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Ancient Ecological Wisdom and Its Continuity in Indian Environmental Acts

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Abstract

The relationship between human society and nature has always been guided by some ethical values that determine the right behavior towards nature. Ecology is the pivot of sustainable development because it preserves the web of life that supports all life. The Indian school of thought, particularly the Hindu school of thought, provides a holistic perspective on life, according to which human beings are a part of nature and not its rulers. The ancient texts and traditions of Indian culture provide for harmony, regulation, compassion, and respect for all forms of life and non-life, which promote coexistence and not the exploitation of nature. This has led to early awareness about nature's balance, biodiversity conservation, and the moral use of natural resources. Over the years, these ethical bases have led to modern environmental governance in India, with the increasing recognition of the intrinsic value of nature in the Constitution, environmental protection laws, and judicial decisions. This research, by establishing the continuity between traditional wisdom and modern environmental ethics, attempts to highlight the continued relevance of value-based approaches to address the degradation of nature and ensure sustainable and equitable development for the present and future generations.

Keywords: *Human–nature relationship, Environmental ethics, Indian philosophy, Hindu thought, Sustainable development, Ecology, Biodiversity conservation, Environmental governance, Constitutional values, Intergenerational equity*

1: Introduction

The 5 E's—Economics, Energy, Employment, Equity, and Ecology—represent key dimensions of sustainable development. Ecology stands as the most vital element because it includes all essential life-supporting systems which consist of land, water, plants, animals, and the atmosphere. Environmental ethics define the set of moral principles which direct human actions about the environment. It focuses on ethical behavior and responsible actions and respectful treatment of all elements that exist in nature. The Vedic period established nature harmony as the main goal for social existence in ancient times. The Sages, Saints, and Great Teachers chose to live in forests where they practised meditation. They shared their wisdom through the Dharmas, Vedas, Upanishads and Smritis. The literature from that era showed a deep respect for plants, trees, Mother Earth, the sky, water, air and animals. The Hindu religion developed through its strong nature reverence which led to environmental protection and ecological harmony. The text taught people to respect the divine presence in nature while supporting the practice of worshipping natural elements because they represent sacredness.

Studying Hindu sacred texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavad Gita, and other mythological literature consists of stories, social and moral codes, and political teachings that signify a set of guiding principles that ought to be followed in daily life. The scriptures show great respect for nature and recognize that all living things depend on the different components of the natural world. They preach that humans should lead a life in harmony with nature, protect the environment, and use natural resources only as much as is needed to meet the essential requirements of human beings. Hindu philosophy proclaims divinity in all living and non-living objects, indicating that destruction of nature will ultimately mean destruction to humanity. Showing compassion towards trees, animals, birds, and aquatic creatures is considered a duty of humans. All natural elements, such as air, water, land, sky, plants, and animals, are the creation of God, and worshipping them would, in fact, amount to showing respect to the Creator. Humans, being one of God's creations, do not have any supremacy over others but are expected to have greater responsibilities to protect and improve the well-being of other life forms. Ahimsa or non-violence is upheld as the greatest dharma, and this dharma extends not only to humans but also to animals, plants, and

microorganisms; whereas hinsa or violence is considered a sin. Natural calamities such as droughts, floods, storms, heavy rains, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tides were explained as the expression of divine anger. The scriptures further advocate purity of thought, word, and environmental cleanliness, and reiterate that all life - human and non-human - are equally valuable and share equal right to live as the belief in the sanctity of life is deep rooted in Hinduism.

Researches in environmental science were originally derived from the Vedas and ancient Sanskrit literature of India, where the interrelated elements of nature were understood with an astonishing clarity. The native theory in the Upanishads held that the universe was made up of five basic elements: earth (land), water, light/lustre, air, and ether, and nature maintained a critical balance among these ingredients. Any disturbance in the proportion of these ingredients disturbed the balance of nature and caused many problems. Animals and birds were also considered essential components of nature. The Atharvaveda recognized a close relationship between plants and the earth, where the earth was described as the preserver of creation and the holder of forests, trees, and herbs, and even declared that “one tree is equal to ten sons” because of the great importance accorded to plants. The Ramayana's Panchavati, or the holy grove (Panch meaning five: Banyan, Peepal, Amla, Neem, Tulsi; and Vati meaning grove), represented the cultural importance of specific trees. Numerous verses in the Atharvaveda also identify and extol natural deities like Surya, Vayu, Agni, Prithvi Mata, and Vanya Devi, making the cutting or polluting of natural elements a sin.

