
Vedic Yajna: A Green Literature Practice

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Abstract

Green literature has popularly been defined as a variety of literature that promotes and protects nature. Concept of green literature may be new to the world, but this awareness is already found existing in our age old Vedic literature. Ancient Indian texts, Vedas stand testimony to the sincere efforts of our noble ancestors towards environmental conservation and protection. The Vedas propound that human beings must have friendly relations with each entity of nature; be it air, water, fire, earth or sky. All the powers of nature have been described to be sustaining life, and also bearing the capacity to destroy life. In order to keep all these elements of nature in harmony, our Vedas educate people to observe reverence for these in various ways of behaviour.

This paper seeks to bring forth one such ecological practice, Yajna that includes oblations of clarified butter and medicinal herbs into the ritualistic fire accompanied with the chanting of holy hymns. Lighting fire and making offerings into it symbolizes the act of giving that lies in the root of the idea of sustainability i.e. giving back to nature. A ritualistic fire

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ceremony, yajña has far reaching effects in ecological spheres, and has always been an effective practice towards enhancing ecology. Being in line with Commoner's First Law of Ecology that says that everything is connected to everything else, this ancient Indian practice is a tool to sustain ecology.

Keywords

Green literature, ecology, nature, Vedic literature, yajña, sustainability

Green literature, as is generally known, is a variety of literature that promotes nature and protects nature. It has very commonly been defined as a criticism of nature exploitation activities and as study of literature and ecology from an interdisciplinary point of view where literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. Literature is a discipline which stays intermingled with each segment of knowledge that shapes the society in one way or the other; be it sociology, polity, economics, geography, geology, agriculture, law, medicine or even technology. This is the case because literature and society are not mutually exclusive, but a reflection of each other. This mutual inclusiveness between literature and society has brought the concept of Green Literature to the forefront of academic discourse that in most of the cases forms the basis of policy making. This paper is an attempt to bring forth an ecologically useful practice endorsed by India's ancient green literature regarding ecological conservation and sustainable development.

Concept of green literature may be new to the world; supposedly coined in 1990s¹ but any student of Sanskrit must be well versed in this concept that was very much prevalent in our age old Vedic literature. Ancient Indian texts, Vedas stand testimony to the sincere efforts of our noble ancestors towards environmental conservation and protection. The Vedas propound that human beings must have friendly relations with each entity of nature; be it air, water,

fire, earth or sky. All the powers of nature have been described to be sustaining life, and also bearing the capacity to destroy life. In order to keep all these elements of nature in harmony, our Vedas educate people to observe reverence for these in various ways of behaviour.

In this era of growing concern for ecological sustainability, green literature is a tool to creating awareness regarding love for Nature that will ultimately lead the world to a sustained world order. The world today sits on the verge of an environmental crisis owing to the materialistic approach where we only take from nature and give nothing in return. A new paradigm is needed that can ensure development without jeopardizing environment. Our Vedic literature realized and even practised this view ages ago when the seers said that the pleasures of the world must be enjoyed with renouncement: *tenatyaktena bhujithah*²

Our very own Vedic literature propounds a number of principles on how to lead a life of bliss in communion with our environment. The Vedas attribute divinity to nature considering its powers beyond control. All natural phenomena are found here beautifully personified, and people have been trained into paying obeisance to them so as to avoid any kind of harm to nature. Fire is the god that on being pleased bestows all kind of prosperity upon the world, Vâyu is the god of air i.e. life giving force, god of water is VaruGa or Âpah that punishes the wrongdoer, P[thivî is mother earth that nourishes all life on this planet, Dyau or sky is the father figure that is the source of life and sustainment. The current research highlights the significance of the environment in our ancient Vedic literature, and uncovers the environmental ethics that prevailed in our ancient civilization. Since the dawn of human evolution on Earth, human life and the environment have coexisted.

Environment and nature have been attributed godly qualities in Vedic literature. All natural forces, such as air, water, sun, earth, and fire are referred to as gods in the Vedas, and so are suitable to be worshipped. Vedic literature commanded human beings to revere nature and its components during a period when environmental conservation

and preservation was not even considered and discussed the way it is done now a days. Vedic hymns are mainly related with natural forces, and consist of prayers for certain natural elements such as fire, air, water, earth, sky, sun, rain, dawn etc. Proper stress has been laid on protecting the environment. People have been made aware of the benefits of a balanced ecology.

