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## REFLECTIONS ON THE MAN-NATURE COMPLEX IN ANCIENT INDIA IN THE BACKDROP OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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### **Abstract**

Environmental crises have posed a very serious threat to the human society across the globe. Scientific studies under the banner of the IPCC have provided sufficient conclusive evidences that these changes are primarily outcome of the anthropogenic activities over the last 250 years led by the western approach to life, nature and development. The fundamental premise of the modern worldview has revolved around the conception of the central place accorded to man placing each and every form of natural resources, plants, animals etc. as subservient to his quest of materialism, consumerism and utilitarianism. Consequently, man is consuming 1.6° Earth's to maintain our current way of life well beyond the capacity of the ecosystem to replenish and sustain itself and man is faced with the challenges like climate change, global warming, land degradation, deforestation, desertification, loss of biodiversity etc.

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Over the last 5 decades, the men of knowledge and wisdom have risen to the occasion calling for a new approach of the sustainable development characterised by a balance between human needs on the one hand and nature's bounties and replenishment capacity on the other. The new call for an entire reformulation of the relationship between man and environmental factors demands an integrated approach accepting the worth and consequent indispensability of the each and every component of the environment in maintaining the ecological balance.

It is in this context that the ancient Indian wisdom has a lot of messages and potential to offer to the modern man. The vast treasure of the Veda, Vedanga, Brahman, Aranyak, Upanishad, shruti, Smriti, etc. composed by the long experience, observation and meditation of the Rishis, Munis and Saints concluded and sermonised that every component of the universe encompassing inanimate and animate forms both has some intrinsic value and worth standing in a certain relationship. This integrative and wholistic perspective guides man to respect and recognise the existence and value of forces of nature and species of plants and animals calling the earth as the "Mother Earth". It is in this framework that we have attempted to underline how the environmental factors were engrained in the life and psyche of man in the ancient India in her quest for the wholistic, comprehensive and integrated approach to life and the world.

### **Environmental Degradation: The Existential Threat**

Of all the problems man is facing at present, environmental crisis stands out unique and distinct for two reasons: first, the material world and natural forces have started to react against anthropogenic activities and it is not accessible to manifest negotiations; and, second, as the natural world has its own set of rules which does not recognise artificial lines drawn by human civilisation, the emerging crisis has assumed global proportions irrespective of the fact of the specific region and people being at the root of the causative factors. The pressure on the planet Earth has increased to such an extent that it is not possible for the Earth to fulfil human needs in the future if the current pattern

of extraction and utilisation continues unabated. Katherine Richardson has found that six of the “nine Planetary boundaries” are transgressed with a clear message that Earth is now well outside of the safe operating space for humanity.<sup>i</sup>

The imminent threat at the planetary scale is so threatening and aggravating that the scientists, social activists and intellectuals all over the world have evolved a consensus on the urgency of the action to prevent further deterioration of the environment and restore the ecological balance. Climate change, global warming, land degradation, deforestation, desertification, loss of biodiversity have emerged as serious threats with disastrous consequences to the human societies across the globe.

The phenomenon of climate change and global warming is direct consequence of the massive build up of the CO<sub>2</sub>, the primary driver of the green house effect in the atmosphere which, according to NASA, has gone to 422 PPM (parts per million) that is an increase of 150% of its value in 1750.<sup>ii</sup> The IPCC’s Sixth Assessment Report has estimated that average temperature for the period 2013-2022 has been 1.14 degrees Celsius higher in comparison to the pre-industrial baseline.<sup>iii</sup> The increase in the mean atmospheric temperature has caused rising sea levels, extreme weather conditions, floods, droughts, change in weather pattern etc.

