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ENVIRONMENTAL SPIRITUALISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURE

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Man has always been attracted and enchanted by the beauty of nature. He has felt amazed and overawed by the powers of nature. Nature has filled him with awe, wonderment, admiration and reverence. The Vedas celebrate nature, life force as well as the wilderness. They contain the earliest record of the outpouring of the human heart borne out of deep reflection and contemplation on nature and creation.

If we look at the present scenario, humankind is up against an unparalleled ecological crisis. Today, the world faces serious environmental issues which include pollution, climate change and global warming.

A serious threat to human beings and their environment is the continuous and accelerating over use of destruction of natural

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resources ... it is unfortunate that efforts to permanently change peoples' environmentally destructive behaviours through intervention has typically not met with success. (*The Journal of Environment Psychology Vol. 19 issue (iv)*)

The foregoing lines show the concern and desperation of present-day global society regarding current environmental issues which includes climate change and global warming, pollution, environmental degradation and resource depletion extinction of plant and animal species and all the attendant sociological and political problems.

As a result of rising environmental and ecological consciousness the term 'Ecology' has gained currency in common uses and moved beyond the boundaries of biology. Ecology has been defined variously as "the study of the interrelationships of organisms with their environment and each other". We now know that wild life is a vital part of the ecosystem and that, if animals, birds or reptiles are killed the whole ecosystem eventually falls apart. Our enlightened forefathers completely understood this.

Having said that "What the western discourse in general and the western academia and its textbooks in particular forget to inform us is that the roots of ecology lie in *Sanatan Dharma* or Hinduism and no other religion pays as much attention to environment and environmental ethics , and to the understanding of the role and value of nature. Hinduism is inherently an ecological religion." (Kermani)

The Rishi of *Ishopanishad* declares: all that you behold - animate or inanimate - is the abode of Brahma - the supreme reality .The *Vedic rishi* divinised nature and had great respect for every manifestation – animate or inanimate.

This brings us to a very pertinent term, ecocriticism. Ecocriticism began with love for nature. Gradually it started raising concerns towards environmental and ecological degradation and "very broadly defined, thus Ecocriticism - also referred to as green studies and environmental criticism in certain quarters - is an

umbrella term ...used to refer to the environmentally oriented study of literature ...” (Lawrence Buell)

The term Ecocriticism was coined by William Rueckert in his 1979 essay *Literature and ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism* by which he meant – the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature. (Glotfelty Cheryl xix—x). Ecocriticism examines the world around us by critiquing the way we represent, interact, or construct the environment around us - both natural and man-made. In America, ecocriticism tends to be more celebratory, being inspired and guided by the American transcendentalism of 1840s. The three writers of transcendentalism were Emerson, Margret Fuller and H D Lawrence. In Britain, ecocriticism tends to be more cautionary, that is it seeks to warn us of environmental threats emanating from the government, industrial, commercial forces and environmental dangers in a globalised world. UK’s green studies focus more on the environmental dangers in a globalised world. Nature and environment have come to occupy an important place in literary and cultural studies. As Glen Luv puts it: “teaching and studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life deems it increasingly short-sighted and incongruous.”

Cheryl Glotfelty holds Christianity’s anthropocentric belief responsible for the way man has treated nature. This view accords centrality to man in the realm of creation. According to this belief, no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purpose since man is not simply clay but made in God’s image. This belief has been responsible for the subordination, abuse and obliteration of the non-human part.

The western religions specially the Christian viewed this nature worship as Paganism, failing to recognise the scientific and spiritual basis of the relationship between man and nature and how this is the only way to sustain ecological balance.... The elements of nature then became devoid of all divinity, and we’re left to be conquered by man. (Kermani)

In recent times, there are a number of ecological movements across the globe the likes of Greenpeace, World Environment Day. In India we have *Van Mahotsav* which was started in 1950 by K. Munshi. This festival continues for a week during which trees are planted. In 1970s in Uttarakhand there was '*Chipko Andolan*', a powerful ecological movement to save trees. The *Bishnois* are a community found in the northern regions of India. They follow the commandments of their *Guru Jambheshwar*. The guru's teachings, known as *Shabdawani*, inspired his followers to be crusaders for environment. Killing animals and cutting green trees is strictly prohibited. The community is also dedicated in their efforts of providing safety to all life forms.

But thousands of years ago, our scriptures – *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *smrutis*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharat*, *Puranas* and other scriptures - taught us that “the animals and plants found in the land of *Bharatavarsha* are sacred; that like humans, our fellow creatures, including plants have consciousness; and therefore all aspects of nature are to be revered”. (Kermani)

It is to their eternal credit that all Indic religions – Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism – show great reverence and understanding towards environment. They follow the doctrine of “*Sarvam khalu idam Brahmah*”. (Everything is Brahmah). It is quite remarkable how the Vedic sages laid the foundations of the marvellous traditions which forever ensured a healthy, harmonious and mutually fulfilling relationship with environment. Their foresightedness is even more remarkable when one remembers that during those times the grave issues plaguing the mankind today like pollution, environmental degradation, depletion of natural resources, etc had not arisen.

