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A REVIEW OF INDIA'S ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES ACROSS THE AGES

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Abstract

While the United Nations Brundtland Commission in 1987 defined sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs”, India has strictly adhered to practice of conserving and preserving the environment through times immemorial.

If we throw a cursory glance at the ancient Indian history, issues such as sustainability and environment were of paramount importance. The ancient innovators believed in the creation of something new that would enhance and improve the surrounding ecosystem. According to our Ancient scriptures,

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Indians have always had a strong belief in maintaining a well-balanced, traditionally viable atmosphere and to live in peace with surroundings.

The medieval India, however, does not boast of worthy jurisprudence of environmental protection. Though there were exotic and endangered animals, birds and trees, but this does not conclusively prove that the rules were essentially concerned about the protection of the environment. Taking up the British rule in India, it would be needless to say that the foreign rules were concerned about the conservation of the ecology in the initial phase of their reign. However, the over exploitation of natural resources and their depletion made the Britishers undertake measures to protect them. Various laws were passed for the conservation of ecology and strongly implemented.

However, the Indian masses still continued to follow the age-old Indian tradition of caring for Mother Nature. We continue to do so till date. Celebration of local festivals like Harela is testimony to our ingrained sense of environmental responsibility. The ancient sensibility of following eco-sustainable practices passed on from generation to generation continues till date.

Keywords

Sustainability, Indian history, ecology, Scriptures, environmental responsibility

Introduction

The concept of sustainable development has acquired tremendous attention in the present-day social milieu. To the western world this is the most novel futuristic plan but not to India. The evolution and maturation of this idea has its deep roots in the rich Indian past. Efforts are made to make people understand the true sense and urgency of an ideology like this but Indians just need to delve into their glorious past to comprehend that sustainability has always been the basis of basic Indian life style. From the very ancient times the

Indian society has based its working around nature, the environment and the wholesome concept of self-reliance. The traditional Indian understanding was always about man and the Environment sharing a perfect and harmonious relationship.

Ancient Indian civilisation took sustainability as an attitude and adapted it in the perfect way possible. Since the Vedic times Indians learn to respect, the forms of nature, conserve them and give them back to nature in the best possible way to enable the future generations to enjoy these resources in the same way.

The medieval and pre-Independence periods in the Indian history have nothing truly worthy of discussing when it comes to environmental care and protection. For the Mogul emperors the forests were those wooded lands where they could hunt animals. The discrimination between the royalty and the common masses however resulted in the preservation of the exotic flora and fauna. The early days of the British rule in India were horrific days ecologically speaking. Ruthless and indiscriminate felling of trees, gross negligence of maintaining water resources, pasture land soon made the British Government realise the impending doom environmentally. Then came the implementation of several laws to conserve the ecology.

Finally came the revival... The post-independence era in India witnessed a lot of changes in the policies and attitudes of the Indian government with regard to environmental protection. Sustainable development once again finds an echo in modern India.

Review of Literature

- Renugadevi R (2012) establishes the fact that messages of environmental conservation found in the Vedas and the Puranas, the Upanishads, the Artha Shastra, the Ramayana and the Mahabharat reflect the basic ideology of preservation of ecology that Indians follow till date.
- Sharma Rajeev et.al (2014) focuses primarily on Indian civilisation as one of the oldest civilisations that staunchly believed in being in harmony with nature.

- PrasadJ S.R A (2015) discusses how the five elements or PANCH BHUTAS mentioned in the UPNISHADS create nurture and sustain all forms of life and play an important role in preserving and sustaining the environment.
- Pandey Archana (2016) brings out the fact that our ancients were acutely aware of the importance of water in our life. The use of highly advanced hydraulic engineering suggests that ecological conservation was of tremendous importance to them.
- Bithin Thakur (May 2019) discusses the history of environmental conservation in the ancient and mediaeval periods in India. He stresses the fact that ancient Indian literature is replete with references to different aspects of the environment, its management, preservation and protection.
- Rajak Siddharth (June 2019) explains how protection of the environment was prevalent in our ancient society. The Vedic, Puranic Jain and Buddhist traditions established the principles of ecological harmony centuries ago.
- Ekka Aqueen (Aug 2020) discusses the protection of the environment in the ancient India and medieval periods by analysing ancient human history and how sustainable development and environmental protection were reflected through lives and activities of human beings then.
- Prakasha K P (2022) states and discusses that the efforts for environmental protection in Indian history can be traced from the earliest periods to the modern times.
- Rakesh (2023) focuses on ecological and wildlife conservation in the colonial period with special discussion of the princely Rajputana states
- Kineman John & Anand Deepak trace the roots of sustainability in ancient India. SUSTAINABILITY SCIENCE was practised in India in the pre-Vedic times.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the roots of ecological sustainability in India.
- To discover the continuance of environmental sustainability from ancient till contemporary times in India.

