

Ancient Verses of Vedas from an Ecological Perspective: Divinity of Nature and Theory of Natural Balance

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Abstract

One of the most revered ancient Indian texts, the “*Vedas*”, are a testament to sacred knowledge and wisdom, pertaining to the origin of the world and its living organisms. Vedas are a source of enlightening physical and spiritual knowledge that encircles “life” as we “live” it and “nature” as we “experience” it. In recent studies, it has been established that this ancient text cites factual and scientific knowledge, which has been duly researched and authenticated. Ecology, nature and the divinity of nature is a prominent and recurring theme in the Vedic texts. With vivid descriptions of “*Paryavaran*” or environment, and the creation and evolution of “*Dyava Prithvi*” or Heaven and Earth together, it also phenomenally illustrates the concept of natural balance, in relation with the five basic elements, the world and its organisms are created out of, which are, Earth (*prithvi*), Water (*jal*), Fire (*tejas*), Air (*vayu*), and Ether (*akasha*). “*Veda*” is a broad term to describe an extensive body of Indian Classical Literature, however this paper focuses on the four “*Vedic Samhitas*” namely the *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*. This paper aims to explore the concept of “divinity of nature” and the theory of “natural balance”, and how any imbalance among the elements of nature creates climate change, environmental degradation and exhaustion of natural resources. It also highlights the significance of Vedic wisdom regarding environmental conservation and protection, and how it can be utilised in the modern world for ecological transformation.

Keywords: Indian Classical Literature, Vedas, Divinity of Nature, Natural Balance, Ancient Indian Philosophy

Introduction

The Vedas are attributed as the earliest known Indian Classical Literature. The word “*Veda*” signifies “wisdom”, exploring philosophical narratives and curiosities through a variety of mythological discourses and allegories. Vedas have been divided into four doctrines, The

Rigveda, consisting of hymns, which is also considered as the oldest text of ancient Indian literary and philosophical traditions. The *Yajurveda* consists of sacrificial traditions and formulas, the *Samaveda*, consists of melodies and the *Atharvaveda*, consists of various spells and incantations for the healing and longevity of human life. *Atharvaveda* is also considered the oldest known doctrine in medicine and healing, through nature. These texts have served as the originating source for the Indo-Aryans' religious and philosophical thoughts (Radhakrishnan and Moore 3). The Vedas are considered to be *Apauruseya*, a work which is beyond the creation of a normal human being (Roy 21). The philosophies that the four Vedic texts propose, however, are not beyond the grasp of a human being and are meant to be adopted for a righteous life. Nature and ecology are an essential part of these texts. As Dr. Marta Vannucci mentions in her work, 'Human Ecology in the Vedas', "[...] the ancient Indian sages, the Rishis, had already established the foundations of an ecologically sound way of life some three to four thousand years ago, or earlier. The ancient traditional Indian way of life was objectively correct, rationally sound and ecologically valid" (167).

The term 'ecology' was first used by Ernst Haeckel in 1866, to describe the 'economies' of living forms. Ecology has come to be understood as the study of the interaction of living organisms and systems, with their environment, and with their co-species (Sarkar and Elliot-Graves). In order to have a better understanding of literary texts through an ecological perspective, the term 'Ecocriticism' comes into play. Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, according to Rueckert. It is an attempt to explore the roles played by literature in the ecology of human species, and the application of ecological concepts to the study of literature (Glotfelty xviii - xx). The Vedic texts, composed of hymns, chants and incantations, and melodies in the Vedic Sanskrit, have a deep-rooted ecological significance and scope for practical application in the contemporary world.

The Vedas

“[...] Countless are the resources of Mother Earth,
from whom flow the rivers of wealth in hundreds of streams,
Worship Motherland as you worship God

From time eternal, the Mother Earth is giving life to her children — you owe debt to Her”
(Atharvaveda 12:1:45)

The word 'Veda' is derived from the root word 'vid' in Sanskrit, which means 'to know', or according to another etymology, it means 'revelation'; the knowledge which contains the evidence of truth within itself (Wilson 1). According to the 'Puranas', the Vedas are believed to have originated from the mouth of 'Brahma', and hence are attributed as the 'word of divine', its creation beyond the capabilities of a normal human being, the work of an 'apaurusheya' (8). In the Vishnu Purana, it has been mentioned that the Vedas were created as a singular work and later on was divided into four separate treatises of divine knowledge, by the arranger and editor 'Vyasa', referring to 'Ved Vyasa'. The division of the Vedas into *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Atharvaveda*, and *Samaveda*, has been credited to Ved Vyasa, the task to have taken place in the 'dwapara yuga' (9). In the *Shapatha Brahmana*, it has been mentioned "From them so heated the three Vedas were produced, the *Rigveda* from *Agni* (fire), the *Yajurveda* from *Vayu* (air) and the *Samaveda* from *Surya* (the Sun)" (6).