The green house effect has resulted into melting of the glaciers and ice sheets in the high altitudes and polar regions raising the sea level. It is estimated that in 2022, global mean sea level was 101.2 millimetres (4 inches) above 1993 levels. Deforestation and forest degradation have emerged as the biggest threats to forests worldwide. Human activities have degraded the earth’s land surface adversely affecting nearly 40% of the world population, i.e. 3.2 out of 8 billion of people.<sup>iv</sup> Since 1960s, more than half the tropical forests have been destroyed which has reduced forest’s capacity to provide essential services to the 1.6 billion people.<sup>v</sup> The rate of the disappearance of the species of the plant and animal species taking place at a rate faster than ever is another area of major concern as 1.2 million of species are faced with the survival crisis.<sup>vi</sup> Though there have been mass extinctions

earlier too, the current phase, the sixth mass extinction is different from the previous one on account of its roots in the human induced effects.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Man-Nature Relationship in the Western Tradition:**

#### **Suppression of the Nature**

The modern western worldview led by the European civilization has revolved around an assumed pivotal and supreme place of human being over all forms of the living world and all the resources of the physical world, which can be traced to the beginning of the Abrahmanic religion as manifest in the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament. Much before the advent of the modern philosophy, the Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, mentioned that the God created man in “his own image” and gave him dominion over “fish of the sea”, “fowl of the air”, “cattle”, “all the earth” and “over everything that creepeth upon the earth” and blessed man to be fruitful, multiply and subdue the earth.<sup>viii</sup> The dichotomy between nature and man is also evident in the Greek and Roman society. Aristotle stressed that the goal of the human life was good life and was quite natural for man to utilise all the gifts of the nature for the sake of himself, his family, his society and state.<sup>ix</sup> In their drives to promote their civilizations both the Greeks and Romans also promoted a mindless deforestation of the Mediterranean” as well as other less obvious detrimental effects such as immense increases in lead levels.<sup>x</sup> For both the Greek and Roman thinkers, it was quite natural for man to plunder the nature in whatever way he desires.<sup>xi</sup>

The advent of the modern age reflected in renaissance, reformation, enlightenment and scientific revolution starting in the 15th century in Europe took the domination of nature by man to unprecedented levels. The new ideas originated from the sovereignty of human reason and utilitarianism recognised the autonomy of the science freeing itself from the regulation of the philosophical postulates and superimposed absolute faith in the atomistic and mechanistic conception of the world dismissing the earlier thought of organismic world of interdependent variables. The new philosophy of unbridled faith in human reason restrengthened the distinct position of the man as a creature with infinite potential to grow while other creatures had

fixed nature within limits, an idea founded by the religious injunctions.<sup>xii</sup>

As the nucleus of the world, separate from and superior to nature and nonhuman animal beings, man was ordained to explore all his full and infinite potential using everything provided in the universe with the application of the God's exclusive gifts of rationality and intellect.<sup>xiii</sup> The people of the European world were held as the true representative of the highest application of the unique gift of logic, reason and intellect while the other world consisted of all of the nature and universe which was bereft of the intellectual capacity and it was at the disposal of the man ready to subdue the entire world to be "happy" and "fruitful". This dichotomy of men and nature provided and consolidated the foundation of victory and control of men over the physical and non human world for exploration, extraction and utilisation.

Even within the human world, it laid and buttressed the foundation of the European hegemony and subjugation of the native people by the European people as they could not utilise their natural surrounding and were unable to recognise the role of human capacity of reason in its extractive and acquisitive applications. The realm of the oppression and dominance went beyond the territorial and geographical contextualisation and entered into another field of the half of the human population on gender basis. It was argued that women did not contribute to the growth and application of technological tools in the history of civilised world they too belonged to the category of nature composed of inert matter.<sup>xiv</sup> Thus, the western discourse on the man- nature relationship prepared the ground for the enslavement not only of human domination of the nature, but also of the European colonization of the non- European people and and colonization of woman by man.

