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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CONSERVATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN ANCIENT INDIA FROM UNSUSTAINABLE TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

In ancient Indian traditions people have always valued mountains, rivers, forests, trees and several animals. Thus much of nature was venerated and protected. Forests have been associated with the names of forest gods and goddesses both in the Hindu religion as well as in tribal cultures. Ancient Indians had recognized the animals' right to co-exist with man and therefore they were loved, nurtured and even worshiped. In order to impress upon the commoners about their importance, the animals were given the status of gods and goddesses. Nature Worship that sprang from the unquestionable supremacy of Nature; and It is believed that the five element Agni, jala (water), vayu (wind), prithvi (earth) and akash (space) have a great influence on life. Sustainable development looks at the equity between countries and continents, races and classes, gender and ages. It includes social development and economic opportunity on one hand and the requirements of environment on the other. It is based on improving the quality of life for all, especially the poor and deprived within the carrying capacity of the supporting ecosystems. It is a process which leads to a better quality of life while reducing the impact on the environment.

Key words: Hindu religion, India, Nature Worship, Agni, Jala, Vayu, Prithvi, Akash, Sustainable development, Environment, Ecosystem.

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INTRODUCTION

Until two decades ago the world looked at economic status alone as a measure of human development. Thus countries that were economically well developed and where people were relatively richer were called advanced nations while the rest where poverty was widespread and were economically backward were called developing countries. Most countries of North America and Europe which had become industrialized at an earlier stage have become economically more advanced. They not only exploited their own natural resources rapidly but also used the natural resources of developing countries to grow even larger economies. Thus the way development progressed, *the rich countries got richer while the poor nations got poorer*. However, even the developed world has begun to realize that their lives were being seriously affected by the environmental consequences of development based on economic growth alone. This form of development did not add to the quality of life as the environmental conditions had begun to deteriorate. By the 1970s most development specialists began to appreciate the fact that economic growth alone could not bring about a better way of life for people unless environmental conditions were improved. Development strategies in which only economic considerations were used,

had begun to suffer from *serious environmental problems due to air and water pollution, waste management, deforestation and a variety of other ill effects that seriously affected peoples' well being and health*. There were also serious equity issues between the "haves and the have nots" in society, at the global and national levels. The disparity in the lifestyles between the rich and the poor was made worse by these unsustainable development strategies. Many decades ago, Mahatma Gandhi envisioned a reformed village community based on sound environmental management. He stressed on the need for sanitation based on recycling human and animal manure and well-ventilated cottages built of recyclable material. He envisioned roads as being clean and free of dust. His main objective was to use village made goods instead of industrial products. All these principles are now considered part of sound long-term development. Gandhiji had designed a sustainable lifestyle for himself when these concepts were not a part of general thinking. Indira Gandhi said in the Stockholm Conference in 1972 that poverty was the greatest polluter. This meant that while the super rich nations had serious environmental problems, the under-developed in Asia, Africa and South America had a different set of environmental problems linked to poverty. Developing countries were suffering the consequences of a rapidly expanding human population with all its effects on the over utilization of natural resources. The current strategies of economic development are using up resources of the world so rapidly that our future

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generations, the young people of the world, would have serious environmental problems, much worse than those that we are facing at present. Thus current development strategies have come to be considered unsustainable for the world's long-term development. The concept of development has come to be known as "Sustainable Development". The nations of the world came to clearly understand these issues at the Rio Conference in 1992. Several documents were created for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which brought out the fact that environment and development were closely connected and that there was a need to 'care for the Earth'.

Sustainable development is defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs

Sustainable development also looks at the equity between countries and continents, races and classes, gender and ages. It includes social development and economic opportunity on one hand and the requirements of environment on the other. It is based on improving the quality of life for all, especially the poor and deprived within the carrying capacity of the supporting ecosystems. It is a process which leads to a better quality of life while reducing the impact on the environment. Its strength is that it acknowledges the interdependence of human needs and environmental requirements.

Environmental ethics: issues and possible solutions

Environmental ethics deal with issues related to the rights of individuals that are fundamental to life and well being. This concerns not only the needs of each person today, but also those who will come after us. It also deals with the rights of other living creatures that inhabit our earth.

