



ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN IN SANSKRIT TEXT: A LITERARY SURVEY

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Abstract

Sanskrit literature is not only rich in the grammatical composition and romantic expression but also in knowledge about environment, its destruction and the need for its protection which come up in many contexts every now and then whenever any attempt is made to study this literature. Starting from the Vedic age till now it carries a number of appearances in the writings of scholars. This need to be explored in detail as the vast size and span of it leaves enough scope for researchers to dig up those sources of knowledge. In this paper different sources of knowledge are studied to find out the concern and knowledge on environment and its protection. It includes all those valuable sources to do maximum justice to the objective of the paper.

Keywords: Sanskrit texts, conservation, protection, plants, animals, medicines.

Introduction:

Protection of environment is a major concern in present age of globalisation and industrialization leading to a number of environmental movements and world level conferences. But a thorough look at Sanskrit texts reveals that the Indian knowledge in ancient and its later stages possessed a rich treasure of knowledge on environment and its protection. The *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Purāṇas*, Epics and even Sanskrit dramas contained a rich body of literature which are very much relevant to understand the importance of nature and its protection. This paper tries to find out the knowledge related to environment and its protection as is mentioned in writings of Sanskrit literature.

Environment Conservation in the Vedas:

Vedas are the vast repository of knowledge. The Veda supplies us various information regarding our past. It is interesting to know that the Vedas have several references in them on environmental protection, ecological balance, weather cycles, rainfall phenomena and related subjects. Vedic tradition believes that the world consists of five elements viz. kṣiti (Earth), Apa (water), Tejas (Agni), Marut (Air) and Vyom (Space) which are collectively known as Pañcamahābhuta. Indian seers were aware of the fact that without the preservation and conservation of the elements of environment it will be impossible for the mankind or other living beings to survive in their near future. This leads them to think over the measures for the sustainability of the nature hence they started to worship the nature. From the study of Veda it is observed that many of the Vedic deities or gods who have been praised are the part of our nature. The Vedic gods are well known to all and no mentioning of them all is needed here. Only for the present context some names are mentioned here. Ṛgveda supplies the information of the worship of the deities viz. Surya, Mitra, Varuṇa, Indra, Marut, Pṛthvī and others who are responsible for the maintenance of the balance of the Nature which in turn helps in sustaining the living world.

In one verse of Ṛgveda, it is stated -“Thousands and hundreds of years if you want to enjoy the fruits and happiness in life, then take-up systematic planting of trees.” Atharvaveda says “let there be peace in heaven, the Earth, the atmosphere, the water, the herbs, the vegetation, among the divine beings and in Brahman, the absolute reality. Let everything be in peace and in peace”¹. A hymn of Atharvaveda supplies an illustration of prayer for the sustainability of one’s cattles, sons and grand- sons where it is prayed to the seasons². This type of prayer signifies the far-sightness of the seers who were exceedingly concerned about a healthy environment. Besides these, various Vedic sacrifices also focus on the sustainability of the purity of the environment.

Environment in the Upaniṣad:

Īśopaniṣad has revealed the secret of existence of life on earth and importance of every organism for mutual survival. So, the very first verse in this Upaniṣad, arises as an advice to the men for the survival of all living being.³ (Īśopaniṣad)

Environment in the Purāṇas

The Purāṇic literature contains various messages related to the conservation of environment. Idol worship is the prominent preaching of the Purāṇas and it is noticed that all the gods and goddesses are presented before us with their own vāhanas. These vāhanas are taken from the animal world and signify some special meaning. The vāhana of goddess Lakṣmī is owl. It signifies that Lakṣmī is the goddess of wealth mainly paddy and owl protects that paddy-field from being eaten by small creatures like rats and locusts. Another reason for selecting owl as the vāhana of goddess lakṣmī is that it is perched at the top of the food-chain. So, to maintain the production of grains, owl family should be protected from extinction. This is a symbolic message for the protection of grains as well as the owl-bird. In the same way Sarasvatī is the goddess of learning and her vāhana is swan. Swan has a special quality that when some mixture of milk and water is kept before it, swan

can receive only milk from that mixture. So it is noticed that the special kind of birds and animals have been selected as the vāhana of gods and goddesses and to give special importance to them and make people concern about their importance in Nature.