Trees were also associated with particular gods and goddesses—for example, Ashoka with Buddha and Indra, Fig with Vishnu and Rudra, Kadamba with Krishna, Lotus with Lakshmi, Mango with Lakshmi and Govardhan, Neem with Shitala and Manasa, Palasa with Brahma and the Gandharvas, Peepal with Vishnu and Krishna, and the Banyan (Vata) with Brahma. Ancient texts like the Manusmriti, which was considered the earliest systematic treatise on Hindu law, prescribed severe punishments for destroying trees and plants. The Charaka Samhita declared the destruction of forests as one of the gravest threats to humanity. Vegetation (Vanaspati) was believed to have a direct impact on the well-being of society. Tree and plant worship in Hinduism has its roots in their practical utility as well as religious beliefs and mythology. Through time, many species became

objects of sacred worship. A key element of Hindu theology is the association of various species with deities and reincarnation, with the belief that the supreme being can incarnate in the form of different species, thereby granting all forms of life a divine and revered status.

Traditionally, Hindus were advised to care for and be affectionate towards all other species as they are towards their children. Many animals and birds were associated with different gods and goddesses, for example, ass with Shitala, bull with Shiva, crocodile with Ganga, deer with Vayu, dog with Bhairava and Dattatreya, eagle with Vishnu, elephant with Indra and Ganesh, rat with Ganesh, lion with Durga, monkey with Hanuman and Rama, owl with Lakshmi, peacock with Kartikeya and Saraswati, serpent with Shiva, swan with Saraswati, and wild goose with Brahma. In Vedic India, animals served many important ritualistic and symbolic purposes; for example, the cow's milk and dairy products played an essential role in religious ceremonies and sacred offerings to gods and in fasting. The scriptures taught people that divine grace could be acquired only when nobody harms any creature and killing mute animals and birds is a heinous sin. By the end of the Vedic and Upanishadic periods, Buddhism and Jainism emerged with their stronger ideals of ahimsa and compassion. Emperor Ashoka the Great (273–236 BCE) propagated the protection of flora and fauna and imposed punishment even for killing small animals like ants, squirrels, rats, birds, and for cutting trees.

India, therefore, has been able to inherit a strong cultural heritage based on tolerance, non-violence, equity, and compassion for all living things. The Vedic philosophy of life, the Hindu religion's tenets, and the moral philosophies of early Indian thought have instilled in people the need to co-exist with nature and the environment. The modern constitutional provisions are a reflection of this mindset, such as Article 48-A, which states that the State shall strive to preserve and protect the environment, or Article 51-A(g), which states that it shall be the fundamental duty of every citizen to protect the environment and show compassion to all living things. The word "protect and improve" is significant in that it is necessary to improve the environment and the quality of life of people. The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of 1960 are still a reflection of the ancient belief that all creation is equal or that killing animals was a sin of the highest order. Therefore, mute animals and defenseless

adversaries were not to be killed, even in times of conflict.

The roots of environmental science in India go back to the Vedic and ancient Sanskrit literature on the subject, where the natural world was comprehended with remarkable clarity. The concept of the universe, according to the indigenous theory in the Upanishads, is formed out of five basic elements: earth (land), water, light/lustre, air, and ether. According to this theory, nature maintains a fine balance among them. Any disruption in the proportion of these elements adversely upsets this natural balance to create various problems. Animals and birds were also dealt as part of nature. The Atharvaveda enumerates the intimate and interdependent relationship between plants and the earth. The earth is emphasized here as keeper of creation, container of forests, trees, and herbs, and it has even been proclaimed therein that "one tree is equal to ten sons." This speaks volumes for the high value attached to vegetation. In Ramayana, the sacred grove Panchavati (Panch meaning five—Banyan, Peepal, Amla, Neem, Tulsi; and Vati meaning grove) illustrates the cultural importance of certain trees. Atharvaveda comprises many verses in praise of Surya, Vayu, Agni, Prithvi Mata, and Vanya Devi, the natural deities, cutting or polluting which have been considered to be sin.

