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Environmental Awareness In Indian Epics And Vedic Period

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ABSTRACT

The connection between humans and nature is inseparable. The environmental consciousness emerging today is a response to the ecological damage caused by technological developments. Still one can see that in ancient India people showed much respect for the environment in which they survived. Hinduism is a belief that has an ecologically rational theory. The Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata are age-old holy texts that include notes for maintaining an eco-friendly balance and the protection of environment.

Man is guided to live in complete harmony with nature. Man is the creation of five components e.g. earth, water, fire, sky, and air. If all five elements are equally balanced the human body remains healthy. Any inequality creates a break down in the body. Despite this, man is influenced by other factors, for example, kind of his diet, water, and climate.

Environment awareness is discovered in India right from the Vedic age. In different ancient texts, importance of environment and their conservation have been discussed. Indian saints have always considered the natural powers to be local deities. In 'Bhoomi Sukta' of Atharva Veda and in Yajur Veda it is asked to give respect to environment as gods and goddesses. Purity of water, natural elements mixture, awareness is discussed in Vedic texts. Respect towards trees is depicted in our great epics i.e., Ramayana and Mahabharata. In Puranas, cutting of trees has been described as a punishable offence. The earth has been regarded as the mother. This paper makes a peep into the environmental and ecological awareness in the Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Vedic Period of Ancient India.

Keywords: Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedic Period, Environmental consciousness, human, nature.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of forests in Indian epics can be understood from the fact that the epic devotes a book to the forests called the Aranyak Parva. Ayurveda was present and practised in the days of Vedic Period. Thus, the Mahabharata inspires us even today as it inquiries into human nature, human relationships, man's links with Nature, Universe and God and an individual's place within the defined society and indefinable self.

The ancient Indian culture has always maintained a way of life in union with the cosmic rhythm. This again is the epitome of the unique concept of Dharma. Apart from the poetic and ideal descriptions of a simple,

peaceful, and blissful co-existence of living beings, we get references to ecological and environmental issues in the Ramayana. Mahabharata also has the Dharma as its seed - the subtle dharma of living in perfect unison with cosmic rhythm, thereby supporting the natural blissful state of all beings, with one's mere existence. In the Anuśāsanaparva of Mahabharata, we get a full chapter (58th one) that compliments the construction of water reservoirs and planting of trees as great acts of piety. Thus the Ramayana and the Mahabharata surprisingly concern many environmental and ecological aspects, besides portraying a blissful and harmonious life in the heavenly village.

Philosophy of Environment in the Vedas-

Vedas contain many narratives and illustrations about the value of the environment. In the Vedic age, people worshiped nature and natural phenomena. In those times the range of forest was large and the field available for farming was less. Agriculture was not developed and the people were entirely reliant upon the natural resources nearby them to meet all their requirements. They were successful in connecting their life with the tangible surroundings and continuing patterns of the bonds with them. The Rgveda which is the oldest of the four Vedas comprises mantra addressed to gods and goddesses such as Indra, Agni, Varuna, Surya, Soma, Prithivi, Usas, etc.

1) Agni- Agni or fire holds an important position in man's life. It provides heat and lightning. Agni is seen in nature and it could be formulated by man's skill. It is through Agni that Gods receive the worship performed by the believers.

2) Indra- Indra is the God of Rain. His weapon is Vajra or thunderbolt. He is the strongest Vedic God. It is stated in Rig Veda that Indra smashes the clouds and provides rain for the growth of plants and other lands on earth.

3) Varuna- Varuna is the god of waters. He is white as a raindrop. It is cited in Rig Veda that Varuna produces water and controls oceans. He released the waters in the environment and delivered it to the rivers.

4) Surya- Surya is a solar god. He is the son of heaven and Aditi, spouse of the dawn. He drives across the sky, moved in a cart by seven horses. To gloss their skin people adore the Sun god, It is said that the rays of the sun have the potential to heal harmful skin infections and heart diseases.