In kālikā purāṇa, the whole process and elements for worshipping goddess Dūrgā has been mentioned. There is a mention of worship of ‘Patrika’⁴ which is also found in the name of ‘navapatrikā’ in later books which are guiding the worshippers till today. This part of ritual is performed during ‘Durgāpūjā’ at the early morning of ‘Saptamī’ i.e the seventh day of ‘Śuklapakṣa’ in autumn and spring season. This patrika is made up of some plants which illustrate the importance of those plants in our day to day life. ‘Navapatrikā’ refers to nine plants which represent the nine manifestations of gods. These are –banana plant (kadalī), pomegranate (dādimva plant), turmeric (haridrā), Jayantī plant, Bel (vilva), Aśoka leaf, Arum plant (Mānkacu), Cola cassia (kacu) and Rice paddy (dhānya). A creeper named Aparājītā is also used here to bind these nine objects together. According to Hindu belief everything which have great potentiality of doing benefit are given the position of god. The above mentioned plants have great medicinal value for which they are kept in the religious activity so that people may conserve them. The banana plant has great medicinal value .The inner part of the long stem has rich iron content as is the fruit banana itself. Iron keeps body strong and is the source of blood, the vital component for the survival. The pomegranate also is a source of iron besides other medicinal values. The paddy used in the ritual shows the significance of it for being the prime source of food in daily life it supplies carbohydrates and is part of everyday meal for many parts of the people of India. Turmeric is a popular plant. The root of turmeric is used as an anti-bacterial medicine. In this way all the leaves used in this ritual contain some medicinal and other values necessary for survival of mankind.

In Skandapurāṇa the importance of ‘Tulsī’ and ‘Āmlā’ has been elaborately described with mythological illustrations. Though the origination of Āmlā (referred here as Dhātrvṛkṣa) tree was given a religious and mythological explanation but it carries a scientific and secular knowledge too. Āmlā has got a rich medicinal value has got a high content of vitamin -C. Skandapurāṇa gives special attention to the tree and advised to worship the tree describing it as one of the most favorite plant of Hari i.e. Lord Viṣṇu.⁵

Along with Āmlā , Tulsī plant has also got high position in Skandapurāṇa. Though Tulsī plant has got high and frequent mention in many of the religious texts as the favorite leaf of Viṣṇu, Skandapurāṇa is the one which has given weightage and importance to Āmlā plant at its maximum. Not only that, Skandapurāṇa also discusses the germination of seed and the need for different necessary component for that⁶.

Environment conservation in the Epics

Both the epics the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata are the source of knowledge of various kind. It is very difficult to give all details of the environmental concerns reflected in those epics but certain striking incidences can be discussed for exploring the kind and extent of knowledge-stock of the Sanskrit literature. The great epic Rāmāyaṇa also hints at the preservation of the animal world. Sage Vālmīki in his Rāmāyaṇa vigorously opposed the killing of animals and the feeling which came through his voice becomes a poem when he heard the heart rendering cry of a crows bird killed by a hunter. The first verse of the world

thus spontaneously came out of the voice of the great sage Vālmīki⁷. The great king Rāma always shows his gratefulness towards the Nature. In Aranyakānda of the Rāmāyaṇa, it is found that Rāma adores the whole Nature while he was entering his newly constructed cottage.

A major environmental concern observed in Mahābhārata was the case of use of Brahmāstra by Aśvatthāmā. Brahmāstra was the most powerful weapon left with Aśvatthāmā when he was unable to win in his fight against Arjuna. When Aśvatthāmā finding no other way to take revenge against Arjuna for killing Dronācārya, his father, there was a heavenly warning in the sky if he throws this Brahmāstra it will not only kill Arjuna but all the living creatures also. So before throwing the Brahmāstra he should again and again think over the alarming effect of that dreadful weapon. So it can be understood from this single incident that even at the time of writing of Mahābhārata also there was enough knowledge about Nature, its sustainability and the causes of destruction of earth.

Environment revealed in Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya

The text Arthaśāstra though deals mainly with polity also shows the author's concern about the Environment. It has been noticed that Kauṭilya in his great work Arthaśāstra has prohibited the sale of meat by any individual. It act was regulated by the state. Slaughtering was restricted those days which is evidenced from the fact that there is no reference of any slaughter house or licensing of any slaughter house in the city. Unauthorized killing was treated as crime and the person engaged in such activities was given punishment by imposing fines. For observation of such activity an officer in-charge was appointed who is designated as 'Sūnādhyakṣa'. It is mentioned in the text that the Sūnādhyakṣa should impose the highest fine for binding, killing or causing harm or injury to deer, breast, birds or fish⁸. In other place it is said that the calf, the bull and the milk-cow should not be killed and it is also said that there should be a fine of fifty panas to the person connected to the killing of such animal⁹. As the animals and plants are the components to the ecosystem and it has a great importance to keep the environment in balance, so they should be conserved. This idea is clearly revealed in Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra.

