

## PERSPECTIVE OF ENVIRONMENT IN HINDU SCIENCE AND CULTURE

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### Abstract

Currently people are facing environmental problems such as pollution, population growth, imbalance in environmental cycles, etc. because of the bad impacts created by human technological advancements. In Hindu teachings it has been taught how nature is formed and how the relationship of human beings with nature should be built so that the life balance can be created. Therefore, this paper raises this issue of the environment from the perspective of Hindu science and culture. Firstly the paper talks about Agnihotra in Vedic and Sanskrit literature. This paper also explicates the role of men and nature relationship in environmental awareness. Further, it also addresses how Hindu see nature as Deity as a manifestation of respect to nature. As a conclusion, this paper highlights that environmental awareness is a conscious concern of a person to his surroundings.

Key words: Environment, Hindu, Agnihotra, environmental awareness

### Introduction

The environmental awareness growing today is a reaction to the environmental chaos caused by the selfish technological achievements. Today, people are actually suffering from problems such as pollution, Population growth, and imbalance in environmental cycles etc. Therefore, humanists of the 20th cen. have anxiously stated thinking for such problems, with various dimensions.

*Paramātmā* is *nirguṇa* (without any quality), *akhaṇḍa* (whole), *advaita* (only one), *nitya* (ever existing), *nirmala* (pure), *svayamprakāśa* (self –luminescent), *satya* (Truth) and *jñāna svarupa* (wisdom incarnate). *Puruṣa* is used as his synonym.

The energy (*Śakti*) emanating from the *Paramātmā* is the nature (*prakṛti*). First this energy is *avyakta* (unmanifested). Then it becomes *maḥat* (effervescent). Next it attains

*ahamkāra* (inexorability). And it results in *śabda tanmātrās* (sound etc. qualities) and turns tangible into the *ākāśa pañcha mahābhutas* (sky etc. five elements). Of these five, water becomes all-pervading. And innumerable *brahmāṇḍas* (universal eggs or universes in spherical shape) begin floating on that water. This is the process of initial creation.

The Process of Initial Creation

*Paramātmān* (*Puruṣa*)

*Śakti* (*Prakṛti*)

*Avyakta* (Nascent)

*Mahat* (Effervescent)

*Akara* (Inexorability)

*Śabda Tanmātrās* (Sound etc. qualities)

*Ākāśa pañcha mahābhutas*  
(sky etc. 5 elements)

*Brahmāṇḍa*

*Paramātmān tejas* is inside every *Brahmāṇḍa* and gave light to the inside of that universe. Because the *Paramātmān* lighted the universe with his *tejas*, the Vedas call him a *hiranyagrabha*, *Anirudha*, *Sūrya*, *Satva*, *Paramajyoti* etc.

## I. Agnihotra in Vedic and Sanskrit Literature

The oldest source of Homa Yajña/Agnihotra ritual can be encountered in the Vedic scriptures, mainly *Rgveda* (X.66.8). Similarly, it can be found in the *Atharvaveda* (VI.97.1) and others which are traditionally known by the Hindus in India as Yajña or Yaga. Therefore, when we hear the Hindus in India perform a Yajña or Yaga is no other than the Agnihotra although the lexical meaning of Yajña or Yaga is much broader than the Agnihotra. Lexically, the Agnihotra (masculine, neuter and feminine) is a sacred offering presented to Lord Agni (sacred fire), especially milk, milk oil and sour milk. There are two kinds of Agnihotra conducted regularly 2 times a day, namely in the morning and evening (*nitya* or *nityakala*) and the incidentally held Agnihotra (*Kāmya* or *nāimitikakala*/ Monier, 1993:6).

Another term for Homa Yajña/ Agnihotra is *Huta* (offerings to Lord Agni). Therefore, we also know the term *Hotṛi* which also means fire. Agnihotra is also called *Hayan* and *Havani*

meaning spoon (which in Sanskrit is called *Juhu*) used to pour liquid offerings. The name *Homa* implies liquid offerings poured into the sacred fire (Loc. Cit.). Other sources on Agnihotra ritual are the books of Brahmana such as *Kausitaki*, *Sathapatha* and *Aitareya Brahmana*. Furthermore, when we see Sutra books specifically about *Kalpasutra*, *Griyasutra*, *Srautasutra* and others, we always find information on the importance of Homa Yajña / Agnihotra ritual. The books *Srautasutra* (*Asvalayana* S.S.II.1.9, *Sankhayana* S.S.II.1, *Latyayana* S.S.IV.9.10, *Katyayana* S.S.IV.7-10, *Manava* S.S.15.1., *Varaha* S.S.14.1., *Baudhayana* S.S.II, *Bhradvaja* S.S.V., *Apastamba* S.S.VI., *Hiranyakesi* S.S.III.1-6, *Vaikhanasa* S.S.1., *Vadhula* S.S.I. *Vaitana* S.S.5-6) describe various forms of Homa Yajña / Agnihotra ritual which can be generally described as follows:

*Om Bhur Bhuvah Svah Om Jyotih Jyotih Surya Svaha Om  
Bhur Bhuvah Svah Agni Jyotih Jyotih Agni Svaha*

## II. Role of Man and Nature Relationship in Environmental Awareness

The ancient people were aware of nature and very much connected. We find that ancient people belonging to various cultures were showing much concern to the environment in which they breathe in.

