

# Ecological Consciousness In Ancient India

Ashutosh Kumar Singh\*

---



---

## Abstract

This research paper primarily focuses on certain ideas of environment conservation and management ingrained in ancient India. The natural resources such as forests and forest products were found as basic source of survival for living organisms during the initial period. In the beginning, natural resources were the primary assets for the growth of agriculture, industry, urbanization etc. Later, the environment started degrading slowly and steadily due to increased anthropogenic activities. Indian civilization, one of the oldest living civilizations, has staunchly believed in being in harmony with the nature. Our ancient religious texts such as Vedas (the Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda), Aranyakas (forest works) Upanishad and Smritis contain many descriptions on the environmental conservation and management as an implicit theme. According to the Vedic traditions, every village will attain wholeness only when certain types of forests are present (e.g. Mahavan, Shrivana and Tapovan). The concept of environmental conservation and management was also prevalent in ancient India. Several Indian trees and shrubs were regarded as sacred because of their medicinal/aesthetic/natural qualities as well as their proximity to a particular deity. Religion was probably used in ancient India as a tool to protect environment and natural resources. All these probably highlight the conservation and management ethos of ancient Indian people.

**Keywords :** Environment, Management, Indian civilization, Religious texts, Conservation.

---

**(Research Scholar) Department of Ancient History, Culture and Archaeology,  
University of Allahabad,**

## Introduction

An interesting feature of all ancient civilizations was that its inhabitants realized the tremendous value of water and natural resources in human life. Each of these civilizations was located on the banks of rivers or within a convenient distance from the sea. This was to ensure a perennial supply of water for day to day activities. It is indeed astonishing to realize that at the dawn of civilization, the humans understood the significance and importance of water and surrounding natural resources. The Environment is defined as, 'The sum total of all surroundings of a living organism including natural forces and other living things, which provide conditions for development and growth; as well as of danger and damage'. We can safely say that Earth, Air, Water, Flora and Fauna are the elements of our environment. Natural resources are its gift to the mankind and to all living beings.

India is a unique sub-continent with vast variations in geographic area, topography and climate. It has a great diversity of ecosystems from the cold and high Himalayan ranges to the sea coasts, from the wet north-eastern green rain forests to the dry north-western arid deserts. Different types of forests, wetlands, islands, estuaries, oceans and plains endow the country combined with a rich blend of diversified natural settings. Natural and biological resources in the country being abundant, the kind of exploitation, they had to undergo through the ages has also been awful, leading to the large scale degradation of the environment in multifarious ways. Increased population, urbanization, pollution, deforestation, mismanagement of water resources etc. have resulted in a distraught state of India's pristine environment. Since time immemorial, the efforts of the people to conserve and utilize the natural resources in a sustainable manner have been quite exemplary. Many customary and community norms were evolved by the society to protect the environment.

Environmental protection is not a new concept to Indian. It has been a 5000 years old history and tradition for them. The management of Natural Resources is a scientific approach for utilization and conservation of land, water bodies, soil systems, plants and animals to enable the people to fulfill the requirement so that along with the present generation the future generations would also be benefited. The modern holistic methods of environmental conservation are replicated in many ancient Indian literatures. The Vedic, Jain, Buddhist and Kautilya's

Arthashastra established the principles of environmental conservation centuries ago. Our saints and rishis also give due respect to nature which can be seen in their prayer that 'maintain as in well being in summer, winter, dew time, spring, autumn and rainy season. Grant us happiness in cattle and children. May we enjoy your protection'. The Prithvisukta especially advocate man's close association with ecology and nature. In ancient Indian literature earth is honored as mother. According to Atharvaveda, earth is to be respected and protected like a mother 'bhoomi mata putroham prithivyah.' In many parts of India, communities have inherited the rich tradition of love and reverence for nature through the ages. Religious preaching's traditions and customs played a prominent role in this reference.

### Methodology

This paper is based on desktop research methodology. Since most of original ancient Indian literatures are in Sanskrit, Hindi/English translation is used. To know the culture of any era and place, we need to go through the literature related to that era, analyze the same and correlate with the current requirements. For the purpose of this paper, relevant references from Vedas, Aranyakas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Arthashastra by Kautilya have been used.