Hence, the Vedic scriptures, mythologically believed to have been in existence since the beginning of time, and to have been created out of divine natural forces; beautifully explain nature and its intimate relationship with human beings. There is, however, some scepticism about the dating of the Vedic texts. Some Indian scholars attribute them to 3000 B.C. and others to 6000 B.C., Vedas being dated back to the 15th century B.C is contested as well (Radhakrishnan and Moore 67). The great Indian mystic and scholar, Aurobindo Ghosh is of the view that Vedas hold within them secret doctrines and mystic philosophies (69). The Vedic texts are inundated with curiosity and philosophical impulse. One marvels at the array of knowledge they provide, dating back to centuries. In their appropriate context, an ecological examination of the Vedic texts offers a wealth of knowledge about the conservation and upkeep of our environment.

Vedic Divinity of Nature and the Theory of Natural Balance

“ O Prithivi, auspicious be thy woodlands, auspicious
be thy hills and snow-clad mountains.

Unslain, unwounded, unsubdued, I have set foot upon the Earth,
On earth, brown, black, ruddy and every-coloured, on the firm earth that Indra guards from
danger.” (*Atharvaveda* 12:1:11)

“O Prithivi, thy centre and thy navel, all forces that
have issued from thy body —

Set us amid those forces ; breathe upon us. I am the son of Earth, Earth is my Mother. Parjanya is my Sire ; may he promote me.” (*Atharvaveda* 12:1:12)

“Dyaus is my Father, my begetter: kinship is here. This great earth is my kin and Mother. Between the wide-spread world-halves is the birth-place: the Father laid the Daughter's germ within it.” (*Rigveda* 1:164:33)

In the Vedic texts, specifically the four *Vedic Samhitas*, natural elements and nature are venerated as ‘divine entities.’ In the above-cited translated hymns from the *Atharvaveda*, Prithvi or Earth is being referred to as ‘Mother’, which can also be connoted to ‘Mother Goddess’, endowing a certain divinity to the Earth itself. Humans are referred to as ‘the sons of Earth’, with Earth serving as the heavenly mother figure who gives birth to her offspring, raises them, and provides for their needs through her resources. Environmental resources including forests, hills, mountains covered in snow, as well as the soil are praised and referred to as ‘auspicious.’ In the third hymn cited above, from the *Rigveda*, Earth is again referred to as the ‘Mother’, and *Dyaus*, the Vedic deity of the sky or heaven is referred to as the ‘Father’. Heaven and the Earth are therefore life givers, Heaven sowing the seeds of life into Earth, and Earth nurturing and carrying life within her, similar to a child in the mother’s womb. The enormous corpus of hymns, which are devoted to, or glorifying nature in metaphorical and allegorical narratives, reveals the profoundly ingrained ecological concerns of the sacred Vedic texts.

Divinity of Nature and Nature Worship

The *Rigveda* begins with a hymn dedicated to *Agni* (fire), and similarly, the *Yajurveda* begins with a hymn for *Vayu* (air). Natural resources, flora and fauna, are a part of ‘lower mythology’ in the Vedas, entities at a lower position than the Gods, but divine in nature (Hopkins 3). Water, Mountains, Vegetation and Animals etc. are all revered as divinity and the Vedic texts describe using beautiful imagery, the importance and means of preservation for the same. Water is considered to have healing powers and every mountain is a divine entity, as well as a resort for the Gods. A variety of Trees and Groves are revered as holy as they are too, associated with the Gods. “A lamp is offered to the *Karanjaka* tree itself, and to cut down trees on the day of the new moon is a sin equal to that of murdering a priest (13, 123, 8 and 127, 3)” (7). Several Vegetal and Animal divinities are holy as well, their existence praised and needed for an ecological balance.

The Earth and its resources were hence seen as divine entities, to be worshipped and conserved by any means. The exploitation of natural resources and inflicting damage on them was considered 'sinful', having serious implications on human life. The Vedic traditions revel in the creations of God and aspire to make the best use of the resources human beings are bestowed with. They throw light on Nature's eternal history and being. The Rigveda, comprising 1,017 hymns divided over ten books, is more of a poetic outpouring on the immense nature of the Universe than the commandments of priests.

