

ECOLOGY AND CONSERVATION IN THE BHUMI SUKTA OF ATHARVAVEDA

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Abstract

Vedas the oldest source of Indian culture and tradition. They propound the most complete, holistic perspective of the universe. For our present global problem of ecological imbalance, it is necessary that we approach our fund of ancient Vedic Knowledge so that some integral means towards the goal of sustainable growth be achieved. In this present paper modest attempt has been made in the same direction.

Ecology is the study concerned with the interaction of living organisms and their environment while conservation means the management, protection and preservation of earth's natural resources and the environment. In the Vedic world view all life in the cosmos is inter-related and interwoven; the process of transmutation and cyclic degeneration and regeneration of life is an accepted postulate. The Man-Nature relationship is at the center of the Vedic vision enunciated through sacred incantation and articulated as rituals for repeated reminding of the need to sustain and foster the ecological balances of Nature.

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Ecology is concerned with the interrelation of living organism with their environment, while conservation means the management, protection and preservation of earth's natural resource and the environment¹. In the Vedic world view all life in the cosmos is inter-related and interwoven, the process of transmutation and cyclic degeneration and regeneration of life is an accepted postulate. The Man-Nature relationship is at the centre of Vedic vision enunciated through sacred incantations and articulated as rituals for repeated reminding of the need to sustain and foster the ecological balance of Nature.

The Bhumisukta of Artharvaveda is one of the oldest and the most important source of information on the relation of man to his environment and his duty is to preserve it. In the sixty three verses of this hymn, the seer Atharvan has presented a beautiful picture of mother Earth, the basis of our sustenance and a symbol of entire environment. The symbolic significance of its verses reflect a sensitive comprehension of ecology and conservation.

Bhumi i.e. the Earth is involved here as the personified Mother Goddess, she supports us by her abundant endowments and riches, it is she who nourishes us all like a loving mother who nurtures her sons.² What could be a more lucid depiction for the intrinsic relationship of Man to the Earth. These sentiments clearly, denote the bond between the Earth and human beings and exemplify the true relationship of human beings to other form of life.

In fact, Earth in the Bhumisukta does not merely mean the land she represents all that is part of the environment. She symbolises the three principal components of environment solid, liquid and gaseous as well. She was described here as born out of the waters of ocean, surrounded by space, she is the creator and the sustainer of the world.

In its solid form Bhumi is the land and above of all living and nonliving beings are the guardian and protector of all that is born as is to be born.³ She supports and sustain all, furnishes wealth and is the foundation of the world.

On the liquid level of environment, Bhumi is the sustainer of oceans, rivers and water.⁴ She is the wife of the clouds and is enriched by rain.⁵

The gaseous aspects of the Earth is expressed by saying that the air 'matarisvan' blow on the Earth and the light of the flame follows the wind which is blowing forward and backward. All the birds and bipeds fly to the Earth.⁶ She bears whatever is heavy, breathing or stirring⁷ all the four quarters belong to her.⁸

Bhumi is called 'agnivasa',⁹ covered by fire she also represents the energy of fire element of the environment. She bears the universal fire which is present in the herbs, water, stones, men and horses.¹⁰ Agni gives heat and shine to the earth. The Earth also rich treasures of gold, gems and metals.

The Earth is the source of all life, the world of the living beings. The five races of men belong to her, they are her children, she bears in many places people of different speech and of diverse customs and manners.¹¹

Not only human beings, but the ferocious animals too are the children of the same mother earth. The man-eating lion, the tiger, the jackal, the wolf, the scorpion and the reptile all on the earth,¹² but it is aspired that they should not harm or crawl on man, mainly because all of them should live together for ecological balance. According to this integral view nothing in this universe is devoid of utility, each and every species has to be protected for its own sake, so that the equilibrium of Nature is not disturbed.

It is against this background that the land, water, air, fire, plants, animals, human beings and the divine beings come together in various images of the Goddess Bhumi, Mother, Earth. Heaven, Earth and the atmosphere have given this vastness of vision to the seer of Bhumisukta while the fire, sun, water and the gods have given him wisdom.¹³ Therefore, he gratefully reveals the sublimity and divinity of Bhumi, the all encompassing principle of Nature and its resources.

We have to come a long way since the Vedic period. We are on 21st century, environmental issues have emerged as a major concern for the survival and welfare of mankind on this planet. As an eminent scientist succinctly remarks, "Even more than population explosion, the imbalance in the environment and ecology is the greatest threat to the continent. We may be able to control the first, but the process of devastation we have begun in the second may bring final doom."¹⁴

This brings us to point where we have to pause and ponder over the ecological imbalances threatening the modern world and the ways to cure and curb them. The question to be asked is what are the diverse components of the disturbance and what methodologies and strategies were suggested and adopted in the past to sustain the ecological balances. Can we, even at this crucial stage, learn any lessons from our ancient Vedic lore for equipping ourselves to face the human predicaments of today?