### Conservation of Nature

The culture of conservation of nature dates back to the ancient Vedic Period. The four Vedas i.e. Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda are full of hymns which explicitly advocate the supremacy of different natural power. Over centuries, three kinds of additional literature were attached to each of the Samhitas: the Brahmanas (discussions of the ritual), Aranyakas (books studied in the forest), and Upanishads or the philosophical writings. Of these, Aranyakas or the 'forest' works and the Upanishad 'Brhadaranyaka' are particularly important from the perspective of forestry traditions. Indian philosophy of PanchMahabhutas explains that the five Great Elements - Earth, Air, Space, Water and Fire (Energy) are interconnected, interdependent and form the web of life. The Upanishads explain the interdependence of these elements in relation to Brahman, the supreme reality, from which they arise: 'From Brahman arises space, from space arises air, from air arises fire, from fire arises water and from water arises earth.' These elements are also part of the environment and Indian sages have established a relationship between

these five elements (PanchMahabhutas) and five sensory organs. The human nose is related to earth, tongue to water, eyes to fire, skin to air and ears to space. The relationship establishes the fact that people need to give them the same importance as they give to their sensory organs.

Conservation of environment was ingrained in the thought processes of early Indians as evident from the teachings of Vedas. The Rigvedic hymns refer to many Gods and Goddesses that is just the personification of natural entities like Sun God, Moon God, Thunder God, Water God, rivers as mother, rain, lightning, trees etc. They have been glorified and worshipped as givers of health, wealth and prosperity. Sun worship is of vital importance in Vedic worship. Today it has been confirmed that solar energy is the ultimate source of energy that regulates the flow of energy through water chain, food chain and drives various nutrient cycles and in this way establish a control over the earth ecosystem, but it was well understood by the ancient Indians.

The Atharva Veda hymn (12.1.11) reads: "O Earth! Pleasant be thy hills, snow-clad mountains and forests; O numerous coloured, firm and protected Earth! On this earth I stand, undefeated, unslain, unhurt." Implicit here are the following principles:

- That it must be ensured that the earth remain forested;
- That humans can sustain only if the earth is protected;
- That to ensure that human beings remain 'unslain' and 'unhurt', the ecosystem integrity must be maintained.
- That albeit vaguely, it also makes a reference to ecology, economy and society concurrently.

Another hymn from Atharva Veda (12.1.35) reads: "Whatever I dig out from you, O Earth! May that has quick regeneration again; may we not damage the vital habitat and heart." Implicit here are the following principles:

- That human beings can use the natural resources of the earth for their sustenance;
- That resource use pattern must also help in resource regeneration;
- That in the process of harvest, no damage should be done to the earth;
- That humans are forewarned not against the use of nature for survival, but against the overuse and abuse.

### Conservation of Flora and Fauna

Conservation and preservation of flora also called as plant kingdom has been an integral part of Indian culture. In general there are many plants, trees and herbs which are sacred among the common people like Tulsi, Rudraksha, Bar, Peepal etc., because they are directly or indirectly associated with different Gods and Goddesses of Indian religions. Trees have been given huge importance in the ancient Indian tradition. The four Vedas are full of hymns regarding reference to different herbs, trees, flowers and their significance for nature, ecology and man himself. Trees and plants were considered as living being. To cut and harm them unnecessarily or at large scale was considered as sin. Peepal tree continuously releases oxygen in the atmosphere which is very important for human life, and therefore, such knowledge must have been put into spiritual form by our ancestors. The tradition of sacred groves was also practiced in ancient period and it is still practiced in folk and tribal communities. A sacred grove is consists of old trees generally at the outskirts of a village. Such groves were called to be revered and regarded as the abodes of Gods and Goddesses or spirits and therefore conserved with utmost care.

Fauna refers to animal kingdom. With land and plants, fauna was also protected and conserved. Wild and domesticated animals were given due respect in the ancient Indian tradition. Many Hindu Gods and Goddesses have some particular animal or bird as their vehicle (Vahana). These consist of lion, tiger, elephant, bull, horse, peacock, owl, mouse etc. The association of these animals with people's religious belief played an important role in their conservation and protection. The feeling of sacredness attached to wildlife protected it and helped in creating an ecological balance. Manusmriti has references to direct and indirect instructions about the conservation of plants and animals. It gives specific punishments for harming trees or animals.

### Environmental Conservation as mentioned in Kautilya's Arthashastra

Kautilya's Arthashastra helps in determining the environmental conservation in Mauryan period. Kautilya popularly known as Chanakya was teacher of emperor Chandragupta Maurya. This book is most secular, realistic and practical in its approach as it was designed to identify the rules and regulations which could be enforced under the law made by emperor. It includes the preservation of environment and ecology.

