

The Environment and Ecology as Revealed in the Vedas

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Abstract

The Environmental problem is an important topic in recent times. We all face the problem of Global Warming and the Green House effect. The environmental science and ecology are two disciplines. Ecology is an important environmental aspect which refers the close relation between plants and living beings. The Vedas are the treasure of ancient knowledge. The Vedic hymns are based on the environmental and natural component. The main Vedic views revolve around the concept of Nature. In this paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the Vedic views on environmental and ecological awareness.

Full Paper

The Environment is natural surroundings in which the animals, plants and human beings all are existed and lived. There is a difference regarding the importance of the Environment in the Western theology and the Vedic thought. According to Old Testament “And God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle and all the earth...” (1). Some western doctrine is also Man centric. Greek Sophist Protagoras was of the opinion that ‘Man is the measure of all things. After Christ, the Nature and the man are treated as two different entities. Some environmentalists are of the opinion that dualism theory of Descartes inspired the man’s prevalence over the nature (2). The environmental movement originated in the World Philosophy Congress in 1973. The Global warming is the most important issue which motivates the scientist and environmentalist to think about it. The Eco-system is injured by the Green House effect. Carbon dioxide, Methane, Ozone etc. all these Green House gases are affected by the environmental pollution.

The Vedic literature is based on the natural component. There are four Vedas which dealt with the concept of Nature and the preservation of Environment. The entire Vedic hymns are laid down the various manifestation of *Prakṛti* or Nature. The human being is the part of the Nature in the Vedic concept of environment There is no dualism between the man and the Nature. The man entirely depends upon the Nature for his existence. The Vedic Ṛṣi did not want to control over the Nature or *Prakṛti*. The derivative meaning of *Prakṛti* is “*prārabdhā kṛtirasyāḥ*”, i. e. wherefrom manifested the reality. For this reason, it is stated in Sāṃkhya philosophy “*mūlaprakṛtiravikṛtirmahadādyāḥ prakṛtivyakṛtayaḥ sapta*” (3), Primordial matter and the material cause of all physical bodies. The eternal *Prakṛti* is not manifested (*avyakta*) and subtle and beyond the limitation of time. *Prakṛti* or Nature is stated as *asat* or not manifested before Creation in Nāsadiya sūktam of Rgveda (4). The similar realisation found in Sarvādhāravarṇam hymn of Atharvaveda, i.e. ‘*bṛhanto nāma te deva ye’sataḥ parijajñire*’ (5). The Śathapathabrāhmaṇa (6) mentioned the same that the *avyakta prakṛti* or material cause i.e. Nature only remains before Creation. It is occurred in Taittirīya-brāhmaṇa (7) that there is no earth, no sky, and no ether before Creation, i.e. the manifested physical universe comes out from the *Avyakta Prakṛti* or the material cause. It has been mentioned in the Nirukta (8) ‘*digghastaparakṛtiḥ*’. Here, *Prakṛti* is applied as primordial cause. According to Buddhist doctrine of Creation the Universe comes out from ‘*asat*’, i.e. *abhāva* or *śūnyatā*: ‘*tathā hi kechidāhuḥ asatoḥ sat jāyate iti*’ (9).

The destruction of the seed causes the generation of plant or vegetable. The Buddhist is of the opinion that ‘*tantunāśaḥ*’ is the cause of the creation of ‘*paṭaḥ*’, it is the material cause of *paṭaḥ*. The destruction of the thread is not the reason behind the termination of cloth, i.e. *abhāvāt bhāvo jāyate*, an object comes into existence from Nothing, *śūnyam*. So, it is a series of causally connected momentary entities. According to Vedānta philosophy, the Universal reality is ‘*Vivarttaḥ*’ of only

Brahman, i.e. '*ekasya sataḥ vivarttaḥ*', like '*raju-sarpa pratītiḥ*'. The string is reflected as a snake without changing its real identity. It is stated that before Creation one and only Hiraṇyagarbha Puruṣa remains as *Adhipati* of all the physical matters. i.e. '*hiraṇyagarbha samavartatāgre bhūtasya jātaḥ patireka āsit/ sa dādhāra pṛthivīm dyāmutemām...*' *R̥ṣi*, here realized that '*ādyāsr̥ṣṭi*' water contains Prajāpati, the *prāṇabhūta* of all the physical entities, i.e. '*āpo ha yadvṛhatīr viśvamāyan garbhaṃ dadhānā janayantīragnim*' (10).