5) Ushas- In the Rig-Veda the goddess Usas is associated with "The Dawn". Ushas is traditionally a goddess united with light and prosperity.

6) Prithivi and Aakash- The Goddess 'Prithivi' is connected to the earth, the place where human beings live. Prithivi is always associated with "The Sky". Earth is our mother and we are all her children. Earth is regarded as a 'mother' and Sky is the father of all.

7) Trees and Plants- Nature has been always precious to Indians. Plants have been admired in Indian scriptures as living creatures with cognizance. Several trees and plants achieve honourable mention in the Indian scriptures. Some of them include Ashok, Kadamb, Bargad (Banyan tree) Paarijaata, Tulsi, and Peepal, etc. The Rig-Veda and several old scriptures regard Tulsi as a lifesaving herb that favours longevity. Tulsi is considered as Goddess Lakshmi; every devotee of Lord Vishnu does worship using Tulsi leaves. The Banyan tree is holy, also identified as Kalpavriksha, the tree that fulfils the wishes of believers. According to ancient Indian scriptures, Lord Vishnu, Brahma, and Lord Shiva live in the Banyan tree. The banyan tree is widely utilized in Ayurveda to cure skin diseases, Diabetes, digestive disorders and it also boosts immunity.

In the Mahabharata, Shri Krishna has said that he is the Peepal tree. The married ladies praying for the longevity of their husbands encircled the Peepal tree, to get our desires fulfilled we tied the cotton threads around the trees. According to Ayurveda, the Peepal tree has cured many illnesses such as stomach pain,

Asthma, skin diseases, liver diseases, etc. In the Vedic age, people were conscious of the importance of forests in sustaining the equilibrium of nature. The Rig Veda instructs “Do not cut trees because they remove pollution”.

Environment and Nature in the Ramayana-

In Ramayana, the largest part of the story is in the forest. The author of Ramayana, Valmiki grants us the beauty of forests, and adventures of the animal world throughout this work. We can mark the peaceful world of the sages in forests. Shri Ram was delighted to reside in the forests of Chitrakuta and not anxious about his kingdom. In Ramayana, Ram, Lakshmana, and Sita while entering into his recently made hermitage at Chitrakut worshipped the entire nature, the forests, trees, and sacred Mandakini river. According to Ramcharitmanas, In Aranyakand, Lakshman left Sita under the protection of Nature and the forest. Meanwhile, when Sita was abducted by the demon Ravan, Ram and Lakshman enquired about nature, diverse creatures, birds, trees, and forests about her in a painful tone.

Sage Valmiki portrays the character of Ram as an adorable protagonist who is always willing to cooperate and live in harmony with other human beings. This characteristic of Ram benefits him in his hard journey in the forest where he has to survive like a forester. Ram and Lakshman experience various elements of nature like villages, dark and secretive forests, rivers, ponds, hills, valleys, mountains, lakes, caves, sea, continent, seashore, island, sky, etc.

Kishkindha, the empire of the forest-dwelling residents known as Vanaras, was the embodiment of living in harmony with nature, which was reflected in their residence and food habits. Biodiversity in the kingdom was prosperous and well maintained. Madhuvan forest guarded by generations of Kishkindha rulers, is mentioned in Ramayan. At the same time, many of the chiefs of Kishkindha such as Sugreev, Hanuman, and Nala, were also variously trained in what can be defined as the fields of geography, law, engineering, language, administration, psychology, and spirituality. The people of Kishkindha were physically strong and healthy. A framework of fair laws of nature was followed in Kishkindha. The residents behaved involuntarily and their efforts were genuine and generated a winning situation.

The devilish (Asuras) movements of the rulers and many citizens of the kingdom of Lanka indicated that they were not concerned about the larger good of the society or environment. They thought that the world was for their consumption. They used their energy and ego to fulfill their motives. Ramayan has mentioned the killing of wild animals, just like the common man was dominated, harassed, or killed. Ravan is said as an oppressor of all living things.

