

Environment & Conservation

Be plain and simple to be identical with Nature. Restoring a state of balance and a respect for Gods creation, targeting inner change in individuals, changing individuals will ultimately expand to changes of global concern such as environment.

In many parts of India, communities have inherited the rich tradition of love and reverence for nature through ages. Religious preaching, traditions and customs have played a big role in this regard: Indian religions have generally been the advocates of environmentalism. They campaigned for such guidelines to the commoners that ensured an intimate contact and sense of belonging in nature. It came in the form of directives to the believers to perform certain rites and rituals, so that it became a way of their life.

Sometimes the messages of environmental protection and conservation are in a veiled form. Today, when the world is undergoing a serious crisis of ecological imbalance and environmental degradation, it is all the more important for us to understand such traditions.

Nature

The culture of conservation of nature dates back to the ancient Vedic Period. The four Vedas — *Rig-Veda*, *Sama-Veda*, *Yajur-Veda* and *AtharvaVeda* — are full of hymns dedicated to the supremacy of various natural entities. The Rigvedic hymns refer to many gods and goddesses identified with sun, moon, thunder, lightening, snow, rain, water, rivers, trees etc. They have been glorified and worshipped as givers of health, wealth and prosperity. The rain-god Indra has the largest number of hymns attached to him.

Sun worship is of vital importance in Vedic worship; the sun was worshipped in the form of gods like *Sūrya*, *Mārtanḍa*, *Uṣa*, *Pūṣan*, *Rudra*, etc. Today it has been proved that solar energy is the ultimate source of energy that regulates the energy flow through the food-chain, drives various nutrient cycles and thus controls the ecosystem all over the earth, but it was probably well understood and realized by the ancient people as well.

Trees have also been given huge importance the ancient Indian tradition. The four Vedas are full of references to various herbs, trees and flowers and their significance. Trees and plants were considered as animate beings and to harm them was regarded as a sacrilege.

The Atharva-Veda glorifies the medicinal value of various herbs. In the ancient texts we come across references to trees like *kalpavṛkṣa* and *pārijāta* with mythical powers. Padma (lotus) and trees like *vaṭavṛkṣa* (banyan), or flame of the forest (*pālāśa* in Hindi, *Butea frondosa*) were given special attention. The worship of the pipal tree (also known as Boddhi tree, *aśvattha* in Sanskrit, *Ficus religiosa*) became a folk ritual, and the pipal was called the king of trees in *Brahma Purāṇa*. *Kautilya* considered cutting trees or its branches is an offence and he prescribed various punishments for it. *Manusmṛti* has references to direct and indirect instructions about the conservation of plants and animals.

TABLE I : PROTECTION OF PLANTS		
Sl. No.	Nature of offence	Punishment prescribed
1.	Felling living tree for	Offender should be condemned as a degraded person (XI. 64).
(a)	establishing mine, factory or constructing big bridge/dam etc.,	
(b)	firewood.	Offender should be condemned as as a degraded person (XI. 65).
2.	Cutting down fruit-laden tree or shrub or twiner or climber or flowering herb.	Offender should recite certain <i>Ṛks</i> for hundred times (XI. 143).
3.	Destroying plants - cultivated or monocarpous or wild.	To atone for the sin, the offender has to attend on a cow throughout a whole day, and undergo penance by subsisting only on milk (XI. 145).

TABLE II : PROTECTION OF ANIMALS		
Sl. No.	Nature of offence	Punishment prescribed
1.	Teasing the animals.	Punishment should be commensurate with the gravity of offence (VIII. 286).
2.	Wounding, injuring leading to blood-shed, etc.	Cost of the treatment should be borne by the offender (VIII. 287).
3.	If other animals are harmed because of untrained driver of a vehicle.	Owner of the vehicle is to pay a fine of two hundred <i>paṇas</i> (VIII. 293).
4.	Causing harm to noble animals like cow, elephant, camel, horse, etc.	Offender is to pay a fine of five hundred <i>paṇas</i> (VIII. 296).