This paper seeks to bring forth one such ecologically useful practice, *yajñea* that includes oblations of clarified butter and medicinal herbs into the ritualistic fire in specifically shaped vessels accompanied with the chanting of holy hymns. Lighting fire and making offerings into it symbolizes the act of giving that lies in the root of the idea of sustainability i.e. giving back to nature. A ritualistic fire ceremony, *yajñea* has far reaching effects in ecological spheres, and has always been an effective practice towards enhancing ecology. Being in line with Commoner's First Law of Ecology that says that everything is connected to everything else, this ancient Indian practice is a tool to sustain ecology. This paper attempts to comprehensively deal with ecological aspect of *yajña* with an aim to establish it as a green literature practice. The entire Vedic literature is replete with plethora of textual references through which Vedic seers facilitated harmony between ecological system and human life, the peaceful co-existence of all the creatures of the universe and their interdependence. *Yajñea* is such an environmentally healthy process that it has been described as the nucleus of the whole world:

*Ayam yajno vicevasya bhuvansya nâbhih*³

*Ayam yajno bhuvansya nâbhih*⁴

The ritual of *yajñea* is a source of nourishment and healthy life for the world just as naval is for a foetus. *Yajurveda* elucidates that *yajñea* decontaminates the atmosphere through its medicinal smoke and provides longevity, breath, vision etc: *Âuryajñena kalpatâm*, *Prâòo yajñena kalpatâm*, *cakcuryajñena kalpatâm*, *ærortram yajñena kalpatâm*, *vâgyajñena kalpatâm*, *manoryajñena kalpatâm* *âtmâ yajñena kalpatâm*, *brahma yajñena kalpatâm*, *jyotiryajñena kalpatâm*.⁵

The process of yajñā has been chronicled as a means to minimize air pollution, increase crop yield, and protect plants from diseases; and cause disease free, pure and energized atmosphere. Yajurveda establishes that the oblations offered in the ritualistic fire are helpful in bringing rain and in purifying the air. An oblation duly offered to the holy fire reaches the sun; rain comes from the sun, and from rain comes vegetation.⁶ Coordination among all natural powers in the form of ūântipāth is prayed for in the end of the ritual of yajñā.⁷

An integral component of Vedic philosophy, yajñā is etymologically derived from root Yaj meaning ‘to worship, adore, honour, revere; and appears in the early Vedic literature, composed in 2nd millennium BCE.⁸ It is used in three ways – divinity (refined persona), collectiveness, and charity (social welfare) which means to contribute in an organized manner for divine purposes of welfare. The Yajurveda marks out yajñā as the greatest benefactor of the human race, bestowing life, wealth, food, energy, prosperity and happiness.⁹

Yâska in Nirukta defines Yajñā as an act in which famous deed of offering oblations for deities is found – yajñah kasmat! Prakhyâtam yajatikarmât¹⁰

Therefore yajñā can be comprehended as an act which expedites the contribution or sacrifice of our time, money, material and energy for nourishment of the universe through a collective effort of virtuous and capable people. Thus yajñā includes any such act which is conducted for the welfare of all with high objectives. That’s the ground on which çatapatha BrâhmaG states that yajño vai çerecthatam karma¹¹ which means yajñā is the greatest deed.

The physical form of yajñā is the one of agnihotra where oblations are offered in the fire, which is considered as the mouth of the deities and a mediator between humans and divine powers, viz. – mukham vâ etad yajñam, yadagnihotram, yajñamukham vâgnihotram.¹² Agnihotra has been defined as the process of kindling, maintenance and worship of the fire which is employed to attain manifold ends. Oblations offered into fire are supposed to reach the sun that sends rain which produces crops, for the sustenance of all

beings.¹³ It is asserted that the theoretical basis of these yajñas postulated that human is not born alone and independent, rather he has some duties and obligations to the society which he ought to fulfill.¹⁴

Various types of yajna are prescribed in Vedic texts that vary in their procedures and results according to the methods they are conducted in. Gautama dharmasûtra describes basically three categories of yajna that are later subcategorized as under:

- (i) Pakayajna: aupasanahomah, vaiúvadevam, parvaGam, actaka, masikaúraddham, úravaGâ, úúlagavâ
- (ii) Haviryajna: agnihotram, darœapaûrGamâsau, agrayaGam, caturmasyani, nirudapaúubandhah, sautramaGî, pigdapit.
- (iii) Somayajna: agnictoma, atyagnictomah, ukthyah, codaúî, vajapeyah, atiratra, aptoryâmah

There are mentions of many more sacrifices for specific purposes. One of those was vratyactomayajña conducted for the purity purpose for including anârya (uncultured) into ârya (cultured) society (Aryans were known to be cultured persons in society). So this had an inclusive purpose. Apart from this, there were royal public sacrifices which could be afforded by royal classes and officiated by special priestly class. These were Rajasûya (coronation of the king), Vâjapeya, Aúvamedha, Purucamedha etc. These yajñas were for specific purpose of cultural unity and uplifting the mass-consciousness.

Besides these, the system of paGcamahâyajña has also been established. The central point in pancmahayajñas is the discharge of duties to the creator, to the ancient sages, to the fellow humans, and to the whole universe with myriads of creatures of various grades of intelligence. Through pancmahâyajñas, a normal human being could afford to pay reverence, study the great Vedic literature, propitiate his ancestors, and maintain the spirit of give and take with all creatures of universe. Thus these yajñas facilitated feelings of devotion, gratitude, reverence, loving memory, kindness and tolerance. The whole cycle of individual and society, nature and universe revolves around the periphery of Yajna. The values of generosity and

cooperation were thus instilled in human psyche through the five great yajñas in domestic arena.

Whatever be the form or method of the yajña performed, one common result accompanies them all: benefit to ecology and environment.

Deciphering Vedic symbolism is essential to understand yajña's philosophical and historical relevance. According to Rigveda, the fire of yajña is the priest inspired by divine being itself, which silently motivates human beings to keep progressing for prosperity of all. Atharvaveda establishes the celestial and spatial position of yajñâgni (the holy fire) when it says that the great fire when dissolves in the earth, nourishes and conducts it; when mingles with space, it transforms into rain water; and the same fire prevails in sky and transforms into the sun. In Aitareya BrâhmaGa, the objective of performing yajña has clearly been stated as public welfare.¹⁵

Herein, Yajña has been said to facilitate rain which helps in cultivation and vegetation on earth and thus becomes a great benefactor of all forms of life on this earth. The sacrificial fire becomes the source of the entire water cycle- from ocean to clouds, clouds to earth, from earth to rivers, rivers to ocean, and in this way maintains ecological balance. Fire always moves upwards and has the capacity of distributing, what it receives in the universe, to all in equal proportion.

In this sense, practising sustainability is the key message of yajña. The ash of yajña which remains at the end reminds us about the mortal nature of everything that seems to exist in the world in its physical form. Therefore, the possession of anything, be it a person or material is meaningless as nothing exists in real. It teaches us to utilize everything with sense of non-possession and indifference.

Yajñas restore balance in nature. If nature is sick, ailing and disturbed by the actions that oppose and destroy its balance, it will certainly rebound. That is what we have been experiencing more and more in recent past. The air is sick making us unwell, the water is impure disturbing our health cycle, the rains do not come on time disturbing crop production, the heat is exaggerated making life

uncomfortable, and the winters are harsh and severe causing great trouble to routine life. Harmful insects such as flies and mosquitoes are growing by leaps and bounds; unforeseen diseases are emerging and spreading without any check. In short, the harmony is disturbed. Yajñas make nature happy. And this in turn is communicated to the environment and the people who inhabit it. Yajña is an ancient practice shrouded in antiquity. But it is as relevant to current time as it was to the seers of the Vedic era who conceived the spirit of yajña to express their love, respect and reverence for Mother Nature.