The ethical basis of environment education and awareness

Perhaps the most important concern is related to creating an ethos that will support a sustainable lifestyle in society. This brings us to the need for environmental education. The Honorary Supreme Court of our country has thus ordered that every young individual at school and college level be exposed to a course on environment. It is not to create only an awareness of environmental issues, but also to bring about pro environmental action. Among the variety of tools that can bring home the ethical issues of the environment, no solution is as powerful as real life experiences in nature. Creating a love for nature brings about strong pro environmental action. Our current educational processes at school and college level are being reoriented to bring this about.

The conservation of ethical and traditional

Value systems of India

In ancient Indian traditions people have always valued mountains, rivers, forests, trees and several animals. Thus much of nature was venerated and protected. Forests have been associated with the names of forest gods and goddesses both in the Hindu religion as well as in tribal cultures. 'Tree' goddesses have been associated with specific plant species. *Ficus religiosa*, the peepal tree, is venerated and is thus not to be cut down.

The Banyan tree in some regions such as Maharashtra, is venerated once a year by tying a thread around it as a symbol of respect. The Tulsi plant is grown on the doorstep outside every home.



Patches of forest have been dedicated to a deity in many Indian cultures especially in tribal areas. These traditionally protected forest patches depict the true nature of undisturbed vegetation and have a large number of indigenous plant species as their exploitation has been controlled through local sentiments. Certain species of trees have been protected as they are valued for their fruit or flowers. The mango tree is protected for its fruit around most farms even when wood becomes scarce. The Mohua tree (*Madhuca indica*) is protected by tribal people as it provides edible flowers, oil from its seeds and is used to make a potent alcohol. Many plants, shrubs and herbs have been used in Ayurvedic medicines which were once available in the wild in plenty. These are now rapidly vanishing. Ancient Indians had recognized the animals' right to co-exist with man and therefore they were loved, nurtured and even worshiped. In order to impress upon the commoners about their importance, the animals were given the status of gods and goddesses. They declared that Almighty incarnates in different animal forms. The kings and the emperors opted different animals in their emblems. Many festivals were/are observed in honor of several animals. In order to inculcate love for animals among children, animals were made heroes in stories. The rulers gave them prime position in art and architecture. Unfortunately, today we are neither adopting ancient Indians' compassionate attitude, nor scientific approach of the westerners towards these animals and hence we are heading towards a catastrophe.

The activities of ancient Indians were woven around the animals. Therefore, they knew the happenings of animal world as much as today's ardent student of zoology. This vast knowledge has been recorded in the scriptures of the time. The Upanishads contain detailed descriptions of horses and cattle. The Garudapurana contains life-histories of fishes and turtles. There are also religious books dedicated to a specific animal. Nagamahdimya, Nandi-purdoa, Mayiratrahimya and Pashu-puriltia are only a few of them. These writings are older than other scriptures of the world; they contain very modern concept such as, origin of life, organic evolution and environmental science.

Here are a few examples as how animal activities are effectively used to impress the abstract concepts to commoners.

- Almighty is present everywhere but he can't be detected easily just like a silk worm cannot be distinguished from the cocoon that his spun around itself.
- When man becomes united with cosmic God, he cannot be separated from the latter just like pollens cannot be isolated from honey, though it is part of the former.
- Man has to attain moksha by continuously chanting of 'Om' mantra in the way a spider finds its salvation in the web it had woven.
- Immortal soul lives in mortal body for some time and then is reborn in a new body, in the same way as worm keeps on changing its resting place.
- A fickle-minded person is like a wild horse whereas a wise man is like a well trained horse which pulls god's chariot.
- Ultimately man has to seek eternal peace just as ever flying vulture has to rest for some time.
- Chanting of mantras has been compared with the croaking of frogs in the rainy season.
- Many species of animals are venerated as being the 'vahan' or vehicle of different gods on which they are said to travel through the cosmos.



In Indian mythology, the elephant is associated with Ganesha. The elephant headed Ganesha is also linked to the rat. Vishnu is associated with the eagle. Rama is believed to be worshiped by monkeys. In mythology, Hanuman, rendered invaluable help to Rama during his travels to Lanka. The Sun god, Surya, rides a horse and has a superb chariot on which he moves through the sky.