Trees were also associated with particular gods and goddesses, for example: Ashoka with Buddha and Indra, Fig with Vishnu and Rudra, Kadamba with Krishna, Lotus with Lakshmi, Mango with Lakshmi and Govardhan, Neem with Shitala and Manasa, Palasa with Brahma and the Gandharvas, Peepal with Vishnu and Krishna, and the Banyan (Vata) with Brahma. Ancient texts like the Manusmriti, considered to be the earliest systematic treatise on Hindu law, prescribe severe punishments for destroying trees and plants. The Charaka Samhita declared that one of the gravest threats to humankind was the destruction of forests. It was believed that vegetation (Vanapati) had a direct bearing on the well-being of society. Tree and plant worship was an integral part of the Hindu tradition partly because of their utility value and partly because of religious beliefs and mythology surrounding them. With the passage of time, many species acquired the status of a 'sacred object of worship'. A distinctive feature of Hindu theology is the association of various species with gods and rebirth with the belief that the supreme being may incarnate in the form of different species, giving all forms of life a divine or exalted status.

Traditionally, Hindus were encouraged to look upon all other species with as much care and affection as they would their own children. Many animals and birds were closely associated with different gods and goddesses—for example, the ass with Shitala, bull with Shiva, crocodile with Ganga, deer with Vayu, dog with Bhairava and Dattatreya, eagle with Vishnu, elephant with Indra and Ganesh, rat with Ganesh, lion with Durga, monkey with Hanuman and Rama, owl with Lakshmi, peacock with Kartikeya and Saraswati, serpent with Shiva, swan with Saraswati, and wild goose with Brahma. In Vedic India, animals had considerable ritualistic and symbolic significance; for instance, the milk and milk products of the cow played an important part in religious rites, fasting ceremonies, and sacrifices to the gods. The scriptures underlined that a person could gain divine grace by refraining from killing any single creature, and that killing mute animals and birds was a serious sin. By the end of the Vedic and Upanishadic periods, Buddhism and Jainism came into existence, further bolstering the principles of non-violence and compassion towards all living beings. Emperor Ashoka the Great (273–236 BCE) also actively propagated the preservation of flora and fauna and laid down punishments even for killing small animals like ants, squirrels, rats, birds, and for cutting trees.

Prince Siddhartha, who became Lord Buddha, followed the principle of Ahimsa and lived in harmony with nature. Ecologically, animals and birds represent the second trophic level in food chains and food webs, assuming immense importance in energy flow. Forests and wildlife continue to be interdependent and complementary, an integral constituent of ecological balance that received due understanding and respect from ancient Indian wisdom.

The basis of environmental law is the realisation that humanity must preserve the invaluable and irreplaceable gifts of Mother Nature, which cannot be replenished once lost. This realisation emerged from the growing awareness that such reckless exploitation, wasting, and appropriation—once tolerated under common law—poses a grave threat to the welfare of present and future generations. To avoid major ecological disasters and possible extinction of humankind, the following concepts have been advanced. First, humans shall live in harmony with nature, making peaceful coexistence and a balanced relationship with the environment the central motto of life. Second, forests, lakes, rivers, animals, birds, and human beings are equal and complementary

components of the same ecological system, in which harm to one automatically brings damage to the other. Third, Ahimsa Paramo Dharma is the guiding principle behind every action, espousing non-violence to humans, trees, birds, and animals alike. Fourth, compassion for all living creatures should be a universal moral duty. Lastly, reverence for nature has to form the core of our value system because “the quality of the environment depends upon the values we espouse and the way we organise our societies.”

Initially, global environmental policies followed an anthropocentric approach. The first International Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, emphasized the need “to defend and improve the human environment for present and future generations.” This reflected a world view where the protection of natural resources was considered primarily in relation to human health, comfort, and survival. The Supreme Court of India also concentrated on the maintenance of the quality of air, water, land, vegetation, and fauna in order to protect human welfare. In such an approach, all human needs have a greater intrinsic value than those of other species, and the corresponding environmental ethics are limited to preventing irreparable damage while permitting limited use of natural resources, so long as the activity will not create irreversible damage or hazardous results. It is here that the concept of sustainable development originated—a concept that seeks to balance economic growth with the maintenance of environmental protection.