This *Prakṛti* causes the Creation of five physical matters or *Pañca mahābhūta* of environment. These are namely the Earth (*Pṛthivī*), the Water (*Jalam*), the Fire (*Agni*), the Air (*Vāyu*), the Sky (*Ākāśa*). All these elements of effect/ (*kārya*) are derived from Primordial cause (11) and it is also said in *Gītā*, as '*prakṛtyaiva ca karmāṇi kriyamāṇāni sarvaśaḥ*' (12). In Vaiśeṣika view, Creation means combination of atoms in different proportion.

The contact is produced due to motion of one object and not the other. Both may be in motion. Praśastapāda, a commentator on the Vaiśeṣika-sūtra gives an instance a dyad of earth which is in contact with two atoms of water which are themselves in contact and constitute a water dyad. According to Mahārṣi Kaṇāda, there are four types of atoms namely earth, water, fire, and air. These atoms are qualitatively different and each atom exists as a separate entity. Unlike Vaiśeṣika school, Greek atomism accepts only quantitative differences in atom. Kaṇāda thinks that during Creation of the world motion is arisen in atoms from 'peculiar dharma'. According to Vaiśeṣika, ether, *ākāśa*, time and ātman are not atomic, but all pervading and thus eternal (13). An atom is an eternal, a dimensionless particle and it has spherical symmetry but is invisible, '*nityam parimaṇḍalam*' (14). It is Hīnayāna Buddhism sect who accepts the existence of atom. Though, Buddhism considers that, atoms are indivisible momentary and imperceptible and the elemental units of the *rūpa-skandha*, Sautrāntikas think that atoms are a dynamic force or energy.

The Earth (Pṛthivī) as revealed in the Vedas

There are so many hymns dedicated conjointly to the earth and the sky in the R̥V. But there is only one slender hymn of *R̥ṣi Bhauma Attri* in which the earth is mentioned distinguishably, i.e. *ballitthā parvatānām khidraṃ vibharṣi pṛthivi // pra yā bhūmiṃ pravatvati mahnā jinoṣi mahini*. (15). Here, *R̥ṣi* has recognised himself as Bhauma or the son of Bhūmi, the Earth. *R̥ṣi* has glorified *pṛthivī* in his *sūktam*. The earth is strong and sublime that it grasps the rock of mountains and overhead scattered clouds for floating down the rivers. The rain falls from the sky or *antarikṣam* to the earthen bed for strengthening the roots of the plants underneath the layers of the soil. (16) Yāskāchārya gives the derivative meaning of *Pṛthivī*, *prathanāt pṛthivīyāhuḥ* (17). Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa also states the same as '*tad bhūmirabhavat, tāmaprathayat/ sā pṛthivyabhavat*' (18). The earth is symbolic of the vastness of nature.

The Earth is not merely an abode in the Vedas, but it has been treated as Mother. For this reason, the environmental elements are vividly described as in this Hiraṇyagarbha sūktam '*yasyeme himavanto mahitvā/ yasya samudraṃ rasayā sahāhuḥ*' (19) i.e. through whose grandeur are these snowy mountains or Himālaya, through whose greatness, is the ocean with *rasā* or the rivers. Also in Akṣa-sūktam, like the draught of Soma from Mount Mūjavat (20). Mount Mūjavat is mentioned as the birth place of the valuable medicinal plant Soma.

It is located on the western part of the Kabul valley (now in Afghanistan) and the south-west part of Kashmir. It is said that *pṛthivī* provides us necessary *bheṣajam* to become healthy as in '*tanno vāta mayobhuvata bheṣajam tanmātā pṛthivī tat pitā dyauh*' (21).