“Agni is in the earth, in plants ; the waters hold Agni
in them, in the stones is Agni.
Agni abideth deep in men : Agni abide in cows and steeds.” (*Atharvaveda* 12:1:19)

“Agni gives shine and heat in heaven : the spacious
air is his, the God's.
Lover of fatness, bearer of oblation, men enkindle him.” (*Atharvaveda* 12:1:20)

In the Rigveda, Nature deities are being worshipped; *Agni* (fire), *Dyaus* (sky), *Surya* (Sun), *Vayu* (air), *Apas* (water), *Usas* (dawn), *Marut* (storm) and *Prithvi* (Earth). The deities were all related to ecological phenomena, hymns being dedicated to them and each of these phenomena given the utmost importance. It is also interesting to note that when a prayer or worship is offered to any one of them, in the Rigveda, that specific Nature deity becomes the chief God, the supreme creator and the supreme destroyer of the universe and life (Radhakrishnan and Moore 4). Similarly, we see these ecological occurrences being referred to as deities in the other three Vedas as well, for instance, in the two hymns cited above, from the *Atharvaveda*, *Agni* is being revered as the 'God'. *Agni* is omnipresent in biotic and abiotic life forms, in the earth, the plants, the waters and the stones. It is present in human beings as well as in animals. It is what gives light and heat, the air belongs to the God of Agni, human beings are called upon to enkindle this divine force for the betterment of their lives. S.R.N. Murthy, a well-known geologist, has stated in his work "Vedic View of the Earth", that "the natural geological aspects have been described as *Indra*, *Agni*, *Vayu*, *Varun*, *Usas* etc." (Tiwari 159). Personifying nature and ecological phenomena as divinity, and nature worship is therefore an inherent part of the Vedic texts, to bless and protect 'life'.

Elements of Nature and Theory of Natural Balance

Elements of nature, often varying in their exact number, are often mentioned in the Vedic texts. The fundamental concept is that Prakriti, the primordial force that permeates all living

forms, is the source of the five main elements—space, air, fire, water, and earth—that together make up the environment. Although each of these aspects has a distinct expression, they are all interconnected and dependent on one another. The safeguarding of the *Dyaus* (heavens) and *Prithvi* (earth) together as interrelated spheres for overall well-being is addressed in the Vedas (Mukherjee 20-21).

“Agni and Prithivi, closely connected,
may they bring low for me the Boon I mention.
Vayu and Firmament, closely connected, may they, etc.
Closely connected Dyaus and the Aditya, may they, etc.
Closely connected Varuna and Waters, may they, etc.
Lord of the seven communities and her who forms all beings, eighth.
Make our ways full of pleasantness: may So-and-So and I
Agree.” (*Yajurveda* 26:1:1)

According to a hymn from *Yajurveda*, cited above, fire, air, heat/light, Sun, water, cloud and sky/heaven are the seven forces of life, on whose support all living beings depend for the sustenance of their life. Earth is revered as the main upholder of life, a divine entity, on which all these interactions take place and life is sustained. Man is called upon to make a beneficial use of these divine interactions and create a good life for himself. The number of the core elements varies across the Vedic texts. In the two hymns from Atharva Veda, cited below, the numbers ‘five’ and ‘six’, are in repetition and hold great meaning when read in their appropriate contexts. They can also connote the number of ‘elements of nature’ among the variety of meanings like five senses, five seasons, five directions, six senses, etc. Despite these variations and inconsistencies, the case for Vedas bestowing great reverence to the forces of life, the elements of nature, is not undermined.

“Five milkings answer to the fivefold dawning, five
seasons to the cow who bears five titles.

The five sky-regions made fifteen in number, one head have these to one sole world
directed.” (*Atharvaveda* 8:9:15)

“Six Elements arose, first-born of Order: the six-day
time is carried by six Samans.

Six-yoked the plough is, as each trace is numbered : they call both broad ones six;
six. Earth and Heaven.” (*Atharvaveda* 8:9:16)

However, the *Upanishads* state that there are five basic elements of nature, of which this universe and life are constituted of, Fire, Air, Water, Land and Space (*Aitareya Upanishad* 3:1:3). The equilibrium among these components or elements and living things has been preserved by nature. The natural balance is disturbed by an increase in any environmental component's proportion above a certain point, and any change to the natural balance poses serious challenges for the universe's living things. Various environmental components have established connections with one another. Humans and the ecosystem have a very natural relationship because they cannot survive without it (Tiwari 158).