- To identify the ways and means to achieve sustainable development from classical ancient times in India.

Methodology of Study

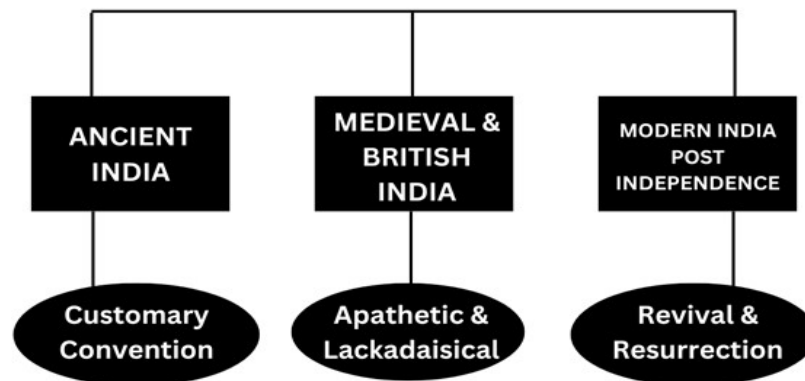
- This study is descriptive in nature hence it uses secondary sources of data.
- The secondary data is collected from newspapers, articles, research journals, and government and non-government reports.

Discussion of the Study

Sustainability—The Buzz Word

- The UN CONFERENCE on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 was the first attempt made to stress upon the need to preserve natural habitats to produce a sustained improvement in living conditions for all.
- The BRUNDTLAND COMMISSION (U.N 1987) introduced the concept of Sustainable Development as “meeting the need of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs”.
- THE RIO EARTH SUMMIT (1992) stressed upon the concept of sustainable development as an attainable goal for all the people.

TRACING THE HISTORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN INDIA



Ancient Indian Practice of Environmental Conservation

The Vedic and Puranic literature, the Upanishads, the Arthashastra, the Charaka Samhita, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharat contain profound concepts and philosophy of environmental conservation thereby sustainable development.

Interestingly what emerged as a new environmental concept in the latter half of the 20th century to the rest of the world had always been a dominant part of the Indian life since times immemorial. Indians then considered the environment as being powerful and that was why they worshipped different aspects of nature.

The highly sacred books viz Vedas, Upanishad, Puranas give a clearer view regarding the unique relationship that existed between man and nature then. Various Verses in the Vedic literature highlight the relevance of protecting the environment and preventing pollution. All the four Vedas recognise the importance of preserving the cycle of seasons that may get affected by unsuitable human acts.

ATHARVAVED states “Do not harm the environment, do not harm the water and the flora, earth is my mother, I am her son. May the waters remain fresh, do not harm the waters. “

RIGVEDA states “Don’t cut trees because they remove pollution.”

YAJURVAVEDA states “Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere.”

Sustainable development is not foreign to the age-old Indian tradition. The Principle of APARIGRAH mentions the process of keeping only what is necessary and returning the rest to Nature.

Verse 1 from ISHA UPNISHAD states that everything in the universe belongs to the supreme God. Therefore take only what you need and set aside the rest for you know, to whom it belongs.

MANUSMRITI an ancient legal treatise condemns brutality and cruelty towards animals.

ARTHASHASTA by KAUTILYA an ancient treatise on administration describes the importance of maintenance of public sanitation and preservation of the environment, forests and wildlife. Kautilya also suggests the need to develop the ABHAYAVANA or forests and animal sanctuaries.

During BUDDHA'S time (6th -5th Century BC) attempts were made to preserve ecological balance. The concept of Ahimsa (nonviolence) is common to both Buddhism and Jainism. Even the 24 Tirthankars of Jainism were deeply associated with the preservation of the environment.

ASHOKA the great Mauryan emperor is chiefly remembered for his Edicts and the inscriptions on them. The inscriptions reveal that Ashoka took several measures to protect the flora and the fauna.

The GUPTA PERIOD, also, is known for the efforts made for the preservation and protection of the Environment. Admittedly the core values of the ancient Indian culture and civilisation are INCLUSIVE, COOPERATIVE, CONSIDERATE and SUSTAINABLE.

Sustainability is at the core of the ancient Indian experience of living. Ancient Indians cared for the Mother Earth and took measures to protect preserve and conserve it.

Medieval and British India

The Disconnect and then the Connect

The Medieval Indian rulers, in an attempt to expand their kingdom, made several attempts to “**connect**” with ecological settings in India but ironically that led to the disastrous “**disconnect**” “with the environment. There was maintenance of the typical architectural style, building, maintenance and repair of forts. Roads were constructed for the armies to go smoothly and war animals were deployed in large numbers to achieve successful imperial accomplishments. However, in all such attempts they were visibly overpowered by the all dominant forces of nature.