The grand and vast hymn of 63 stanzas of the Ātharvaṇa *Pṛthivī* or *Bhūmi* in which *R̥ṣi* Atharvā adores the earth like a child. It was the oldest universal hymnody of the Earth. The Poet laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore was so much overwhelmed by this Bhūmisūktam and he too wrote a large Bengali poem on earth named 'Vasundharā' in his famous book 'Sonar tarī' (22). *R̥ṣi* Atharvā

has observed that the earth who holds people on her lap without binding them, who has many high, low and plain levels, who bears plants enriched with many powers, may the earth spread wide and become prosperous (23). The earth has oceans and rivers for huge waters and the living beings breathe and move over there. May that earth place us in the blessings of first drink, where the universal waters flowing all around, ceaselessly day and night (24). Ṛṣi called the earth as ‘*haraṇyavakṣā*’, i.e. golden breast who feeds like a mother as in ‘*Viśvambharā vasudhānī pratiṣṭhā hiraṇyavakṣā jagato niveśanī*’ (25). He is of the opinion that the earth is the up-holder of all the store of wealth, the standing place, having golden breast and the resting place. The earth whose immortal heart is in the highest heaven, encompassed with truth, may the earth bestow upon us lustre and grant us power in the highest dominion, may the earth place us in food. Ṛṣi realised the earth as his mother and he is her son, i.e. *mātā bhūmiḥ putro ’haṃ pṛthivyāḥ* (26). Here an echo of the 19th century Bengali poet is heard, i.e. may my child always live with milk and rice (27). Ṛṣi Dīrghatamas looks on *pṛthivī* as mother who keeps static and dynamic objects securely on her lap as in ‘*sthātuśca satyaṃ jagataśca dharmāṇi/putrasya pāthaḥ padamadvayāvinaḥ*’ (28) and also without limb *pṛthivī* protects limbed animals like a mother in her womb, ‘*bhūriṃ dve acarantī carantaṃ padvantaṃ garbhamapadī dadhāte*’ (29).

Even we find the hymn of Ṛṣi Bṛhaduktha who offers his son Vājin’s dead body and the soul to *pṛthivī* for his immortality as in ‘*tanuṣṭe vājintanvaṃ nayanānī vāmamasabhyam dhātu śarma tubhyam*’ (30). After the end of the life, the person’s body rests in peace on the lap of the Mother Earth.

At present, the environmental situation of the earth deteriorates gradually. Thus, we need to be careful and also pray like Vedic Ṛṣi, ‘*devodevaḥ suhava bhūtu mahyam/ mā no mātā pṛthivī durmatau dhāt*’ (31), i.e. may I succeed to evoke all the deities and the mother earth never feel unpleasant for us.

The Heavenly Sky or Ākāśa as revealed in the Vedas

Vyoman or the heavenly sky is referred to as habitat and Brahman is indicated as *Parama Vyoman* or *āśraya*, i.e. ‘*prchhāmi vācaḥ paramaṃ vyoma*’ (32), I ask you what is the *āśraya* or *parama vyoman* of all the speeches? Ṛṣi Dīrghatamas answered it in the next mantra, i.e. ‘*brahmāyaṃ vācaḥ paramaṃ vyoma*’ (33), eulogist Brahman is *parama vyoman* or *āśraya* of all the speeches. In this way, brahmarūpa *śabda-guṇa* establishes *vyoman* as dwelling place in the Ṛk mantras and it is supported by the philosophical thought later on. Scientist Acārya Jagadish Chandra Bose said in his article entitled ‘*ākāśa spandanam o ākāśasambhav jagat*’ that the heat and the light is the electrical motion of *ākāśa* (34). Like sound *ākāśa* is the habitat of the heat and the light, such as ‘*nṛcakṣā eṣa divo madhya āsta āpoprivān rodasī antarikṣam*’ (35).