According to Kautilya it is the duty of king to conserve environment, ecology and other natural resources. It was done through assigning duties to different state officials. He prescribed that suitable trees and plants should be grown to preserve dry lands. He emphasized that pasture land should be protected appropriately as it arrange the food for cattle. He was of the opinion that king should conserve and preserve water reservoirs as it is the most valuable gift of nature and man can't live without water. Residential buildings, roads, commercials, cremation grounds etc. ought to be constructed in such a way that it cannot harm the ecology and doesn't have any negative effect on biodiversity. As per mauryan law, every house should have proper provision for controlling fire. In addition to this there must be proper provision in every house for proper sewage and proper removal of garbage and wastes. Any sort of violation of these rules was legally liable to penalty or punishment. Kautilya recommended different fine and penalty for polluting the surroundings unnecessarily. Doing urine and faeces, throwing dead bodies at public was a punishable offence.

Sometimes, damage to ecosystem happens due to natural disaster also. He gave a disaster management system for the same as all of the hazards can't be prevented by human endeavor. He identifies eight natural calamities i.e. disease, famine, fire, flood, rats, serpents, wild animals and evil spirits. City superintendent is liable for controlling hazard from fire. During rainy season, villages situated near the water bodies were migrated and settled to other areas which are away from flood. Kautilya also laid emphasis on mass participation during rescue work. Famine management was also noteworthy. During famine king should make a store of food and seeds and distribute them to mass by constructing forts or other works with the grant of food. It is the duty of king that when disaster actually occurs, he should take quick and specific measure in order to minimize the harmful effects on community. Help of friendly foreign government can also be taken if necessary to manage the disaster.

### Conclusion

In ancient India, protection and cleaning up of environment was the essence of Vedic culture. The conservation of environment formed an ardent article of faith, reflected in the daily lives of the people and also enshrined in myth folklore, art, culture and religion. In Hindu theology forests,

trees and wildlife protection held a place of special reverence. Cutting green trees was prohibited and punishment was prescribed for such acts.

Under the Hindu culture moral injunctions acted as guidelines towards environmental preservation and conservation. For instance, to maintain the quality of water and to avoid the water pollution, Manu advised not to contaminate water by urine, stool or coughing, un-pious objects, blood and poison. Yagyavalkya Smriti and Charak Samhita give many instructions for the use of water for maintaining its purity.

Under the Arthashastra, various punishments were prescribed for cutting trees, damaging forests, and for killing animals. The state assumed the functions of maintenance of forests, regulation of forest produce and protection of wildlife. Arthashastra also prescribed punishment for causing pollution and un-civic sanitation. The rivers also enjoyed a high stature in society. The Ashoka Edicts, especially the 5th Pillar Edict, states that how animals and birds were protected in those days.

Thus, ancient India had a philosophy of environmental management principally enshrined in old injunctions as they were contained in many scriptures and smritis. The environmental ethics of nature conservation were not only applicable to common man but the rulers and kings were also bound by them.

#### References:

1. The Atharvaveda (1895-96), Translated by Ralph T.H. Griffith, retrieved from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/av/index.htm>.
2. [www.downtoearth.org.in](http://www.downtoearth.org.in) accessed online on Tuesday, 26 April, (2016).
3. [www.indiaenvironmental.org.in](http://www.indiaenvironmental.org.in) accessed online on Tuesday, 26 April, (2016).
4. Aiyangar, K.S. (1941) Ancient India and South Indian History & Culture : Papers on Indian History and Culture; India to A.D. 1300. Oriental Book Agency.
5. Bhat, S. (2010) Natural Resources Conservation Law. Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 13.
6. Dwivedi, O.P. (1993), Human Responsibility and the Environment: A Hindu Perspective, Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies, Volume

- 6 Article 8, 1993, retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs/vol6/iss1/8>, DOI : 10.7825/2164-6279.1077. Classical India, Jemieson, D.(Ed.), A Companion to Environmental Philosophy, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2001.
7. Kangle, R.P. Kautilyan Arthashastra, Part-II(English Translation), Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi (1986).
8. Kothari, A., Suri, S. and Singh, N. (1995) People and Protected Areas. Rethinking Conservation in India. The Ecologist, 25, 88-194.
9. Kumar, B.M., Forestry in Ancient India : Some Literary evidence, Asian Agri History, 12 (4), 299-306 (2008).
10. Pande, O.P., Vaidik Sahitya aur Samskriti Ka Swarup. (In Hindi) Vishwa Prakashan (A Unit of Wilie Eastern), New Delhi, India, 1994.
11. Pandey, D.N., Cultural resources for conservation science, conservation biology 17 (2).