### **Sustainable Development - Search for a Long term Viable Relationship among Environment, Resources and Human Needs**

The roots of the concept of sustainable development can be traced to the movement against the ill effects of the heavy industrialisation and urbanization spurred by the advancements in the field of science and technology in the western European countries that resulted in the disastrous impact on environment and quality of life. In

the 1960s, Rachel Carson's "The Silent Spring"<sup>xv</sup> which was included in the 25 greatest science- book by Discovery magazine in 2006<sup>xvi</sup> highlighted how the indiscriminate use of agricultural chemical, pesticides and other synthetic chemicals had led to the harmful effects on animals and birds and human population. Garret Hardin in his paper entitled "The Tragedy of the Commons by" elaborated in 1968 the antagonistic relationship between the logic of self-centered materialistic consumerist culture and the preservation of the shared resources and argued that the commonly held natural resources like clean air and water, forests, fisheries etc. are under serious threat of depletion by the unregulated use by the individuals driven solely by the self- interest.<sup>xvii</sup>

In 1972, a few years after Hardin's essay, Meadows et al., commissioned by the Club of Rome, in the report "Limits to Growth" based on a computer simulation aimed to predict the consequences of what could happen in a planet with limited resources and concluded that the strongest ending scenario was an economic and social collapse by the end of the 21st century if man imposes no limits to growth.<sup>xviii</sup> In the same year, the concern for the environmental degradation assumed international dimension with the United Nations Conference on Human Environment held in Stockholm. The Conference adopted a Declaration containing 26 principles and was a milestone in the direction of growth of a sustainable developmental model as it not only gave the environmental concerns international recognition but also stressed on the need to take a human centric approach based on the well being of the people around the world in the developmental process.<sup>xix</sup>

The increase in the knowledge and recognition of the effects of the modern developmental process sounded alarming bell for the men of conscience and intellect all over the world for a number of reasons: first, it became evident that the nature's resources are limited and therefore cannot sustain for ever if consumption of the earth's resources exceeds their replenishment rate over a long period; second, the rate of the human consumption of the natural resources as has taken place since industrial resources has been alarmingly high against the

rate of creation of resources by the natural process; and third, the developmental model pursued till then had disastrous consequences on the nature and earth with its bearings on the animal kingdom including human being.

The origin of the notion of the sustainable development is the outcome of such a condition of inevitability and inescapability. The term itself came into vogue in 1980 when International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) shaped the global agenda in the report on World Conservation Strategy founded on the concept of sustainable development. The term gained international popularity and approval in 1987 by the study by the World Commission on the Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (1987), also known as the Brundtland Report.

The Brundtland Report stated that critical global environmental problems were primarily the result of twin factors of the enormous poverty of the South and the non-sustainable patterns of consumption and production in the North. It called for a strategy on the harmonious and complementary relationship between human desire for planned change and the environmental resources identified as “sustainable development” and defined it as a “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The Commission accepted and asserted that the “present state of technology and the social organization on environmental resources, together with the limited ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities” impose limitations on sustainable development.<sup>xx</sup>

The consciousness about the impact of the climate change on the planet and human life coalesced the leaders, statesmen, intellectual, academicians and civil society to build a consensus on the preventive and remedial measures to prevent the phenomenon of the climate change and consequently the International Panel on Climate Change was formed in 1988 by the UN Development Programme and the World Meteorological Organization with a mandate to explore the causes, consequences and ways of fighting climate change. In 1992, the Rio

Conference commonly known as the Earth Summit was a milestone achievement in the advancement towards restoring the ecological balance. It recognised the interdependent and integrated nature of the different social, economic and ecological factors and dismissed the isolationist worldview to be sustained over a long time. With a view to find a lasting path of the development process, the summit adopted the Rio Declaration which recognised that the human beings have the right to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature and viewed the right to development with equitable developmental and environmental needs of the present and future generations.<sup>xxi</sup> The Conference also chalked out a comprehensive action plan as Agenda 21 in every area where human actions have left an impact on the physical and living surrounding.<sup>xxii</sup> In addition, the Conference also came forward with consensus on the importance of forests in climate change, biodiversity and desertification/ land degradation and propounded the Forest Principles for global Consensus on the management, conservation and Sustainable development of all types of forests.<sup>xxiii</sup> As the problem of the climate change started worsening with more scientific studies under the banner of the IPCC, the issue of sustainability too came to assume universal recognition as a core idea of international development theory and policy and consequently, sustainable development has emerged as a core feature of national and international policy making, particularly by the agencies of the United Nations.