The Heavenly sky or *Ākāśa* is regarded as father in the Vedas as in this mantra- ‘*idaṃ dyāvā pṛthivī satyam astu, pitarmātaryadihopabrube vām*’ (36), i.e. giving the place to exist, *O dyāvāpṛthivī* or the heavenly sky and earth, both of you like our caring father and mother always stay with us. The seer Agastya is astonished by their first emergence and who comes earlier in this environment. But, he realises that their existence does not depend on one another. They move like a wheel for sustaining the whole universe. The Sun or *Āditya* is said as a son of the heavenly sky. Like a father, *Ākāśa* protects all the physical bodies of the environment. An eulogy has been made by Ṛṣi Gṛtsamada that the sky and the earth both confer us food and lodging, as in-‘*asya me dyāvāpṛthivī ṛtāyato bhūtamavitrī vacasaḥ sidhāsataḥ*’ (37). Ṛṣi also observed the clear and glittering sky at night, i.e. ‘*sinīvālī pṛthuṣṭake yā devānāmāsi svasā*’ (38). *Rātri* is depicted as the sister of the divinity who covers all the celestial and animate and inanimate earthly objects by her shadow like a tree. On the other hand, Ṛṣi Viśvāmitra has observed the shining dawn in the sky, such as ‘*uṣo devyāmartyā vi bhāhi candrarathā sūnṛtā irayanānī*’ (39), O divine Uṣas thou eternal beautiful chariot shine out awaking the pleasant and truthful speeches.

Water or Āpaḥ as revealed in the Vedas:

Rṣi Medhātithi praised the water in eight mantras of the Ṛgveda in which he called the water as ‘Devī’ and the ‘Mother’ too... i.e., ‘*ambayo yantyadhvabhirjāmāyo adhvarīyatām/ prñcatīrmadhunā payaḥ*’ (40). Also, in ‘*apo devīrūpa hvaye...*’ (41). The motherly water is treated as a friend and sweet milk, so, it is called ‘*madhu*’ and ‘*payah*’ simultaneously.

Water or *jalam* is regarded as medicine and the source of existence and immortality. It is said in the Ātharvaṇa mantra, ‘*apsvantaramṛtamapsu bheṣajam*’ (42). Also, in this Rk mantra- ‘*apsu me somo abravīdantarviśvāni bheṣajā*’ (43), i.e., *amṛta* or soma is produced inside the water. Actually, without water there will be no growth any *bheṣajas* or medicinal plants on earth. For this reason, water is referred to ‘*pavitram*’ or purifier in that mantra- ‘*idamāpaḥ pra vahata yat kiñca dūritam mayi*’ (44), i.e. O, Water! whatever misdeed I have done that cleansed by your purity. We find an appeal of Rṣi for pouring the water in form of rain as in, ‘*ṛtasya gopāvadhi tiṣṭhato ratham satyadharmāṇā parama vyomani; yamatra mitrāvaruṇāāvatho yuvaṃ tasmai brṣṭirmadhumat pinvate divaḥ*’ (45). Varuṇa as well as Mitra is denoted as the divinity of *Vārirakṣaka* or the saviour of water in this mantra. They are truthful and offer sweet shower of rain from the celestial region. It has been stated that, the cloud comes down from the sky as raindrop according to the desire of these divinities, i.e., ‘*tamabhreṇa brṣṭyā gūhatho divi parjanya dragsā madhumanta īrate*’ (46). Similar mantra is found in Parjanya sūktam in which Rṣi Bhauma Attri has provoked Parjanya or cloud to pour down waters for flowing forward the streams and sprinkle both heavenly sky and earth with water. The water helps to grow up grains in the soil and to quench the thirst of the living being and also to restrain the decay of the ground (47). Rṣi says in brṣṭi-sūktam, i.e., ‘*varṣasya svargā mahayantu bhūmim*’ (48). That’s why, the rivers are worshipped in the Ṛgvedic mantra. There are almost 25 rivers mentioned in the Ṛgveda, i.e., ‘*imaṃ me gaṅge yamune sarasvati śutudrī stomam sacatā paruṣṇyā...*’ here, we find famous three rivers gaṅgā, yamunā, and sarasvatī and also sutlej, irāvātī and the other branches of the river Sindhu or Indus. In the Vedic period, the gold, the attire, wool and rich horses, honey and soma plants are available in the Indus valley, i.e., ‘*svaśvā sindhuḥ surathā suvāsā/ hiraṇyayī sukr̥tā vājinīvatī*’ (49). Thus, the river Sindhu is regarded as superior in the Vedic period such as, ‘*pra te radad varuṇo yātave pathaḥ sīndho yadvājī avyadravastvam*’ (50).