1. The ancient people were not suffering from man-made environmental chaos. Secondly, The subject matter of these texts may be religion, medicine, law or literature. However, since any literature cannot conceal impressions of culture all these texts have precast notions about their environment. What we have to do is to peep into the minds of these people and have to trace the relation between man and other environmental factors. In these texts we may not get direct reference like “Do not kill animals, killing animals means killing variety in nature. However, we do get references as” Do not kill animals, it may lead to *adharma*. With the help of different concepts like *dharma-adharma*, *pāpa-punya* etc. those people have created a positive view about nature which is the slip off desideratum of the

humanists of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our task is to unveil these masks by pointing out the logical reasons behind these.

2. There are certainly some concepts which are totally irrelevant today because of the changed social condition and are still creeping up in the thinking of a lay man and must be removed by logical thinking. For example –a) *bahuprajatva* i.e. abundant progeny was honored in ancient India. At that particular time it was the necessity of a family for various reasons. But it is totally irrelevant today since the whole world is harassed by population growth. B) Animal killing. This practice is still prevailed all over India, of course in a certain layer of society. We find descriptions of *naramedha*, *aśvamedha* and *paśuyāga* ( i.e. respectively killing a human being, killing a horse and killing normally a goat) in Vedic literature. Today, we find that in Vedic sacrifices *piṣṭapaśu* i.e. an animal made of flour is substituted for real animal. In later Sanskrit Literature a strong hatred for *paśuyāga* is depicted.

Vedic person has crossed his primitive stage, he had developed his intellectual faculty, he was utilizing nature for his benefit. His life was flowering with nature and was mostly dependent on nature. This fact is well evident in the creation myth. It is said that the whole world is a creation of *yajñīya-puruṣa* (a person born from the sacrifice.) He has created the earth, air, water, light and space etc. from his body. Also he has created various creatures like horse and goat etc.

3. Man wishes for the well being of other creatures and plants along with himself. In one verse he describes Lord Rudra as medicine for cows, horses & goats and human beings.

*bheṣajamasi bheṣajam gave'scāya puruṣāya bheṣajam/ sukham meṣāya  
meṣai// ŚYV 3.5 a*

In another verse he wishes wellbeing of *dyāvāpṛthivī* (Earth & heaven) *antarikṣa* (Ether) & plants. He does not want these to be destroyed. His request to horse is as follows:

*śivo bhava prajābhyastvamanirah /  
mā dyāvāpṛthivī amiśocīḥ mā vanspatīn // ŚYV 11.45*

While he cuts trees for the sacrificial post, he thinks that the falling *yūpa* i.e. sacrificial post should not harm heaven and ether. He says:

*dyām mā abhilekhīḥ, antarikṣyam mā himsīḥ pṛthivyā sambhava / ŚYV*  
S.43

Do not disturb heaven, do not harm the ether. He does not want to destroy the roots of plants. He says- *he auśadhyaḥ, tava mūlam mā himsiṣam /*

‘ I shall not destroy your roots.’

### III. Nature as Deity

Since he respects nature, he has deified almost all factors of environment i.e. *dyāvāpṛthivī*(heaven & earth), *agni*(fire), *parjanya* (rain), *uṣā*(dawn) *naktā*, (night) *mitra* (Sun) *varuṇa*(follower & supervisor of the cosmic order) etc.

### IV. Love towards Nature

In the Vedas love towards nature is very much shown as it was a part and parcel of the then society. Everybody was interrelated to each other for mutual cooperation and the necessity was for protection of nature. The earth, water and fire were regarded as Gods. The seers calls *pṛthivī* (earth) as *mātā* and they have motherly feeling towards water also. He says, *namo mātṛe pṛthivai' āpo asmān mātaraḥ śundhayantu'*( Mother water may purify us).