In 2015 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, successor of the Millenium Development Goals which included 17 sweeping goals encompassing a comprehensive framework to meet the challenges of the climate change, clean energy, water scarcity and pollution, bio diversity loss, clean cities, life below water and on water etc. mentioned in different goals like 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17 and elaborated in corresponding targets and indicators.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **Environmental Consciousness in the Ancient India: Search for an Integrated Whole**

The immensely vast array of the knowledge tradition of the



ancient India can be ascertained in the religious and secular literature both. In fact, much before the Vedic civilization, the recognition to the animals like peacock, bull, deer, tiger and leaves and trees in the human life during the Indian Valley Civilisation (IVC) too has been traced<sup>xxv</sup> despite the fact that failure to understand the Harappan script remains the major hurdle in the proper understanding of the life, philosophy and culture of the IVC.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The Vedic civilisation starting around 1500 BC has a plethora of evidences as exemplified in the Vedas, Brahmans, Aranyakas, Upanishads, Puranas, Vedangas, Tripitakas, Angas, Ramayan. Mahabharat, Arthashastra, Manusmriti, Mahabshya, Ashtadhyayi etc. to offer proper worldview of the ancient India towards nature and environment.<sup>xxvii</sup> The distinguishing point of the Indian tradition lies in its firm belief that the entire universe is reflection of the ultimate truth and power, i.e. Brahma and each and every form of nature-inanimate and animate both has its own intrinsic value and indispensable role in maintaining the ecological balance. It is for this reason that all living and non-living components stand in a certain harmonious and complementary relationship contributing to the integrated whole in sharp contrast to the western tradition as elaborated earlier in this paper.<sup>xxviii</sup> In this scheme of ideas, human being was in no way endowed with any superior, overwhelming and overriding power and position vis a vis other components of the natural world and the flora and fauna. The Iso Upanishad categorically states that it is the lord whom every creature belongs to and so rules out the superior-subordinate relationship in living organisms.<sup>xxix</sup>

The wisdom of the Indian sages manifested in imparting divine character to the everything surrounding human society including animal and plant kingdom. This made them an object of reverence and worship completely dismissing the logic of the utilitarian world view and the concomitant denaturing humanity. The nature, the Ancient Indian wisdom exhorted, was a manifestation of the five smallest, supreme

and ultimate powers namely, earth, water, fire, air and space known as Panchmahabhutas. What is noteworthy in this context is the connection between these forces and human being as these forces are the fundamental structural bases of the entire universe including human body and each human sense organ is a reflection of one of them as mentioned below:

S. No.	Panchmahabhutas (Physical Elements)	Property	Human Sense Organs
1	Akash (Space)	Hearing	Ear
2	Vayu (Air)	Touch	Skin
3	Agni (Fire)	Vision	Eye
4	Jal (Water)	Taste	Tongue
5	Prithvi (Earth)	Smell	Nose

The link between the human senses and the fundamental elements establishes nature as inalienable truth of human life.<sup>xxx</sup>

In tune with the realization of the intrinsic value of each and every component of the nature, the Vedic intellect viewed the forces of the nature endowed with divinity. Thus, the Veda gives elaborate provisions for the worship of the terrestrial Gods, the atmospheric Gods and celestial Gods like Indra, Agni, Vayu, Varuna, Surya, Maruta, Usha, Ashvin, Aditi.

