

# ECOLOGICAL ETHICS IN THE VEDAS: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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**Abstract :** The objective of the proposed paper is to examine the attitudes and behaviours of the Aryans towards nature. I intend to draw the attention of the historians towards our cultural past in new perspective, i.e. the Vedas Compendia (Samhita) because there are solutions of various problems concerning ecological and environmental consciousness as described in the texts. The facts discussed in the Vedas are mostly the outcome related to the study of nature and man's place in the universe. In fact, the Vedic hymns express deep communion with nature. Nature is to be understood as a friend, revered as a mother, obeyed as a father and nurtured as a beloved child.

**Keywords:** Environmental livings, Behaviour, Nature, Cultural Past, Ecological ethics.

The proposed paper is an attempt to identify certain patterns of ideas which complement the history of environmental livings in Vedic India. Its purpose is to assess the attitude and behaviours of the Aryans towards nature.

Here, I intend to draw the attention of the historians towards our cultural past, especially the Vedas, because we comprehend that there are solutions of various problems concerning ecological and environmental consciousness. The facts discussed in the Vedas are mostly the outcome related to the study of nature and man's place in universe. It is imperative to bring out all the facts to analyse the scientific basis for understanding how the ecological and environmental consciousness emerged among the Aryans. This still leaves space in our understanding of its 'Subjective' side which has elements of particular aspect covered in. To quote Dr. N.S. Rajaram, "If there is one lesson to be drawn from our study of ancient world, it is that ecology is the master of history. The effects of ecology may not be discernable in the history of countries that can be measured in centuries, but become all important in the case of civilizations like India and Egypt that span millennia."

India is the birth place of Aryan civilization which is based on values and ethics. Aryans laid stress on study and practice of ethics. Indian Vedic culture, 5000 years ago, had reverence for environmental resources. Indian philosophy promoted values and harmony with nature. Earth is considered as mother and all the living beings are its offsprings, vegetation is sacred. A

strong feeling of man's participation in the universal order pervades the Vedas, man is inseparable from his cosmic environment, he is not distinct from it but imbued in it.

Vedic hymns express deep communion with nature. Nature is to be understood as a friend, revered as mother, obeyed as father and unturned as a beloved child. In fact when Aryans entered in Saptasindhu land of seven rivers, they were nomads and fortified by nature a friend, revered as mother, obeyed as father and nurtured as a beloved child. In fact when who depended on natural objects for their survival. This resulted into their over consciousness regarding nature and environment. It is interesting to note that their vajanashalas or laboratories in open areas and enchantment of hymns while putting a mixture of fumed natural product and ghee into the fire, was a technique to make their surroundings pollution free and perfumed. It is the triumph of mind over the environment.

Ecological ethics are defined as the code of appropriate behaviour towards ecology. In philosophical terms ethics are meant for the concept of the 'Good'. Ecological ethics has the potential to help in creating a social order which integrates the economic development with ecology and environment protection, science and spirituality, material and ethical progress. While unfolding the pages of Vedic culture, we come across the fact that the ecological ethics are integral to the Aryan societal order. Though ecological ethics are an inseparable part of Aryan history yet it virtually does not find any place in scholarly work done by modern historians particularly in this area.

The present paper has immense importance in the cultural study of ancient India, with a purpose to examine the place of ecological environmental ideas prevalent in Vedic society. This study has relevance in modern times as the efforts done by the global community for prevention of environment deterioration has not achieved the results. Even years after Stockholm and Rio de Janeiro conference world's environment has deteriorated further and ecological imbalance intensified. The answer for this situation lies in the study and understanding of our ancient ecological values. Thus it becomes imperative to study and analyze our ancient literary sources, particularly the Vedas from this angle.

Former American Vice President, Al Gore in his book *'Earth in Balance'* stresses that road to economic prosperity passes through environment consciousness when this is becoming a global crisis. He writes... "to save the earth environment, it has also led me to understand a deeper kind of inquiry, one that is ultimately an investigation of our civilization".... If it is considered that sustained development or developed country is to be carved out of exploring past and the environmental awakening, then why not a developing country like India should explore their glorious past especially the Vedas where all round development viz. physical and spiritual, social and political, religious, economic was based on ecological ethics. Moreover its scope is vast where the whole of the Hindu philosophy, i.e. the holy Vedas, the *Rig Veda*, *Samveda*, *Athrvaveda*, *Yajurveda*, etc. should be studied exclusively under the above said title. An attempt should be also made to enumerate the reaction of the Aryans towards

various elements of nature. The study has a lot of potential to cover natural resources and man's judicious participation in exploiting these resources in the Vedic age.

The ocean of history has various whirls of historians, their approaches and views but surprisingly no one has taken up a serious attempt to study the historical literature in this perspective. This area of study has got the attention of sociologists and philosophers of the west as well as of India. The efforts done by Lance E. Nelson's edited work *Purifying the Earthly Body of God* shows the relation between religion and ecological concern in Hinduism. This book covers the most relevant aspects of Hindu tradition and searching out its implications. Another scholarly work of M. Vannucci, *Human Ecology In the Vedas* is an attempt to reconstruct the history of ecology in the Vedas.