The lion is linked to Durga and the blackbuck to the moon goddess. The cow is associated with Krishna. Vishnu's incarnations have been represented as taking various animal forms which serially include, fish, tortoise, a boar and a dwarf, and a half man half lion form. Mountains like Revtachal, Himalaya, Govardhan etc were believed to contain life saving medicinal plants. Ganga, Yamuna, Kalindri, Gomti and many other rivers were worshiped by ancient Indians. The associations to various plants that have been given a religious significance include Tulsi, which is linked to Lakshmi and Vishnu. The Tulsi plant is also linked to the worship of ones own ancestors. The peepal tree is said to be the tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment. It is also associated with Vishnu and Krishna. Several trees are associated with the goddess Laxmi, including Amalaki, Mango and the Tulsi shrub. Rudraksha is believed to be a scared one. People make the rosary from it. They worship the nature as it is the Mother Nature.





Nature Worship that sprang from the unquestionable supremacy of Nature; and It is believed that the five element Agni, jala (water), vayu (wind), prithvi (earth) and akash (space) have a great influence on life. They believe that each in village, any large tree is revered as the power that sustains the community. According to the popular belie, all plants are conscious being with distinct personalities. They are represented as gods, demons and animals And since time immortal, the grateful population found it entirely natural to worship trees that gave them food, fire, shelter, shade, clothing and medicine. In fact a seal discovered during excavations at an Indus Valley site (the first-known ancient Indian civilization, c. 3000 BC - 1700 BC) shows the peepal tree being worshipped.



The importance of trees is also mentioned in the Puranas. Because they do not stop growing, trees symbolize reproduction, especially the flowering and the fruit-bearing species. Therefore in villages, any large tree is revered as the power that sustains the community. Trees play an important role in almost all ceremonies, especially their leaves, fruit and roots. Some sacred trees are the mango (*Mangifera indica*), the neem, peepal, durva., kushagrass etc. They worship bull, cow considering them holy animal. Snake worship is popular here,

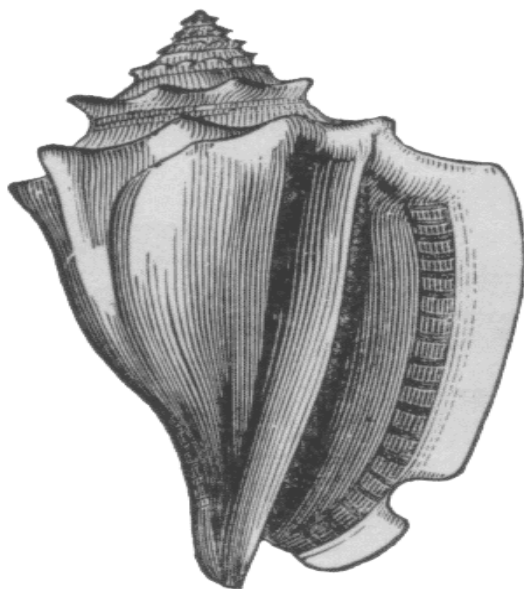
people call them nagdev. Traditions also held that these species, which were considered as an important aspect of Nature, were the basis of local life support systems and were integral to bringing about a harmonious life. In traditional societies of the past, these examples were all a part of ethical values that protected nature. As modern science based on the exploitation on nature spread into India, many of these traditions began to lose their effectiveness as measures that led to conserving nature. The Indians also had the concept that any animal can be reproduced and evolved only from pre-existing animal, which is also the hypothesis on which organic evolution theory relies. According to Brihadraoyaka Upanishad, Virdjan got bored of solitude and adopted binary division like an ameba and became two individuals, one of them acting like male and other the female. As the time passed by, these individuals assumed different animal forms such as ants, cattle, donkey, goats and pigs. Thus, the whole world was populated by evolving one group of animals into another. However their classification of animal world was on the basis alone, as they did not believe of external forms in killing and dissecting the animals for their study. Ancient Indian people were aware of the role played by heredity and environment in the development of an individual.

In Yajurveda, a prayer reads, "Give us cows that have abundance of milk, bulls that have full vigor and vitality, horses that can face challenges of any enemy, a ruler who is courageous and fearless, intellectual son and a wife who can take good care of the young and old". Their prayer in Bhiimi-siikta indicates that they had intimate knowledge of different animals ;"In winter protect us from the scorpions and snakes that creep in our dark and moist caves, in rainy season from ferocious boars and bison, in summer from tigers, lions and other man-eating animals" says the prayer. There are many instances in our scriptures where ancient Indians had mastered animal languages. While king Kekaya was with his queen, he overheard the conversation of a pair of birds nesting in his courtyard which made, him laugh. He admitted to the queen that he understood birds' talk but refused to share this with others which was a taboo. When the queen insisted to know the contents of the bird's conversation, the king preferred to divorce her on the advice of his guru who had blessed this boon on the king than divulge the code. In Chandogyaupanishat another interesting incident has been mentioned. One evening a pair of cranes were flying back to their place of rest ; the talkative one said to the other that the king Janasbruthi is a very religious and learned person and therefore we must be extra careful while flying over his kingdom. This other crane reacted sharply and asked, "Does this king come anywhere near wisdom of Raikva?" The king overheard this conversation, located Raikva who was relaxing under a bullock cart and learned Bramha-jnana from him.