Punishments prescribed in *Manusmṛiti* for acts hostile to the environment (from Priyadarsan Sensarma, "Conservation of Biodiversity in *Manu Samhita*", *Indian Journal of History of Science*, 33(4), 1998)

Tradition of resistance

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw more examples of resistance against forest cutting. Most of those movements were largely against unjust colonial forest laws which affected the livelihood of the local people, especially tribals: the creation of government protected forests by the colonial government was

disastrous for the tribals, who were purely dependent on forest produce. The tribal communities were thus the worst hit by governmental forest departments. Even after the formation of an independent government in 1947, the official forest policy reiterated the main tenets of the colonial act of controlling all aspects of forest management through 'governmental forests'. The *Chipko* and later *Appiko* movements emerged out of these post-independence forest policies. These movements were led by individuals such as *Mirabehn*, *Sunderlal Bahuguna*, *Anna Hazare*, *Chandi Prasad Bhatt*, etc., who were motivated by the Gandhian ideology of non-violent satyagraha.

Anna Hazare used the village temple as a focus for eco-development in his area in Ahmadnagar district of Maharashtra. He involved local people in water management schemes with the logic that '*rain water should be trapped where it falls*' to raise the water table.

Indian traditions, customs and religious beliefs enlighten us about the protection of the flora and fauna. They teach us one fundamental principles of ecology, especially that ***every living entity of the biosphere has its own important role in the flow of energy and cycle of nutrients which keep the world going.***

Environmentalists, therefore, have started realizing the significance of culture as a force for conservation and have focused on traditional knowledge systems. Religious teachings and cultural traditions could be used in a positive sense for conservation of the environment and ecology.

Extracts from Primary Texts

Atharva-Veda

Hymn in praise of the Earth

May the Earth pour out her milk for me, as a mother does to her son.

O Earth, may your snowy peaks and your forests welcome us! ...

Set me, O Earth, in you centre and your navel, and in the vitalizing forces that emanate from your body. Through them may you purify us!

The Earth is my mother, her son am I;

Heaven is my father: may he fill us with plenty! ...

Upon the immutable, vast earth supported by the law, the universal mother of the plants, peaceful and welcoming, may we walk forever! ...

Agni is in the earth, in the plants; the waters hold Agni in them, in the stones

is Agni. Agni dwells in the hearts of men; Agni abides in cows and horses. ...

May we glorify you, O Earth, in villages and the open land, and assemblies and gatherings across the world.

(12.1, Bhūmī Sūkta, tr. adapted from Louis Renou and R.T.H. Griffith)

Note: These few lines from a hymn in praise of the Earth, *Pr̥thvī* ('the broad or vast one') spell out two fundamentals of India's ecological conceptions:

(1) The earth is our mother and we feed on her 'milk', that is, the food we get from her or grow on her.

(2) Agni, the fire, taken here as a symbol of consciousness, is not only in humans and animals, but also in waters and stones: the entire creation is conscious.

Mahābhārata

The cosmic tree

That man who worships every day the *āsvattha* [pipal tree, *Ficus religiosa*] ... is regarded as worshipping the whole universe with the gods and demons and human beings. (13.126, tr. by K.M. Ganguli)

Note: Here the pipal tree is regarded as a miniature symbol of the universe. This is in fact a Vedic idea: in the Rig-Veda, 'Vanaspati', the tree-lord of the forest (another name for Agni or the fire-god) is described as having 'a thousand branches' (3.8.11, 9.5.10). The tree becomes a cosmic symbol of unity (its trunk) in diversity (its many branches and countless leaves). Worshipping the tree is thus equated to worshipping the whole creation. This is the reason why most temples in India have a sacred tree (*sthalavṛkṣa*), which worshippers circumambulate.

Milking the Earth

Once on a time, the tall trees of the forest, the mountains, the gods, the Asuras, men, the snakes, the seven Rishis, the Apsaras, and the Pitris [ancestors], all came to [king] Prithu [and asked for boons]. ... He then addressed the Earth, saying, 'Coming quickly, O Earth! Yield to these the milk they desire. From that, blessed be you, I will give them the food they solicit.' ... And first of all, the tall trees of the forest rose for milking her. The Earth then, full of affection, stood there desiring a calf, a milker, and vessels [to hold the milk]. Then the blossoming Sala [*śāla* tree, *Shorea robusta*] became the calf, the Banian tree became the milker, torn buds became the milk, and the auspicious fig [pipal] tree became the vessel. [Next, the mountains milked her:] The eastern hill, whereon the sun rises, became the calf; the prince of mountains, Meru, became the milker; the diverse gems and deciduous herbs the Earth, obtaining 'all things capable of bestowing energy and strength'; they were followed by the demons, who obtained wine.] The human beings milked the Earth for cultivation and crops. The self-created Manu became their calf, and Prithu himself the milker. Next, the Snakes milked the Earth, getting poison as the milk ... [The milking continues, with the seven rishis milking the Earth and obtaining the Vedas as their milk, followed by various celestial beings, the ancestors, etc.] Even thus was the Earth milked by that assemblage of creatures who all got for milk what they each desired. ... The powerful Prithu, the son of Vena, performing various sacrifices, gratified all creatures in respect of all their desires by gifts of articles agreeable to their hearts.' (7.69, tr. adapted from K.M. Ganguli)