In the Vedic view, the sustenance of ecological balance is regarded as the first and last duty of man, since then the moral order of the world i.e. rta could be sustained. This concept of rta is nothing else but the law of ecological balance of envisaged by the

Vedic seers. The emphasis is both on the notion of cosmic regularity as also on purity and no-pollution. The Vedas dedicate many hymns to **Varuna** who is considered the sacred superintendent of the cosmic moral order, he is the squadron of rta he sees all that is between Earth and Heaven and even that which is beyond them.¹⁵

There is another prayer in the Artharvaveda which draws our attention once again to ecological balances and how the Earth, like Varuna is herself the upholder of moral order. Truth and moral order sustain her.¹⁶ She is called the sacred environment, "Devayajani"¹⁷, God's design unfolding. Man has been given the capacities for its conservation and growth which would promote his own development

also. The conception of the Earth as the Mother in the Bhumisukta even goes further and prescribes that we should always recount and never forget the glories of mother Earth in all assemblages and meetings of the people¹⁸ since she prefers virtuous men of great abilities to those ones who obstructs the good.¹⁹

We no longer live in a world with intimate ecological resources, we must be conscious of the ecological bottom line.

The theory of conservation has to be the science of totality which moves from segmental knowledge to the integrative wisdom of our Vedic seers. Many of us consider that the ecological awareness has developed in the recent past only but this becomes unfounded when one reads just the Bhumisukta of Atharvaveda, what to talk of the whole Vedic literature. It aims at conserving the environment in its broadest sense, not only on the physical level, but also on the normal, mental, religious, spiritual and above all the cosmic level and that too not merely by checking or controlling the pollution, but by the attitudes and perception of the people towards Nature. In this way the Bhumisukta depicts a theory of environmental stewardship, eco-spirituality which is not found in any other religion, tradition or belief.²⁰

The very opening verse of the hymn states that the Earth is sustained by truth by eternal order, by penance austerity, knowledge and sacrifice²¹ An austere life of discipline devoted to the pursuit of higher values, truth and rta makes this love of Earth really significant and valuable. These two presuppose diksha which issues into taps and Yajna. These six principles are the basic principle on which the balance of ecology has to be founded. Such a pure and protected Earth alone can bestow strength, lusture and authority on the rashtra.²² Mother Earth or Nature is expounded here not only source of sustenance but also as a means to spiritual enlightenment. According to modern environmental science, the concept of conservation has following three stages (i) Preservation of natural resources (ii)

Environmentalism (iii) Global Citizenship, all of which are incorporated in the simple verses of Bhumisukta.

(i) Preservation of Natural Resources: There are two views regarding the preservation of natural resources.

(a) Utilitarian Conservation

Natural resources should be used for the greatest good for the greatest number and for the longest time." In this view, the man is the central point of the universe, the purpose of saving forests is not because they are the beautiful or because the shelter wild creature but only to provide homes and jobs for people.

(b) Bio-centric Preservation

Nature deserve to exists for its own sake, regardless of its usefulness to humans. In this view habitat protection is the fundamental right of other species than humans as well.²³

The Bhumisukta of Atharvaveda combines both of these aspects in its implicit concept of conservation. There is an interdependence between human beings and other forms of nature, but human beings and dominant species have destroyed the environment for their own greed and uncontrolled desires. Those who responsibly defend and protect the natural resources are in turn showered with divine blessings,²⁴ but those who pollute the environment and indulge in hatred, violence and selfishness must be regulated immediately. This step of conservation has to be practised at individual level by one and all.

(ii) Environmentalism

The environmentalism of seer Atharvan is so robust that he prescribes the exploiter of Earth to be punished and even vanished.²⁵

The prayer for preservation of original fragrance of Earth, is not the physical odour which is also a specific characteristic of the Earth, but it signifies the bewitching loveliness of the land, strengthened by the constant reference to honey²⁶ or

the nourishing aspects of Nature. This has to be shared by all.

(iii) Global Citizenship

The third step of conservation focuses not only on particular pieces of wilderness but about the life support systems of the whole planet. A key concept of this wave is the "Sustainable Development" a term introduced in the Earth summit held at Rio De Janeiro in 1992 have been organized to address this very wide phase of environmental protection.

This Bhumisukta of Artharvaveda goes a step, further when it propounds that every entity and organization is a part of large, extended family presided by the eternal Mother Earth. The Mother has always supported her children and has been the source of fulfillment for their unending desires, She has never demanded any thing in return. But we as her children, must not exploit her and violate her line of control. These sentiments denote a family bond not only between the Earth and the human beings, but all forms of life. In fact the traditional Indian ideal of "Vasudhaiva Kutumakam", is the whole cosmos being one single family is even wider than global citizenship. In the cosmic vision of the vedas, all animate beings and in aminate things are part of one and the same principle. As Dr. Karan Singh as rightly said, "The planet Earth is a single living and pulsating entity, that the human race in the final analysis is an interlocking extended family 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' as the Veda has it."²⁷

Thus it may be concluded that the Bhumi Shukta of Artharvaveda is an lucid expression of the emotions of a true son of the Soil Mother Earth is depicted here as a symbol of the Natural resources bestowed upon man, she is worthy of homage. She never decays and fulfils all our wishes may she bless us with all that is good! May God, the lord of universe, make the mother Earth of ours pleasant in every quarter.²⁸ May that Earth thus prospering advance our prosperity.²⁹ But for that we have to be

watchful, cautious and ready to sacrifice our best for her, the Mother Earth.

"Vayam Tubhyam Balihrtah Syama"

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