Sometimes he expresses his friendly and loving feelings towards water and tress. *sumitriyaḥ āpaḥ auśadhayaśca naḥ /<sup>1</sup> ŚYV.6.22.*

### V. Tender Feeling towards Plants

In passing, various trees are referred to; they are  
Khadira, Bilva, Palāśa,

Nyagrodha, Udumbar, Ásvattha, Plakṣa and some plants and grains like Yava, Priyaṅgu, Mahāvīrhi, Vīrhi are enumerated. While describing the big trees, the author of the AB has in his mind the smile of four classes in the society and political hierarchies of social power like *bhaujaya*, *svārājya*, *vairājya* etc. He calls Palāśa the origin of all vanaspatis. The KB identifies soma with palāśa. Both authors have in mind a division or classification of the trees, viz. auśadhi and vanaspati- cf. KB2.7. It is told in AB2.1(35) that as the priest says the offering verse to Agni in Prāyañyā īṣṭi, from the south the plants come first, as the plants are related to Agni.

Mainly plants are praised for their medicinal use e.g. *yūyam emam me agadam kṛtam* (ŚYV 12.76)<sup>2</sup>, “you have healed my patient.”

A Vedic person describes plants as *mātaraḥ* mothers and *devīḥ* Goddesses. *auśadhīriti mātaraḥ tadvo devīrupabruve* ŚYV12.76<sup>3</sup>. O plants, I pray you as mothers & Goddesses. Plant is prayed as-

*dīrghāyuste auśadhe khanitā yasmai ca tvā khanāmyaham/ atho  
tvam dīrghāyurbhūtvā śatavalśā virohatāt//*

One who is digging you (for medicinal purpose) should live long and spread with hundred sprouts.

## VI. Prosperity through Animal

We clearly notice that paśu is considered to be the most valuable wealth. Cattle was indeed very much precious to old Indians as it formed the very wealth or life of them. All the sacrificial activity was mainly based on the cow and other home- quadrupeds. Therefore, in every possible way, the authors of these two texts have described paśu. They call it the sacrifice, the food and what not. Moreover, we find reference to aśva as an ideal for speed and aśvatara as the best carrier of heavy loads. The Vedas have described about the role of cows for a safe place to grow harmoniously. All the products of cows are quite helpful for the holistic growth of society whether living or nonliving. There are many cases where the cows

are respected like mothers and worshiped like goddesses. We may prosper with male progeny, with cows & bullocks; with horses and with many prosperous things. Let us prosper with bipeds & quadrupeds. Let the Gods lead our sacrifice according to the seasons.

## VII. House for Environmental Preservation

The house is the basic requirement of a human being. How to build the house is the ever relevant question. *AV.* 7.83.1<sup>4</sup> describing the construction of a house provides an ideal answer on it. The seers ask Indra to give such a house, that it will ward off heat, cold and rain and is imperishable and last long. Though the verse is addressed to Indra, it forms part of the section which deals with the king's duties it can, therefore, be interpreted to mean that the king should provide such houses to the citizens as are dispellers of the cold, the heat and the rains. This verse occurs in *RV.* VI.49.9<sup>5</sup> also. The significant word here is *tridhātu*. Sāyaṇa interprets it to mean 'threefold, three-storeyed (*triprakāraka*, *tribhūmika*) etc.

## VIII. Selection of land

The deity for the land is called *kṣetrapati*. Really speaking while choosing the land for building a house one accepts airy surrounding. But sometimes we don't find such airy spot or even an airy spot can also become polluted afterwards. In such circumstances we require a remedy to purify the spot. It is interesting to inquire what remedy the ancient Indians were using and we find that since the times of the Vedas fire is used as the means of air purification. The deity is Agni. *AV.* 1.2.7.5 and 6<sup>6</sup> requests Agni to accept the fuel which was poured in, so that the air will be purified and protected from the black magicians, the blood-eating animals and the poisonous insects. Actually the importance of Agni for many other purposes is already emphasized since the times of the *RV.* Agni occupies the second important position in the Vedic pantheon.

## IX. Air

The Vedic seers also recognized this importance. In every place wherever *vāyu*, the deity of air, is invoked, He is asked to become so pure that no impure things will ever dare to enter into the atmosphere. *AV.IV.5.25.17* states that wind is the support of all beings. Wind is equated with the highest self, for the very reason that it destroys the enemy, i.e. bad things, protects the people and impels them for activity. In order to take the advantage at these qualities of the wind, he is invoked to keep the surroundings pure. The air pollution or noise pollution that are seen in the present days were not noticed at that time but various types of winds were mentioned in the Hindu Literature. The wind takes the water from the four oceans and imparts it to the clouds in the sky. The clear-cut perception of the natural phenomena is noticed here (*Mahabharata XII.315.39*). The air at present is polluted and we face many breathing problems which are new to the modern world like Covid-19. This is the result of modernization. Sacrifices and rituals can solve this problem to a great extent.