In the sanatan (eternal) tradition of India, man's association with the material world can be ascertained from the famous Prithvi Sukta of the Atharva Veda which calls earth as the Mother Earth- "Mata bhumih Putroham Prithivah" (the earth is my mother and I am her son).<sup>xxxii</sup> It is important to note that after about the 3000 years, the message of the "Earth as the Mother" was recognised in 2009 by the international fraternity underlining the farsightedness of the Indian wisdom as the UN General Assembly (UNGA) designated 22 April as the International Mother Earth day.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The vast Indian literature of the olden times is replete with glories of trees hailed by ancient seers placed under the chief deity Soma. Rig Veda states, "May the plants, waters and sky preserve us and woods and mountains with their trees for tresses."<sup>xxxiii</sup> The Bhagwad Gita depicts the world as a single banyan tree with unlimited branches in which all the species of the animal kingdom, man and animals alike

wander. The Upanishads make it clear that the plants, trees and forests are endowed with divine attributes mentioning trees as the “Vriksh Devata” (Tree God). The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad draws a picture of similar characteristics of the man and trees and urges man to have reverence and righteous duty towards their protection.<sup>xxxiv</sup> For a sonless person, tree has been mentioned like a son.<sup>xxxv</sup>

The importance of the tree was also accepted in the life after this world and planting trees like peepal, neem, vata etc. was linked with the human desire to avoid hell life.<sup>xxxvi</sup> What is more interesting in this context is that trees have been conceptualized as having sensory capabilities to feel cold and heat and even hear sound just like human being does.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Felling of trees was strictly prohibited. The Agni Purana imposes restrictions on the cutting down of trees bearing flowers and fruits linking it to the worldly happiness and states describes that one who destroys a tree giving shade is tortured by the agents of the Lord Yama in the hell with sword like leaves.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Axing even for sacrificial purpose was also not arbitrary wilful act and placed under rituals in order to ensure highest regard for the trees.<sup>xxxix</sup>

The basic postulate of the Vedic cosmology that there is only one creature of the entire universe, the Purusha also known as the Prajapati<sup>xi</sup> is also reflected in the world of the animal kingdom. As the manifestation of the Almighty Power, all living creatures on earth too were seen as indispensable in the divine scheme of the functioning of the universe. Conservation of the animal being apart from the plants and trees was considered as the pious moral duty of the human being for their protection.<sup>xii</sup> The Rigveda exhorts not to cause harm to anything.<sup>xlii</sup>

In contrast to the western notion of the nature of the animal beings as passive and inactive, the Indian genius of the past accepted and recognised special abilities and intelligence of the animal beings on the land, in the air and in the water. Several of them were accepted as the mounts of many Gods and Goddesses, such as, lion, rat, dog, bull, peacock of the Goddess Durga, Lord Ganesha, Lord Bhairav, Lord Shiva, Lord Kartikeya. Being vahanas of the divine powers, they too were seen as an object of worship and respect.

The Atharva Veda mentions protective prayer towards celestial powers for the protection of all “Four footed” cattle which highlights the sentiment and attachment of the Vedic gentry to their domestic animals in their socio- cultural and religious life.<sup>xliii</sup> There was an explicit taboo on the brutal and cruel behaviour towards the animals. The Manusmriti clearly mentions that one who kills cattle would die as many times as the number of hairs on the cattle.<sup>xliv</sup>

### **Conclusion: Message for the future of the Humanity**

It is obvious that the need of the hour is a search for a comprehensive philosophy of man which could also encompass apart from man all other aspects of the non- human beings of the animal kingdom, plant life, earth’s resources and forces of the nature in order to protect the planet earth as well as human life. As the conventional western tradition is the primary reason for the ills of the developmental process jeopardizing bio diversity and human life both, there is an indispensable requirement to search for another world view and the ancient Indian philosophy of founded on the fundamentals of the integrated and relativistic world view enshrines several concepts which can be of immense importance for the entire mankind at present as well as future.

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