actively involved themselves in the respect for all living things and their protection. It is believed that 360 of them, mostly women and children. Sacrificed their lives by hugging the trees to save them from the axe men of Maharaja of Jodhpur in 1730.

The **Chipko' movement**, active since 1973, is one of the most successful conservation movements in India which exemplifies local people's concern for protection and conservation of the environment, Spearheaded by the women folk of village Gopeswar in Garhwal in Uttar Pradesh. The movement has eventually saved about 12,000 square kilometers of sensitive water catchment area. Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna have become household names in the country for their commitment- and dedication to the cause of environmental protection of the Chipko movement.,

**According to Islam**, the riches of the earth is a common heritage. Therefore, the legitimate quest of development must not be detrimental to the environment but must ensure its conservation. The **Quran** is sensitive to the cutting of trees which is sanctioned only under

**In Buddhism** the rivers, forests, grass, mountains, the Sun and the Moon are highly respected and considered to be objects of adoration. One of the seven main principles of Buddhism says:

**"All things, all men and all events are inter-related and inter- diffused."**

Thus the Buddhist philosophy helps us to have a clearer understanding' of the present situation of the environmental crisis which is due to misunderstanding the place of man in affecting the present situation.

**"All beings are fond of themselves. They like pleasure, they hate pain. they shun destruction, they love life and want to live long. To-all, life is dear and hence their life should be protected". - Lord Mahabira**

**-Prince Siddhartha (later Lord Buddha)** was born under a *sal* tree in full bloom; he attained enlightenment under a Bo-tree and his *parinibbana* took place in a grove of *sal* trees in full bloom. This suggests that even the supreme events take place in a natural setting.

Furthermore, **Lord Buddha** had once said:

**A tree is unique. It has unlimited tolerance, patience, and generosity. It provides a congenial atmosphere for many living organisms to survive. It also keeps on providing shade (as long as it stands) even to the man who attempts to destroy the tree with his axe.** This statement signifies the paramount importance and value of trees, and the environment so necessary to sustain life including that of man.

**Jainism** too propagates respect for nature's creation and their protection. "Ahimsa" - one of the foremost teachings of Jainism enshrines protection of even the smallest and

In more recent historical times **Mughal Emperor Babur memoirs** (Babur Nama), **Guru Nanak's hymns on 'Baramaha'** (the seasons) and **Emperor Jehangir's memoirs** showing his keen interest in wildlife provide fine illustrations of the continuance of rich

The society which we have created is a perverted one. From Nature (*prakriti*), we have moved to perversion (*vikriti*). Insecurity, pollution and poverty are the symbols of a perverted society. In such a society, the individual lives in a state of perpetual dissatisfaction. His desires (*trishna*) **expand**. He never enjoys real peace and happiness. We have bartered peace and happiness for temporary prosperity. For peace, one has to take pills and for happiness, drugs.

How to move from Nature to culture? The answer is very simple. We have to change our behavior towards Nature. The practical way to culture from Nature was shown by Lord Buddha. The root cause of misery was desire (*trishna*). Our needs should be fulfilled, but we should not run after our desires. In order to fulfill our needs we have to sublimate Nature with the help of science and technology. Gandhi in our times reached at the same conclusion when he said, '**Nature has enough to sustain all, but nothing to satisfy the greed of anybody**'.

What is role of education in the creation of a cultural society? We often lay stress on the education of children, especially on the development of their minds. As a result of this we have created a society in which we have big minds, feeble hands and no hearts. Personalities are unbalanced.

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In the recent years we seem to have lost touch with our glorious tradition and wisdom of protecting nature. Environmental protection and sustainable development are concerns of such nature that permeate the entire humanity. Therefore, environmental education is the single most important factor that can influence and change the attitude and behavior of human beings.