## X. Water

The word like water also has many synonymous words like *ap*, *jala*, *udaka* etc., which have different connotations. The water is also called as *jīvāna*, which is very appropriate. The reason is quite obvious. The peculiarities of the water are described in the *Av.1.1.4.48*. This verse with slight change also occurs in the *RV.1.23.19*.<sup>9</sup> Here Sāyaṇa explains all the qualities of the water. The first one is that the water contains the *amṛta* 'ambrosia'. The word is intentionally kept without translation, for the word *amṛta* means literally 'immortal', but in this context, 'a drink causing immortality'. This word *amṛta* here is to be interpreted in an environmental context and not in the philosophical i.e. *Upaniṣadic* sense. We all know what is called 'the water cycle'; the water changes into steam, the steam into the cloud, and the cloud again into water. So in this way also the water does not dry or die; it is *amṛta* i.e. immortal. Again there are medicinal properties in the water. The food destroys diseases like hunger, weakness etc; this food is available through agriculture and the agricultural progress depends on the water. There is thus a very close relation between the water and man; all the peculiar epithets in the Veda, which are given to the water exhibit the environmental

awareness on the part of the Vedic ṛṣis. Natural calamities due to rain are like excessive rains, drought, invasion of locusts, rats' infestation, parrots and foreign invasions. These were the calamities faced by the human beings and they were supposed to be the natural calamities, one could not afford to desist them. Here the same germs can be noticed of course, pollutions are of different natures.

Herbs and plants which are dependent on water are the life- companions of the human being. This type of attitude can be seen in *AV.* VI.9.96.1,<sup>10</sup> which supports the *Rgvedic* statement. The first line of the above mentioned verse is in *RV* X.97.18<sup>11</sup> and the second line is in *RV* X.97.15.<sup>12</sup> Soma is the significant word here.

Soma is also connected with the ocean; naturally the water is the only cause for the growth of the herbs and plants. Other words are quite clear except the *amhas*. Because *amhas* means sin. But the problem is when it is connected with the herbs it can be interpreted to mean the disease in general i.e. physical as well as psychological, because the sin can be interpreted as a sort of psychic disease. It is also to be noted, in the connection that the herbs and plants were also used for oblations in the fire. From a modern point of view, that they have a direct relation with the disease is the established fact. But the Vedic people seem to have gone a step further, and discovered that the herbs and plants are capable of removing the sin also. The word *amhas* is used in *RV* and *Vajasaneyi Samhitā*. While commenting on *Rgvedic* verse Sāyana doesn't explain the word *amhas*, but *Mahīdhara*, the commentator of *vas* explains it as 'the disease'.

## **XI. Quest for Peace:**

The main theme underlying the great Epic Mahabharata emphasizes that unscrupulous and unethical conduct, duplicity and evil deeds will never pay. One can achieve perfection and reaches God solely guided by the twin factors Righteousness and Truth (i.e. Dharma and Sathya). The Epic, a mammoth edifice with devotion as its foundation projects Vidhur's

intellectual acumen, Kunti's sagacity, Gandhari's chastity and other spiritual values. It is an encyclopedia of laws and rules relating to the preservation of character.

Hindu Dharma has laid down the modes of repayment of our debt of gratitude. To Gods, this can be done by the performance of Yagnas and Poojas. Rishis can be satisfied by the study and recitation of even portions from the Vedas. Our duty towards the deceased forebears is to conduct ceremony. The eatables offered during the Shraddha are delivered to them in the form of Amrutha. Lastly, while living in society, we should sympathize with the people in distress and try to do our best to mitigate their suffering.

We come across the good wishes expressed by the sages like Madhuvata, Rutayate Madhuksaranti Sindhavaha etc. The Vedic santipatha mantras gives us the atmospheric unity and the unity of the whole universe.

## **Conclusion**

The role of the above references of human relationship with natural elements is doubtlessly religious. Now where Vedic people have used terms parallel to ecosystem, or ecology etc. In such a condition could we label these people as 'environmentally aware? People often created an idea of man and nature relationship and showed their awareness to their surroundings more forcefully now a days. From this we can say environmental awareness is a conscious concern of a person to his surroundings. The point is, that the religious & superstitious relationships with nature can be utilized more forcefully in promoting environmental awareness so far as a layman is concerned. If the customs, myths, legends which show ties between man and nature, many such cases of those relations could be collected from Vedic literature. Fire is helpful for the air purification. Wind is the life – force of living beings. Therefore, the pure wind is an essential requirement. There can't be any substitute for water, in either way, at least in India. So also herbs and plants are the friends of mankind. Nobody has neglected it. All this shows that our ancestors were fully

aware of the environment and because of this their most proper attitude towards nature, they did not face the problems, which now –a-days we are facing.

### References

1. ŚYV.6.22
2. *Ibid.* 12.76
3. *Ibid*
4. AV. 7.83.1
5. RV. VI.49.9
6. AV.1.2.7.5 and 6
7. *Ibid.* IV.5.25.1
8. *Ibid.* 1.1.4.4
9. RV.1.23.19
10. AV. VI.9.96.1
11. RV X.97.18
12. *Ibid.* 97.15

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