Rṣi Viśvāmitra wanted to cross the rivers śutudrī (sutlej) and vipāśā (beas) along with his things of Sacrifice. But seeing the huge force of water, he felt that like two white cows licking the calves, these rivers flow rapidly. Then he prayed the rivers that he comes to them afar with cart and chariot, kindly bend down and be able to cross (51). The seer did not want to hurt the natural flow of the motherly rivers. So, he seeks permission in his Viśvāmitra-nadīsaṃvād-sūktam. Thus, we pray like Vedic Rṣi today ‘*śaṃ no devīrabhiṣṭaye, āpo bhavantu pītaye*’ (52), to quench the thirst slowly and peacefully flowing down for us, O goddess.

Wind Or Vāyu as revealed in the Vedas

The Wind is called Paramabrahmaṇ in Taittirīyopaniṣad as- ‘*namo brahmaṇe namaste vāyo, tvameva pratyakṣam brahmāsi*’ (53). The wind is an important element of environment, without it the living animals can never exit on earth. The commentator Sāyaṇa also states in his commentary ‘Hiraṇyagarbha as ‘*prāṇavāyu*’, i.e., ‘*prajāpaterdevādīnām prāṇātmako vāyurajāyata*’ (54). Marut and vāyu are stated as two separate gods in the Ṛgveda. MacDonnell called Marut as the deity of storm. Being identified with the phenomena of the thunder storm, the Maruts are naturally intimate associate of Indra... from the constant association of the Maruts with lightning, wind and rain. It seems clear that they are storm gods in the RV (55). Hillebrandt was of the opinion that Maruts and the Wind are the same god (56).

According to Yāskācārya, ‘*maruto mitarāviṇo vā mitarocino vā mahaddravantīti vā*’ (57), i.e., The Maruts have light noise and brightness or swift runner. Sāyaṇācārya said that the Maruts are actually the Sun rays and storm (58). Vedic scholar Anirvan is of the opinion that the Maruts are the varieties of *prāṇavāyu* (59). In the Ṛgveda, we find the storm gods Maruts come along with the chariot of Vāyu, i.e. ‘*vapanti maruto mihaṃ pra vepayanti parvatān/ yadyāmaṃ yānti vāyubhiḥ*’ (60). It is stated

also in the Ṛgveda that the Maruts along with Vāyu pour down the rain and tremble the mountains. It is clear that two separate functions of the Maruts and Vāyu occurred in the Ṛgveda. Mātariśvā is too called Vāyu in the Vedic mantra. Yāska said, 'mātariśvā vāyurmātaryantarikṣe śvasiti mātaryaśmāniti vā' (61). *Mātari* means the ether or *antarikṣam*. Ṛṣi Anila dedicated this Ṛk mantra to vāyu, 'vātasya me mahimānaṃ rathasya rujanneti stanayannasya ghoṣaḥ' (62). The storm is so powerful that the dust is blown away in the sky. Like Vedic Ṛṣi, we now pray for fresh air as 'vāta āvātu bheṣajam...' (63) may the wind blow like medicine.