However, the only redeeming feature was the establishment of the nature parks, gardens like Gulistan and fruit orchards around their palaces and along the banks of the rivers. Unfortunately, the Mughals did not have any clear policy regarding the protection of the forests or wildlife. Surprisingly the MUHTASIBS were entrusted with the duty of preventing pollution.

BABARNAMA gives a detailed account of the diverse vegetation and wildlife in India. Then JAHANGIR'S "TUZUK-I-JAHANGIRI" explores the King's keen interest in exotic plants and birds. AKBAR'S governor Ali Quli Afshar went on to grow the extraordinary and the uncommon varieties of fruits. However, the **zeal** and the **determination** to sustain, to preserve, to protect the environment was truly **amiss**.

Protection of the environment, preservation of the ecology was actually never a matter of grave concern to the Britishers ruling over India. Deforestation took place on large scale primarily to obtain timber and other natural resources which were of commercial importance. Forest land in hilly areas was cleared for commercial farming. Truly the British rule in India resulted in massive exploitation of forest wealth in India and a deep disregard towards the ecology.

However, over exploitation and over use of natural resources led to the quick depletion of the natural reserves. Then came the introduction of certain laws to conserve the environment. Indian Forest Act 1865, the Indian Forest Act 1927 and several such acts were introduced to prevent deforestation and the unaccountable felling of trees. In 1864 the first inspector general of forest was appointed to prevent forest fires and to make an estimate of the growing stock.

To check water pollution the Britishers brought in and implemented The Shore Nuisance Act 1853, The Oriental Gas Company Act 1857, Indian fisheries Act 1897.

To control air pollution The Bengal Smoke Nuisance Act 1905 and The Bombay Smoke Nuisance Act 1912 were introduced. To protect the wildlife the Britishers brought The Elephant Preservation Act 1879 and The Wild Birds and Animals Protection Act 1912. However, their focus was primarily on making a catalogue of trees and maintaining forests primarily for their resource extraction. The colonial era, thereby, was a watershed in India's environmental history but certain laws and acts did go a long way to protect and preserve the flora and the fauna.

The Revival and the Hope-Sustainable Growth Post Independence

"This vast earth is my mother. "- Rigveda (1.164.42)

“The earth is my mother her child am I “- Atharveda (Book XII-12.1.12)

What is ingrained deeply, stays on. It continues from generation to generation. What started out as a distress call to prevent the Kejri trees from being felled in the 18th century in Marwar district of Rajasthan by the Bishnoi community culminated in the CHIPKO MOVEMENT of 1973 led by Sundar Lal Bahuguna, Gaura Devi and others. The chief objective was to protect the trees on the Himalaya slopes from the onslaught of the contractors of the forest region

This became the turning point in the history of eco-development struggles in India and across the whole wide world.

The SAVE SILENT VALLEY MOVEMENT 1981 targeted at saving the wet evergreen forests in the silent Valley region of Palakkad district of Kerala from being submerged by a proposed hydroelectric dam across the Kuthi Puzha River that runs through the valley. The project was successfully stalled.

The JUNGLE BACHAO AANDOLAN 1982 initiated by the tribal of the Singhbhum district of Bihar was primarily to protect the Sal forest from being cleared. The APPIKKO MOVEMENT 1983 was the Southern version of the Chipko Movement. Felling of trees was stalled and the locals of Uttara Kannada and Shimoga districts started afforestation on the totally eroded lands. The NARMADA BACHAO AANDOLAN (1985) led by Baba Amte, Medha Patkar and the tribals focused on the conservation of the environment and the complete ecosystem of the valley.

It is observed keenly that in India the environmental movements have gone beyond the social and cultural differences. The environmental movements have been a positive and productive area of maintaining sustainable development. Apart from the ecological movements there are also environmental provisions mentioned in the Indian constitution for ecological protection. The NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT POLICY of 2006 focuses on the conservation of fast depleting natural resources as well as the improvement of resources for environmental conservation. Understandably human beings are at

the centre of sustainable development ideology. Environmental Protection and Conservation Is an integral part of the development process.

To wrap it up with a saying

“AS IS THE MICROCOSM

SO IS THE MACROCOSM”

It is a profound concept that highlights the interconnectedness of our existence. This saying has its roots in the Ayurvedic philosophy, an ancient medical system and all-inclusive and encompassing well-being.

“THE ENVIRONMENT IS NOT OURS TO TAKE OR LEAVE. IT IS OURS TO MAKE - THE GEETA (09.10). The Indian culture has since times immemorial stressed upon the concept of the entire universe as a benefit station of the self. And we continue to follow the legacy....

Charaiveti. Charaiveti

Keep moving, keep following the path of preserving the ecology, in keeping with the legacy handed over to the Indians – a legacy that promotes complete sustainable development.

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