Atharvaveda explains the effect of the oblations offered in the yajña in the way that when the medicinal herbs are offered in the holy fire with the clarified butter, the essence of these spreads in the atmosphere through the smoke emitted there and purifies the atmosphere along with filling it with sweet fragrance.¹⁶ The vapors of the substances offered in the yajña spread in the air and purify it. It happens mainly because of the ghee offered in the yajña. The Yajurveda quotes like this: gh[tena dyâvâp[thivî pûryetâm¹⁷

The Vedas abound in references that establish yajña as a source to pollution free atmosphere. The holy fire has been said to be the destroyer of many a disease causing germ, bacterium and virus.¹⁸ Yajurveda asks people not to stop performing yajñas that are responsible for purifying the air. Purifying of the air is vital to life, which can easily be done by the process of offering gh[ta (ghee) in the fire.¹⁹ Air being vital for life; much stress has been laid upon maintaining its purity. Our Vedic literature describes air as the bearer of medicinal quality: â vâhi bhecajam.²⁰ Medicated air through the process of yajña imparts good health to the people of the world. Air has been described as the soul of all deities. It exists in all as life breath. Vâyu, god of air has been prayed to blow with its medicinal qualities.²¹ Pure air is very much needed for the flora and fauna of the world also. Through the yajña, the farmers can protect their cultivation from the pests and insects. Also the cattle life can be free from diseases by performing yajña. The substances, which get diffused in the air through oblations offered in the holy fire, protect the plants from harmful organisms. This results in the healthy cultivation of fauna in that area.

Here a Vedic hymn from the Yajurveda supports this: Devovanaspatorjucatâm havirhotaryaja²²

This has been proved that the sounds and their vibrations have cosmic powers. They can penetrate the energy spheres at the subtle and cosmic levels with substantial amplifications. The Sanskrit language itself is having special impulsive phonetics that send out harmonious wave patterns when pronounced. The Vedic-mantras are so designed that they contain the essence of essential sound of the torrent of life sustaining energies from the cosmic energy centre of the corresponding mantra. These Vedic mantras produce vibrations while chanting them, which in result keep the human mind peaceful and also keep the living beings healthy. When these mantras are recited while performing yajña, their vibrations help in spreading energy waves in the surrounding atmosphere. The classic texts of Indian origin record the influence of mantras on plants and other living beings.²³

Yajña is an ecologically benign ritual. Most of the prayers and hymns found in the Vedas convey the notion of revering nature in all areas, which is comparable to modern-day principles relating to natural resource protection, and if such practices are continued now, they may provide solutions to different environmental concerns.

The pandemic has proved that for nature there is no geographic boundary and the effects of nature reach everybody. Teachings of Vedas are beyond religion or geographical boundaries.

Vedic texts believe that 'yajña' helps increase the crop production, controls air pollution, protects the surroundings from air borne disease etc. This belief shows that the saints of Vedic period knew about the harmful effects of gases which were reverted by burning of specific substances containing medicinal value.

Fire is well known as a scientific method of conversion of matter into energy and expanding its potential and positive effects into the surrounding atmosphere. Medicinal smoke released at high temperatures has been considered to be the simplest way to administer a drug as a rapid pharmacological action can be detected upon inhalation.²⁴

Yajna has since time immemorial been an integral part of Indian history and culture. More particularly in ancient India, yajña appears as the backbone of entire social and political structure. Thus, most of the Vedic literature revolves around this ritual in different forms for numerous purposes. Though it overtly seems that yajña has been a part of religious life of Vedic Aryans, after the philosophical and historical analysis, it appears that yajña crucially contributed to social harmony, constructing political hegemony, and facilitating public welfare in its most intense as well as external procedures.

This practice is an instance of the amazing environment culture elaborated by our ancient Vedic texts. When the world today is struggling to find ways and means to preserve environment for our successive generations, this green practice is a sagacious way to environmental protection, ecological balance, and other related phenomena. Britannica.com describes the general aim of yajña as sustaining the natural order of the universe.²⁵

This ritualistic fire ceremony has far reaching effects that encompass physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and most importantly ecological spheres, causing purification at all these levels.

Vedic literature regards nature and environment in a holistic manner and revere their constituents by carefully preserving them. Reverence for all natural resources such as land, water, air, hills, forests, animals etc. is the first and foremost message of Vedic philosophy. This literature as a whole is the embodiment of the concept of yajña.

Developing such a culture of sharing and giving back to the ecosystem will ensure sustainability at two levels. Sustainability of the natural systems will be a logical outcome of this process. This is because a one-way ruthless exploitation of Mother Nature is a blatant violation of the spirit of giving back to the system. Secondly, resources will be consumed in a carefully thought out manner. Whenever natural resources are consumed, efforts will be made towards replenishing them in some manner. In fact, resources will be consumed with minimum amount of wastage. All these practices followed by the

ancient Indians shaped their living style, and they are very much the need of today.

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