From an anthropocentric approach, the Supreme Court of India gradually adopted an ecocentric approach. Ecocentrism is a belief that emphasizes the intrinsic value of all forms of life, their interdependence, and integrity as being important, irrespective of their usefulness to humans. It posits that everything in nature has value in itself—plants and animals, rivers and forests, mountains and glaciers—and needs to be protected not for human needs, but to protect the survival of the whole biosphere. In it, human beings are considered to be one of the many species that have a dependence on nature. The ecocentric approach protects the interests of all species and natural systems, in order to maintain ecological balance that will ensure the continuity of life on Earth.

The Isa Upanishad, one of the oldest Hindu scriptures dating almost 4,000 years back, reflects the deep roots of Indian environmental ethics. It declares that “the universe along with its creatures belongs to the Lord; no creature is superior to another, and human beings

must not place themselves above nature. No species should encroach upon the rights and privileges of another.” The thought enshrining the philosophy of equality among all forms of life shares concomitances with the principles enshrined under various modern international conventions on the environment. Instruments such as the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (1980), the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (1998), the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (1982), the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES, 1973) uphold the idea that species possess not only instrumental value but intrinsic worth. India, as a signatory nation, is under an obligation to adopt measures protecting endangered, threatened, and vulnerable species within their natural habitats, thereby upholding an ecocentric perspective deeply rooted in environmental ethics.

This approach has also been espoused and applied by the Supreme Court of India through landmark cases such as *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad. Union of India and Centre for Environmental Law, WWF-India v. Union of India*. It held that protection must be given to all forms of wildlife, not merely those species which are useful to human beings, since every species-human and non-human-has an inherent right to exist. It further directed that the spirit and intent of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, must be complied with, since its protection will ensure the maintenance of the ecological chain and ecological balance. It defined 'wildlife' to include all uncultivated flora and undomesticated fauna, and clarified that every threatened species needs to be saved from extinction. Protection in situ and ex situ was thus held to be vital principles to save habitats and ensure the survival of rare and endangered species. This judicial interpretation has strengthened the ecocentric principle that all life forms possess intrinsic value and should be protected as part of the larger ecological whole.

It was also emphasized that a guiding perspective must be ecocentric rather than anthropocentric when implementing various national policies and action plans, such as the National Forest Policy of 1988, the National Environment Policy of 2006, the National Biodiversity Action Plan of 2008, the National Action Plan on Climate Change of 2008, the Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats Scheme of 2009, and the National Wildlife Action Plan of 2002-2006.

In other words, the safeguarding of environment must not be merely a matter of human benefit but long-term survival, preservation and well-being of all the species of Earth. It would call for holistic practical approach so as to ensure that protection for each species-whether of instrumental value to the human beings or of intrinsic worth-is granted adequate protection. Earlier, the focus was mainly anthropocentric, where conservation of the species was worth its weight only if they had utility value for the human beings. The contemporary environmental ethics emphasize the need for protection of all species, as the protection of endangered species would help significantly in the protection of the integrity of the whole ecosystem, and not merely the welfare of human beings. This is evident in the philosophy of the Endangered Species Act, 1973, and other similar conservation acts in other parts of the world, which give protection to species facing extinction, irrespective of their economic value. The truth is that the plants and animals that we see today are only a small fraction of the rich biodiversity that existed on this planet in the past. Many species have already been lost due to human intervention, habitat destruction, and ecological imbalance. Whatever biodiversity is left today must be protected and preserved by the current generation of human beings as a responsibility to the next generation.

CONCLUSION

India, therefore, has inherited a great cultural tradition of tolerance, non-violence, equity, and compassion for all living things. The wisdom of the Vedas, the Hindu religion's principles, and the moral tenets of early Indian philosophy emphasized the need for co-existence between human beings and nature. The modern ethics of environmentalism and legislation are based on these same principles, which emphasize ecocentric values, sustainable development, and the conservation of all species. Whatever biodiversity is left today must be protected, conserved, and preserved for the future by the current generation of human beings.

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