Ecological Significance of Vedic Texts: Reverence, Preservation, Transformation

The very concept of environmental preservation dates back to the Vedic era; it is not a contemporary occurrence. The Vedic ‘Man’ initially sensed God's existence in the world through nature, during the earliest, most formative stages of their civilization (Desai 638) The basic elements of nature were not perfectly balanced for the universe's creation. It has also been suggested by various mythological tales that the cosmos initially expanded before beginning to contract. As the basic forces' or elements' strengths were adjusted, the cosmos then started to expand again, creating a habitable world, known as the ‘*Vivasvana*’ (Roy 57). This was the world where life could sustain itself, but it was also the duty of the living beings to protect and not over-exploit the resources provided to them, so as to not hinder the natural balance of the world they live in. The Vedic texts have a copious number of hymns dedicated to the preservation of ecological balance, and on how to make the most apt use of the ecological resources, for the betterment of their mind, body and soul.

“Whatever I dig from thee, O Earth, may that have quick growth again
O purifier, may we not injure thy vitals or thy heart.” (*Atharvaveda* 12:1:35)

“Be glad and joyful in the Plants, both blossoming and bearing fruit,
Plants that will lead us to success like mares who conquer in the race.” (*Rigveda* 10:97:3)

“Let fruitful Plants, and fruitless, those that blossom, and the blossomless,
Urged onward by Brihaspati, release us from our pain and grief.” (*Rigveda* 10:97:15)

In the hymns cited above, from the Atharva Veda and Rig Veda, respectively, practices for the preservation and conservation of ecological resources are preached in an allegorical and theological form. The first Hymn can be connoted to an advisory against depleting Earth of its resources, by exploiting it for minerals, vegetation and even groundwater. A cautious prayer, that Earth may be replenished of its resources again and not destroyed by exploitative acts of man. In the two hymns cited above, from the *Rig Veda*, the essentiality of plants, both blossoming and blossomless, fruitful and fruitless, for the nurturing and advancement of human life is stated.

Vedic Texts: from the Ancient to a Modern Era

The Vedic texts highly personify 'Nature' and attribute a divine quality to ecological entities. The Vedic Aryans indicate that they were aware of their reliance on and relationship to something greater than nature by personifying and worshipping natural things. Personification entails knowing a person, and personifying a natural thing as a subject of worship implies having a more or less clear understanding of what we refer to as 'God'. Man yearns for a superior force he can rely on. He could revere someone who is superior to him. The gods of the different stages of the Vedic faith are reflections of man's evolving requirements, pains, desires, and heart-searchings (Radhakrishnan and Moore 98).

“But the paramount importance of the Rig-Veda is after all not as literature, but as philosophy. Its mythology represents a clearer, even if not always chronologically earlier stage of thought and religious development than is to be found in any parallel literature. On one side at least it is primitive in conception, and constructive under our very eyes: how a personal god develops by personification out of a visible fact in nature (anthropomorphosis) no literary document in the world teaches as well as the Rig-Veda” (Bloomfield 29).

It is necessary to see the Vedas, not just as a theological and mythological text, but as a serious work of literature, brimming with scientific, philosophical, moral and ecological knowledge and discourses. It is not fruitful to reject the doctrines of this marvellously detailed text on the premise of it being primitive and closer to theology than science. As Goldsmith believes, the ancient texts of the world, mythologically presented, are not merely pre-scientific revelations but an insight into the reality of our being, they must be read with serious and earnest considerations as religious practices may have the enormous potential for

saving the natural world. “Dayananda considered the Vedas to be the books of all fields of knowledge, and he has written his commentaries to prove this point. Aurobindo has given a psychological interpretation of the Vedas. *Satwalekara* follows the line of thinking of Dayananda to a certain extent” (Roy 34). Hence, it can be inferred that Vedas belong to the world and not just one religion, a literary reading of the texts reveals a multitude of mysteries and philosophies, of utmost importance too.

Conclusion

The Vedic texts personified ‘Nature’ as ‘Divinity’ and hence, the Earth and its resources were revered and protected at all costs as sacred beings. Natural resource exploitation and harm were regarded as "sinful," as they had detrimental effects on human existence. The Vedic customs praise God's creations and maximize humankind's access to its resources. They also discuss the "Elements of Nature," which make up the world, and how nature has maintained the balance between these components or elements and living beings. Any rise in any environmental component's percentage over a certain threshold disturbs the natural balance, and any shift in the natural balance presents significant risks to the universe's living things. Environmental protection is not a modern phenomenon; the idea itself is rooted in the Vedic period. During the oldest, most formative phases of their culture, the Vedic “Man” first discerned the presence of God in the world through nature. However, the Vedas must be read as a serious work of literature, full of scientific, philosophical, moral, and ecological knowledge and discussions, rather than just as a religious and mythological document; the study of which is imperative in understanding its mystical philosophies and thoughts.

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