Thousands of years ago, the sage of *Ishopanishad* gave mankind the message of what the modern environmentalists call the concept of “sustainable development” which has now become a buzzword. The concept of Sustainable development - to use the limited natural resources responsibly and judiciously, for stable development and without infringing upon the rights of future

generations on these resources - is strongly reminiscent of these lines of the Ishopanishad:

ईशावास्यं इदं सर्वम यत्किंचिज्जगत्यां जगत्।

तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जिथाः मा गृधः कस्य सिद् धनम् ॥१॥

O men, the Entire Universe is pervaded by God!
Enjoy all of nature as gifts from God, but with a spirit
of renunciation (shloka 1)

This deep respect and love for nature is evident in every aspect of Hindu culture and tradition. In the *Atharvaveda's* 'Bhoomisookta', the earth is adored and respected thus: "The earth is our mother and we are all her children." (shloka 12)

Salutations to mother Earth. In her is woven together ocean and river waters, in her is contained food which she manifests when ploughed, in her indeed is alive all that lives. May she bestow us with that life. (shloka 3)

O Bhumi Mata! I am the son of mother Earth, Parjanya (rain god) is my father, may he fill us (with the vital power in Water). (shloka 12)

Salutations to Mother Earth, Great is this place where we live together. Mighty is the force present in it which controls the great speed of movement and shaking. Great is the God Indra, who protects her with vigilance. May she the Bhoomi (Earth) make us lustrous like gold so that we do not see any one with the attitude of hatred. (shloka 18)

The Vedic hymns are full of deep symbolism. This symbolism is particularly evident in ecology. *Surya* is the sun god; he is the source of all life and bestows upon us light and warmth that nurtures everything; The god of rains, lightening, thunder and storms is *Indra* who is associated with crops and plenitude; and *Agni* is the god of fire, the carrier of the oblation.

The Vedic hymns have great message for mankind, such as:

The Sky is like Father, The Earth like Mother and The Space as their son
The Universe consisting the Three is like a Family and
Any kind of damage done to anyone of the Three Throws the Universe out of Balance ... *Rigveda* (160.2)

There is a strong undercurrent of reverence for nature and environment in almost all cultural and social activities. This underlines the profound respect that the ancients had with nature. Axing down of a green tree was considered a sin deserving of punishment in hell. The ancient Indian literature speaks of the gratitude, indebtedness and abiding commitment that humankind owe to Mother Earth.

Thousands and Hundreds of years if you want to enjoy the fruits and happiness of life, then take up systematic planting of trees. (*Rig Veda*)

Rivers occasion location widespread destruction if their coasts are damaged or destroyed and therefore trees standing on the coasts should not be cut off or uprooted. (*Rig Veda*)

Plants are mothers and goddesses. (*Rig Veda Samhita* 10.97.4)

Trees are homes and mansions. (*Rig Veda Samhita* 10.97.5)

Sacred grass has to be protected from man's exploitation. (*Rig Veda Samhita* 10.97.5)

Plants and water are treasures for generations.

(*Rig Veda Samhita* 10.97.5)

One should not destroy the trees. (*Rig Veda Samhita* 6.48.17)

The *Matsya Puran* mentions the practice of *Van Mahotsav*, the tree plantation ceremony. Thus, it becomes evident that the environmentally sound custom of tree plantation ritual is more than 1500 years old in India.

The ancient books describe the necessity of living in harmony with nature and exhorts man not to pollute the environment. The wisdom and foresightedness as well as the rational thinking of the

Vedic seers is astonishing given that there was no notion of the word pollution in those times as such.

Do not cut trees because they remove pollution

(*Rig Veda Samhita* 6.48.17)

Do not poison water and do not harm or cut the trees.

(*Yajur Veda* 6.33)

Plants and herbs destroy poisons. (*Atharvaveda*.8.7.10)

Purity of atmosphere checks poisoning (*Atharvaveda* 8.2.25)

The oceans are treasures of wealth. Protect them.
(*Yajurveda*.38.22)

Do not disturb the sky and do not poison the atmosphere.(*Yajurveda* 5.43)

Atharva Veda also cautioned not to dirty and add poisonous substances into water bodies as it may result in the spread of diseases. “he who dirties or spoils ponds, lakes, rivers, etc, or cause smell near residential areas is liable to chastisement.” (Joshi and Namita,2009)

These texts which are the repositories of ancient Indian philosophy reflect the vitality of a holistic vision which regards all elements in the universe as the manifestation of the same divine power.

One remarkable and intrinsic part of Indian ecological tradition is the sacred groves - called *Devarakadu* in Karnataka, *Pavitraskhetralu* in Andhra Pradesh, *Kovil Kadu* in Tamil Nadu, *Deorai* in Maharashtra, *Bugyal* in Uttarakhand and *Kavu* in Kerala. Since ancient times, these sacred groves were preserved in the outer periphery of the villages and these grew into the repositories of rich ecological treasure. In fact, sacred groves have become part of the “biosphere reserves” of India containing some of the rare and endangered species of plants and animals. Sacred groves were found in abundance in Bharat which were protected by local communities and which goes to show that forest resources were precious. The sacred groves are left untouched by local people. All interferences

into it are taboo. Sacred groves are dedicated to a deity or mother goddess who is supposed to preside over it and protect it. Our ancestors did not require any law to protect these groves where trees and plants were allowed to grow undisturbed and where reptiles, birds and animals could have lived freely without fear of poaching or interference by man. The existence of forests today in India can be credited to this tradition also which still survives in India today.