The Fire or Agni as revealed in the Vedas

It is said about the fire that 'eka evāgnirbahudhā samiddha ekaḥ sūryo viśvamanu prabhūtaḥ' (64) i.e., the same fire is kindled in various ways in various forms like earthly fire, electricity in the sky and the Sun. The fire gives vigour and digestive power and the Sun is referred to the soul of all that moves and stands in the Ṛgveda (65). 'Agnir vai sarvā devatāḥ', said by Yāska (66). Agni and the Sun, these two are called the source of *tejaḥ* or energy as in, 'agne yatte divi varcaḥ pṛthivyām yadoṣadhīṣvapsā yajatra/ yenāntarikṣāmurvātatastha tveṣaḥ sa bhānurarṇavo nṛcakṣāḥ' (67). The *tejaḥ* of Agni pervades everywhere. The equality of Agni and the Sun are found in the Taittirīya-saṃhitā, i.e., 'saṃ tvamagne sūryasya varcasā'gathāḥ...' (68). It is also said in the Atharvaveda that the golden Sun has revealed itself as Agni, 'hiraṇyavarṇo ajaraḥ suvīro jarā mṛtyuḥ prajayā saṃviśasva/ tadagnirāha...' (69). This equality of the Sun and the Fire is said as *tvaṣṭā* or *viśvakarmā* in the commentary of Sāyaṇa (70).

Ecological Awareness in the Vedas

We find the reservation of the Forest and plantation in Araṇyānī hymn in which *araṇya* or the forest is treated as divine mother. The Forest protects all animals and insects and the resource of food, also the work place for people residing there (71). There are also reference of important seeds for cultivation as in 'vrīhayaśca me yavāśca me māśāśca me tilāśca me mudgāśca me khalvāśca me priyaṅgavaśca me mehapavaśca me śyāmākāśca me nīvārāśca me godhūmāśca me masūrāśca me yajñena kalpantām' (72). All these seeds made available by the performance of yajña and this is the prayer of Ṛṣi Yājñavalkya. 'Tato viṣaṇ vyakramat sāsānānaśane abhi' (73), i.e., *sāsān* animate and *anaśan* inanimate beings are all the extension of Puruṣa or Hiraṇyagarbha, that is imperceptible. It has been proved by the Scientists too that each and all living and non-living environmental elements are the atomic combination of the physical matter.

The animals were the essential part in the Vedic period. We find the hymns for their protection as in 'ya iṣe asya dvipadaścatuspadaḥ' (74), the Lord of these bipeds and quadrupeds. Also occurred in famous Paṇi and Saramā dialogue hymn where the robbers *paṇis* stole the divine cows and as a diplomat saramā, the divine bitch rescued them (75). Actually, *paṇis* are the symbol of personified darkness and the cows are the symbol of Sunbeam which removes the darkness. In this context, we find in the Ātharvaṇa hymn of cow as 'etaḥ vai viśvarūpaṃ sarvarūpaṃ gorūpaṃ' (76). In this manner, the Vedic Ṛṣis have close relationship with the natural environment and they kept maintaining as a part of it.

I conclude my topic with the famous 'Madhurīk' mantra- 'madhu vātā ṛtāyate madhu kṣaranti sindhavaḥ, mādhvīrṇaḥ santoṣadhīḥ, madhu naktamutoṣaso madhumat pārthivaṃ rajaḥ' (77): i.e. Honeyed wind blows, the honey sprinkles from the rivers, may the herbs bring us sweetness, may the nights and dawns and the earthly dust become sweet.

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59. Anirvan, *Vedamīmāsā*, Sanskrit College Prakashan, College Street, Kolkata,1970, pt. 2, p.558.
60. RV.8-7-4
61. Niruktam,*daivata kāṇḍam*, 7-10 62. RV-10-168-1
63. Ibid.10-186-1
64. RV. 8-58-2

65. Ibid. 1-115-2
66. Niruktam ,*daivata kāṇḍam*, 7-17
67. RV.3-22-2
68. TS.1-5-5-16
69. AV.19-3-24-8
70. RV.1-61-6
71. Ibid. 10-146-2 and 6
72. Ś.YV.18-12
73. RV.1090-3
74. RV.10-121-3
75. Ibid.10-108-11
76. AV.9-7-25
77. RV.1-90-6 and 7