Sanskrit Drama and Environmental Concern

In the drama Abhijñānaśakuntalam, Kālidāsa shows his great love for the nature. In the benedictory verse he eulogies the eight visible forms of Śiva i.e. Water, Agni, the Hotri, the Sun, the Moon, Space, Air and the Earth. Through this verse Kālidāsa tries to make people aware of the fact that these factors of Nature have great importance in the survival of the human being and other living organisms. One evidence of preservation of the nature is reflected in the uttering of a hermit of the hermitage of Kaṇva when he forbids the king Duṣyanta from throwing his arrow on a tiny dear. He tells the king that he should not kill the deer as that was a wealth of hermitage¹⁰. In that hermitage the rule was so strict that even the king was not allowed to kill animal. This incident proves author's deep thinking regarding the sustainability of the animal kingdom. Kālidāsa's consciousness and love for nature is reflected in various parts of the drama Abhijñānaśakuntalamam. In the first act of this drama there is a beautiful scene where the hero Duṣyanta meets Śakuntalā for the first time while she was engaged in pouring water to the plants along with her two

friends Priyamvadā and Anasuyā. The conversation among the hermit girls nicely depicts the idea of conservation of various trees in that hermitage. Śakuntalā was instructed by Kaṇva to take care of all the plants and trees in the absence of her foster father Kaṇva.

The drama Nāgānanda of Śrīharṣa which was composed in the 7th century A. D. reflects the concept of preservation of animal world. ‘Nāgānanda’ or ‘Joy of the Serpents’ is a nāṭaka where prince Jīmūtavāhana sacrifices his life for a serpent. Garuda, the king of birds used to kill the serpents and devoured them. On that circumstances serpent king Vāsuki told Garuda that he should not kill the serpents in this manner because for such action he would be in loss in the long run and this will be a threat for the serpent’s world also. There is a reference of ‘Kalpataru’ in this drama which is described as a heavenly tree that fulfills the wish of a person. This tree has a high place in the heart of Indian and is frequently used in various Indian scriptures. All these expressions hint towards the consciousness of the author regarding the preservation of the Nature.

Conclusion

The study of different Sanskrit texts shows the richness of Indian knowledge in ancient period. The study highlights diverse aspects of knowledge related to environment and its conservation and preservation. The knowledge of cosmic bodies to micro-organisms, germination of seed to animal breeding the universe as a system and even nuclear bomb, the knowledge of all can be found in some way or other in various contexts either in Vedas, Upaniṣads, or Mahākāvyas, and dramas. Though the paper also demands an exploration of various Purāṇas which are more intelligible and less abstract, the limited scope did not allow the author to dig up much except Skandapurāṇa and kālikāpurāṇa. Besides, it could not discuss much on other sources, yet has highlighted the kind of knowledge which are rich on environmental concern and protection of it.

Notes

1. *Om dyau śāntih, antarikṣa śāntih, pṛthivī śāntih, āpa śāntih, oṣadhayah śāntih, vanaspatayah śāntih, viśwedevah śāntih, brahmā śāntih, śāntireva śāntih sā mā śāntiredhi.*
2. Atharvaveda, 6th Anuvak, hymns 5,6.
3. Isopanisad, V.1 “इशा व्यास्यमिदम् सर्वं यद् किञ्चिद् जगत्यां जगत्। तेन त्यक्तेन भुज्वीता मा गृथं कस्यसिद्धं धनम् ॥
4. Kalikapurana.chapter 60. V. 20
5. Skandapurāṇa, part- II, Viṣṇukhaṇde, Kārtikamāsamāhātyam, chapter.12
6. Ibid. Chapter. 12
7. “मा निषादः प्रतिष्ठां त्वमगमः शाश्वती समाः। यद्क्रौञ्चमिथुनादेकमबधी काममोहितम् ॥”
8. ‘सूनाध्यक्षः प्रदिष्टाभ्यानामभयबन्बासिनां च मृगपशुपक्षिमत्स्यानां बन्धबधहिंसायामुत्तमं दण्डं कारयेत्’; Kangle, R P, The Kauṭiliya Arthaśāstra, 2.26.1, P. 80
9. Ibid, 2.26.10 &11

10. Kale, M R edited Abhijñānaśakuntalam of Kālidāsa , Act I, P. 18. “न हन्त्य न हन्त्य आश्रममृगोऽयम्”...“न खलु न खलु बाणो सन्त्रिपातोऽयमस्मिन्/मृदुनि मृग शरीरे तुलाराशाविवाप्तिः।”.

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