An integral part of ancient Hindu tradition is tree (and plant) worship. We are fortunate to have many magnificent trees which are sacred to us - *peepal*, *bel*, banyan, *ashoka*, *amla*, *arjun*, to name a few - and most deities have their favorites. *Rudraksha*, *bel* and *dhatura* are favourites of *Shiva*, *Vishnu* is fond of *parijata*, *peepal* and *tulsi*, the goddesses *Saraswati* and *Laxmi* sit on white and red lotuses. Religious ceremonies require the leaves of *belpatra*, *tulsi* or *neem*. This practice of using these leaves during rituals serves to remind us of the deep connection that man shares with nature.

Also intrinsic to the Indian culture is the practice of *Sthal Vriksham*. *Sthal* in Sanskrit means a holy place and *vriksha* is a tree. Every temple is associated with a tree which in turn is associated with a god and has a story behind it. These trees are to be respected along with the gods. The *Kadamba* tree is the *sthala vriksham* at the *Meenakshi Sundareswarar* temple. Some of the other well-known examples of *sthal vraksham* include the Vanni tree at the *Mugudeshwar* temple at *Kodumudi* and the mango tree at the *Ekambershwara* Temple at *Kancheepuram*. The mango tree at the *Ekambereshwara* temple is thought to be more than 3000 years old. The chief deity of this temple is *Shiva* who is represented and worshipped as the *Prithvi Lingam*. The tree has four branches which are said to represent the four *Vedas*. *Sthal Vraksham* is our important genetic resource for the preservation of species diversity.

Among the trees regarded as sacred in Hindu tradition, Banyan tree occupies an important place. This tree is considered auspicious and is regarded as a symbol of life and fertility. Banyan

tree is mentioned in the *Vedas*, the *Purans* and the epics. One of the most sacred tree is the *Peepal* also known as the *Ashwatta*. In Hinduism, it is believed that the *Trimurti* reside in it. The roots of the tree represent *Brahma*, the trunk *Vishnu* and the leaves Shiva. In *Shri Bhagwat Gita*, Lord Krishna said “Among the trees, I am Ashwattha”. Buddha attained enlightenment under a *Peepal* tree which came to be known as the bodhi tree. *Tulsi* is one of the most venerated plant in Hinduism. The leaves of tulsi plant are always required in religious ceremonies and it is quite well known for its medicinal properties. “In that house where there is a Tulasi (plant) there is no poverty, no (hostile) action due to (i.e. from) the kinsmen, no grief, no fear, and no disease”. (*Padma Purana* 6.28.33)

Hinduism believes that animals too possess souls. Like humans, they are subject to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The scriptures do not distinguish between the soul of a man and the soul of an animal. It is believed that animals also have a spark of the divine. *Bhagwat Geeta* says

ईश्वरः सर्वभूतानां हृद्देशेऽजुर्न तिष्ठति।

भ्रामयन्सर्वभूतानि यन्त्नारुढानि मायया ॥

(O Arjuna, the Lord resides in the region of the heart of all creatures, revolving through Maya all the creatures (as though) mounted on a machine)

As all religious ceremonies required flowers, fruits and leaves, it was paramount to preserve and protect the trees and plants. Viva Kermani writes “So much importance was given to trees that there was also *Vriksha Ayurveda* - an ancient Sanskrit text on the science of plants and trees written by *Acharya Surpala* around the 10th century, this is a complete manuscript for the management of plants and trees. This starts with the glorification and praise for trees and tree planting and provides details about management and care of seeds, plants and trees. It contains details from soil conservation, planting, sowing, treatment propagating, and how to deal with pests the disease, etc.”

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Environment and Forest in its May 2012 report said that “Environment in ancient India was not an entity isolated, apart and independent from mankind.” The isolation of environment, it observed was a “modern-day phenomena arising out of crass commercialisation, careless technology, unplanned urbanisation and unbridled human greed.” It noted that the “relationship between people and environment / ecosystem in ancient India had been one of harmony, coexistence, natural care and concern - the two supporting and complementing each other in their own way.” The Committee observed that “Worship and reverence to various elements of environment — the earth , air, water , river, tree, forest , mountains ,etc by personifying them not only signify how crucial and vital these were considered for our existence by our forefathers but also guide us how best to preserve and protect our environment even in the absence of regulatory regime (and) environmental governance.”

The present paper aims to show how the Vedic sages laid the foundation of the marvellous traditions which forever ensured a healthy, harmonious and mutually fulfilling relationship with the environment. Their foresightedness is even more noteworthy when one remembers that during those times the serious issues plaguing mankind like pollution, environmental degradation, depletion of natural resources, etc had not arisen. An attempt has been made to demonstrate how Hinduism is inherently an ecocentric religion where all aspects of nature are respected.

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