Two thousand year old Panchatantra contains numerous stories in which the animals have been given prominence. This collection of stories is also the basis for 'Aesop's Fables'. Even today, children as well as adults find great excitement in reading these animal stories. Talkative turtle, stupid frog, rat and lion stories are too well known. Similarly all grandma stories have crows, sparrows, snakes as main characters. The court poets have written numerous collections in which the animal life has been described in minute details. Kalmias and Banal give a vivid picture of a variety of animals that lived together at ashrams. Buddhist Jathaka stories attach great importance to rebirth. The elephants and the monkeys come across a variety of animals in different re-births. During his

long vanavasa, Lord Rama developed special relations with different animals such as Jatayu, Sugriva, Hanuman, deers and monkeys. Kishkinda of Ramayana now known as Hampi has good population of monkeys even today. Lord Krishna was also an animal lover. In order to protect the animals that he loved, from heavy rains and thunder storm he lifted a huge mountain and came to be known as Govardhana Giridhari.

The emperors, kings and queens adopted different animals as their emblems. The Gangas of Talkadu opted for an elephant, whereas a lion was Kadamba's choice. Hoysala's emblem has a tiger whereas the Vijayanagara kings settled for a boar. Mysore Maharajas went for Ganda-bherunda, two-headed mythical bird. These emblems were printed on flags that were hoisted at the time of different religious functions. Coins of different denominations were minted by embossing these emblems. These emblems were also displayed prominently on temples, forts and palaces. Because of their minute size, the invertebrates are not given much importance in olden days. However, the Mollusk, the soft bodied shell fishes were considered as very sacred. Lord Vishnu always carried a conch which is an exoskeleton of the animal. A shaligrama which is worshipped as a representative of Vishnu, is a fossilized mollusk. Pearl oyster were collected from the sea bed. Among insects, honey-bees, silk-worms and mud-wasps were very well known. Often fish are mentioned in our mythology. Our progenitor, Manu, finds a little golden fish in his folded palms while offering 'Arghya' to the sun god. The frightened fish promises Manu that some, day it will come to his rescue if he let it go now.



Fascinated Manu rears the fish in his ashram. When it grows up he first transfers it to a lake and then to the sea. One day the fish brings a warning that, deluge is inevitable and vanishes. When a terrible torpedo hits the sea and land, Manu collects all the animals in a huge boat with an intention to protect them. However frightened animals raise hue and cry and the boat is about to capsize. At that moment the fish appears on the sea and drags the boat to a safe place. Churning of the ocean by the Suras and Asuras is a very interesting episode in Hindu mythology. They employed Vasuki, a huge poisonous serpent as a rope and Mandara mountain as a churner. In order to prevent the mountain from sinking, Lord Vishnu assumed the form of a turtle and supported it. As a result of this churning,