Along with the forest-dwelling societies such as Kishkindha, Ramayan finds mention of various Gurukuls and Ashrams spread across the country, devoted to holistic teaching and conducted by Rishi who gave priority to the physical, mental, and spiritual growth of scholars. The Ashrams were full of biodiversity. Ram, Sita, and Lakshman, when in the forest during their banishment, lived in the most eco-friendly way. They followed the sustainable ways of the Ashrams. On one event, while going to the Ashram of Agastya Rishi in southern India, Lord Ram points out to Lakshman, the peaceful mood of animals in the surrounding forest, which he relates to the positive vibrations emerging from the Ashram.

Rishi Matang – the Guru of Shabari – had facilitated a forest for meditation and education. In contrast, Lord Ram is defined as the guardian of all beings, and during his reign, agriculture prospered. It is mentioned that when Lord Ram got a chance to choose a boon, he chose for the well-being of all living beings, free-flowing rivers, and prospering nature all around. The monarchical flag of Ayodhya had an image of a tree.

The description of forests appears repeatedly as Ram and Lakshman roam through the forest encountering problems on every single path. Their companions in the forest were those, who lived in complete unity with nature like Hanuman, Sugreev, Jambavan, and Vultures like Jatayu, and Vibhishana, the youngest brother of Ravan. Ram and Lakshman make alliances with them and reach their purpose of searching for Sita through them. In the entire tale of Ramayan, Sage Valmiki provides an example of how an exiled human being

accomplishes his goal through peaceful and friendly behaviour with the unique energies of nature. The cooperation between Ayodhya and Kishkindha to eliminate the oppressive rule in Lanka, which was a threat to everybody, and the cordial relations between the two kingdoms thereafter, are examples.

Environment and Nature in the Mahabharata-

Nature is an integral concern in the Mahabharata which includes several stories. King Pandu departed the kingdom and moved into the forest for penance beside his two wives Kunti and Madri after being cursed by Rishi Kindama. In the forest, he lived the life of a hermit. Their five children 'Pandavas' were born and raised in the forest among hermits. King Pandu lived quite a long time in the forest with his wives and children. After some years the curse of the sage took effect and Pandu collapsed and died in the forest.

The Pandavas were exiled to the forest by the scheme of their cousins Kauravas. They have to experience a troubled life in the forests. According to the Vana Parva, Pandavas and Draupadi followed many hermits and sages of elevated status in the forest. The Pandavas and Draupadi resided in the forest for 12 years and 1 year in the incognito. Their adventures in the forest were incredible. The trees had fruits, herbs, and flowers in every season. In the forest, Arjun became entangled in austerity. As a result of Arjun's hard penance, Lord Shiva emerged in front of him in the mask of a hunter, and after a vicious battle with Arjun that crushed his pride; Lord Shiva gifted him the Pashupatastra. According to the Mahabharata, "the existence of an animal and the existence of a human are of equal value". Mahabharata does not observe any individual is separate even for a bit and it suggests wholeness.

CONCLUSION

In the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Environment and Nature are personified as a unified and harmonious system of life. The two epics unitedly draw an ecological sight of India from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka. Kalidasa has also adopted the approach of Sage Valmiki and Vyasa in depicting nature and social life in his dramas. It is said that true wisdom is beyond the limitations of time and place. The Vedic society of India which flourished and stayed for over 10,000 years till today, is a great repository of such knowledge and it is time that we apply it for our wellbeing. Today, people are facing problems such as pollution, population growth, and unevenness in the environmental cycles, etc. Brutal exploitation of biological resources by man, as a part of industrial and other human-centered development, ignoring the simple truth that the human species is only one among the various components of the cosmos, has already been destroyed in our environment. In Ancient India, people never disturbed about their surroundings and the need for ecology since they never faced environmental threats. Therefore, we can follow their eco-friendly experiences from the impressions of the ancient manuscripts.

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