The study of the *Rig-Veda* reveals that the ancient perceptions on the universe, nature, cause and effect relationships and how sages came to revere even adore nature in its different manifestations and wittingly and unwittingly evolved an environmentally friendly culture. The tope which is very much in the paradigm of history has been ignored by the historians. There are a few scholars in history who are giving a drastic turn to ancient history and historiography viz. N.S. Rajaram's *The Politics in History*, Bhagwan Singh's *The Vedic Harrapans* and K.D. Sethna's *The Problem of Aryan Origin, from an Indian Point of view*, but they deal with the topic partially not wholly. In 1992 Mr. Banwari did a valuable work on development of environment consciousness among Indians, under the title *Panchvati*, however his study lacks historical perspective of the theme.

Jeanie Miller's Book: *The Vedas-Harmony, Meditation and Fulfilment*, Ananda Coomaraswamy's *The Dance of Shiva*; Pandit Satyakam Vidyalankar's *The Holy Veda*; Narang Sudesh's *Atharva Vediya Prithvi Sukta* also deal with the subejet not wholly but partially. The approach during study remains quite subjective to their vested interest. One has to take special care to explore Vedic people and their response towards environment or no general accord has been reached on the above said topic. In fact, the modern dilemma of the destruction of nature has marred the sprit of conservation of our ecology. Much is to be explored for the awakening of modern man of India as well as world regarding ecological ethics.

Environment played a great role to design the destiny of Indian culture, philosophy and heritage. Positive attitudes of contemporary people towards nature resulted into literary development. These literary piece, viz. Four Vedas, 18 Puranas, 108 Upanishads and 3 Smrities & many more are the store houses of their knowledge. The whole study is based on primary source materials which are available in various archives, libraries, temples, ashrams and Arya Samajas. These sources have to be studied while keeping in mind the research methodology of our discipline because A research material related to the study is full of mythology. Above all this study is of primitive unscientific age, to explain various phenomenon of nature with which man's confrontation resulted into aggregate of animated ethics. There is a need to analyse each and every entity which has to be analysed textually

and conceptually to make a meaningful coherent, conceptual and sound study. Moreover till now no general accord has been reached on the question of ecological consciousness among the Vedic folk. An attempt has been illustrated to establish objective and causal relationship among animated deities and the Vedic Rishi's consciousness about surroundings.

My goal in present paper is to offer an alternative approach to ancient Indian History i.e. to study the Vedas particularly to explain the concept of ecology and ecological ethics. How these ecological ethics are intertwined and evolved from ancient literature, i.e. the Vedas has been discussed in the light of their holistic approach of the Vedic-men towards nature. The Vedic concept of God is perfectly ethical and, hence, the Vedic verses uphold high moral values of life and there is an idea of invoker of the Lord by evoking nature's bounties, known as deities, Deva, Vishvdevas.

Travelling through the Vedic age one can easily reach the concerned Bhumi maintaining Sanity and Virginity. The Vedic hymns to the earth Prithvi Sukta, are unquestionably the oldest environmental invocation to be studied analytically.

*Apah* (Water) is considered nectar-medicinal essence, bane for mankind in the Vedas. There is an easy perception, that is accumulated wealth of Rishis i.e. Vedic hymns regarding *Apah*. Aryan way of purification of third essential component of ecology Air (*Vayu*) was considered immensely important. I presume these Rishis or the writers of the Vedas were staying in the forests and forest life used to be polluted by jungle rule, 'might is right'. Hence they brought out a method to purify Air (Breath) and hence evoked *Vayu*.

So ecological ethics are symbolical triumph of mind over the environment. The main purpose of this paper is to bring out, how and when idea of ecological ethics began to take shape among Indians. The whole study is a long journey of a man from nomadic to civilized human being and his response towards nature and natural objects. How this response resulted into the worship of natural objects, the sun, the air, the water, the earth, the trees and so on. With the passage of time, human dependence on natural objects resulted into the birth of 33 crore deities and philosophies viz. monotheism, polytheism and materialism among Indians.

In fact, I hope, when Aryans came to India, the circumstances compelled them to follow a mixed pastoral and agricultural economy in which cattle played a prominent part. The former prayed for increase of cattle and agricultural production. Priestly class prayed for natural purification. Thus the order of nature was an ultimate resort. Vedic men were conscious about their surroundings for spiritual, physical and material prosperity. The conscious voice resulted into cosmic creation of universe and world's first grand work in the praise of God, Nature and Man. The nature was the most important weapon to achieve his livelihood and after death the Rig Vedic people would not go to heaven or hell but either to the house of clay or remained in plants. It is to be traced out in 900 B.C. why later Vedic man became more vocal for natural objects when he talked of transmigration of soul, i.e. the repeated passage of the soul from life to life. The departed souls were given new physical identities

according to their Karmas i.e. animals, insects, plants... There was role of Agni, Apah and Vayu in the origin of asceticism which was not merely a means of escapism but it had a positive aspect to attain knowledge in the lap of nature. Hence the Vedic texts refer to nature's eternal history but not the history of a human achievement. Thus, we may conclude that the Vedic texts personify 'Nature' and attribute a divine quality to ecological entities.

The Vedic Aryans indicated that they were aware of their reliance on and relationship to something greater than nature by personifying and worshipping nature things. Hence, the earth and its resources were revered and protected at all costs as sacred being. According to the Vedic scriptures, natural resource exploitation and harm to environmental degradation had ill effects on human existence. The Vedic customs praise God's creations and maximize humankind's access to its resources. The Vedic seers and sages also discuss the elements of nature, which make up the world.

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