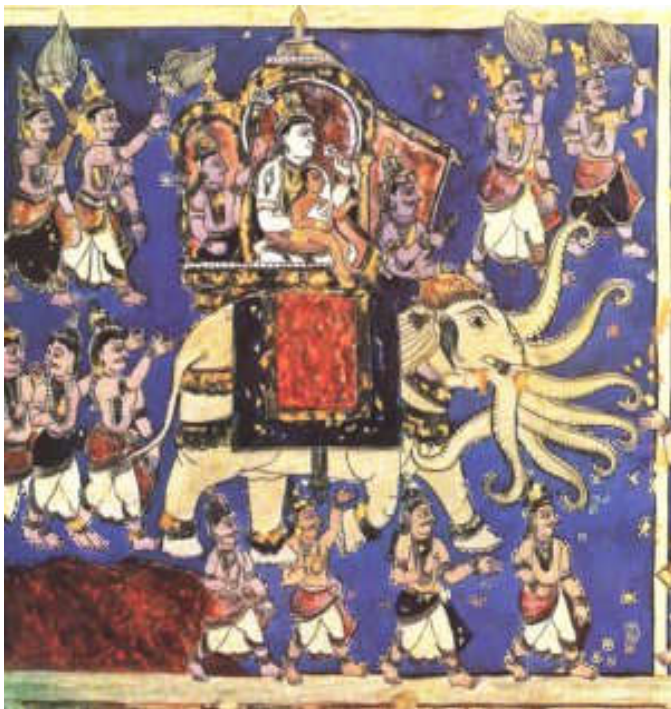
very rare gems like, Kamadhenu, Shankha, Dhanushya, Chandra, Silrya, Dhanwantri, Amritha, Rambha and Laxmi, came out of the ocean. Once Garuda was accompanying his father to Chandraloka. On his way, in the Himalayas, Garuda visits a lake to quench his thirst. To his great surprise he finds in the lake, a tortoise and an elephant fighting each other ferociously. He was at loss to know how to stop them from fighting and hence he feasted on both of them and solved the problem permanently ! The crocodile is given prime of place in Hindu religion. It is believed that the Ganga river depends on a crocodile for her very frequent visits to Bay of Bengal from the Himalayan mountains. The rain-god Varuna also rides on Makara. Kamadeva's emblem is Makara and hence his wife carries it whenever she goes. At times the couple takes a joy ride on this animal. In one of the expeditions of Himalayas, Hanuman was bathing in lake when all, of a sudden a huge crocodile clasps his legs. With great difficulty he drags the animal out of water. The cruel animal turns itself into a beautiful damsel and proclaims that because of Daksha's curse she became a crocodile and it is Hanuman's contact that revoked the curse.

Similarly, when Hanuman was returning from Lanka his perspiration fell in the mouth of a Nakshttra and she gave birth to Makara Dhawaja. The story of Gajendra Moksha is well known. When the elephant Gajendra visits a pool of water, a under-water crocodile clasps its sharp teeth into one of its hind legs. When the -elephant seeks Lord Vishnu's intervention, the lord kills the crocodile and sets the elephant free. Kashyapa muni populated the patalaloka. with a variety of snakes. Thus his wife Kadru is considered as the mother of all the snakes. When Janamejaya, wanted to eliminate all the snakes, Takshaka, the king of the serpents with the help of Astika prevented him from doing so. Nagapanchami is an annual festival celebrated in honor of the serpents. Sesha, Visuki and Taksbaka are important representatives of the snake-world. Sesha dedicated himself in the service of Lord Vishnu. Vasuki volunteered himself to be employed for churning of the ocean. When Vishnu incarnated as Krishna, gesha accompanied him as Balarama. It is a very old custom to instal Naga-stones in villages and towns and periodically worship them. Garuda is an extraordinary son of Kashyapa and Vinata. At the time of his birth, his glowing face made the people think that he is God Agni Himself. The snakes are his favorite snacks. Jatayu and Samprathi are Garuda's two offspring. Pigeons are favorite animals of Kamadeva and Yamaraja. Karthikeya employed peacock for his transportation. Herons are associated with Koushikamuni. Goddess Saraswati always rides a swan. The crow is very well-versed with happening of the heaven and hence people who wish to go to paradise try to please it.

More Examples of Animals from Indian Mythologies

Deer is associated with innumerable stories. Maricha assumes the form of a golden deer in order to attract Sitadevi. Lord Shiva gets wrapped up in deer skin. Vayus chariot is pulled by a pair of deer. Rishya-shringa was born to a deer which lapped up semen of Vibhandaka. Musk-deer, kasturimriga, is nearest relative of deer. Vashistha gets Kamadhenu for supervising samudramanthana operation. However later on Vishvamitra snatches Kamadhenu from Vasishta. During Parashurama's incarnation, she was in the custody of Jamadagni. Kirtavirya captures her from Jamdagni. Finally she lands with Indra. Cows are Lord Krishna's favorites. Yamadharmaraja always

rides a male water-buffalo whenever he intends to visit the earth. Mahishasuramardini is celebrated with all pomp and show, all over the country. Indra employs Ucchaishrava, a snow white horse as his vehicle. Later he changed to Airavata, an elephant with multiple trunks (shown besides). Sun god's chariot is pulled by seven red horses.



Conclusion

Concepts that support nature's integrity must thus become a part of our modern educational systems. This constitutes a key solution to bring about a new ethic of conserving nature and living sustainable lifestyles.

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