Note: In this passage from the Mahābhārata, the earth is compared to a cow giving fulfilling the desires of every category of creatures — divine, semi-divine, demonic, human, animal, vegetal, even mineral (the mountains). This is echoed in other myths such as the story of *Kāmadhenu*, Vasiṣṭha’s cow of plenty. The concept is simply that nature generously fulfils all our needs. In our current context we may add that while we are entitled to ‘milk’ the earth, if we end up harming the cow herself, she will have no more ‘milk’ to give us.

Manusmṛti

Plants have consciousness

Those born from sprouts are all flora propagated through seeds or cuttings. Those that bear copious flowers and fruits and die after their fruits mature are “plants” (oṣadhi); those that bear fruits without flowers, tradition calls “forest lords” (vanaspati); and those that bear both flowers and fruits, tradition calls “trees” (vṛkṣa). Various kinds of shrubs and thickets and different type of grasses, as also creepers and vines — all these also grow from either seeds or cuttings. Wrapped in a manifold darkness caused by their past deeds, these come into being with inner awareness, able to feel pleasure and pain. (1.46–49, tr. Patrick Olivelle)

Note: This passage from Manusmṛti lays out a broad classification of plant life. The interesting point here is the assertion that some plants have awareness and can feel pleasure and pain, a scientific truth that Jagadis Chandra Bose demonstrated some 2,000 years after this text was written.

Bhāgavata Purāṇa

The delights of nature

If Kṛṣṇa had gone to a distance to observe the beauty of the forest, they [Kṛṣṇa’s fellow cowherds] vied with each other in touching Kṛṣṇa first and enjoyed themselves [in this competition].

Some played on the flutes; some blew their horns, some sang humming in tune with black-bees, some imitated the sweet notes of the cuckoo.

Some ran with the shadows of the birds; some walked beautifully like royal swans; some sat down with the cranes, while others danced with peacocks.

Some pulled monkey’s tails dangling down from branches of trees, while others climbed trees along with the tails in hand. Some made wry faces at monkeys while others jumped from one branch to another.

Hopping with frogs, some became drenched with the waters of the streams and waterfalls. ... (10.12.6–10)

[Kṛṣṇa, accompanied by his elder brother Balarāma and the cowherds, has entered the Vrindavan forest. He addresses Balarāma:] ‘Oh, how wonderful! Carrying the presents of fruits and flowers on their heads, these trees bow down their heads laden heavily with fruits to your lotus-feet’ ...

Adorned with garlands and accompanied by Balarāma, he burst out into singing in imitation of the sweet humming of bees intoxicated with the honey sucked by them, while his followers were extolling his feats in song.

Sometimes he imitated the rapturous notes of swans, and sometimes he danced mimicking the dancing peacocks, provoking his companions to laughter.

Sometimes he imitated the chattering of the parrots in sweet indistinct words. Sometimes he sweetly cooed in imitation of the warbling and cooing of cuckoos.

Sometimes, in a voice deep and sonorous like the rumbling of clouds, and extremely fascinating to the cows and cowherds, he would affectionately call out [by names] cows that had strayed away to distant pastures.

He used to imitate the notes and cries of birds like cakora [a fabulous bird subsisting on lunar rays], krauñca [a curlew or heron], cakravāka, [the ruddy goose], bhāradvāja [a skylark] and also peacocks, and sometimes behaved or shrieked like animals terrified at tigers and lions (10.15.5–13, tr. adapted from G.V. Tagare).

Note: These passages from a well-known text about Kṛṣṇa's life describe him in his childhood, with his fellow cowherds, amusing themselves in the forests around Vrindavan, imitating the animals' typical behaviours, from bees to monkeys. These extracts reveal a high appreciation of wildlife and nature's

Kautilya's Arthaśāstra

Forest sanctuaries

The king should establish [on the border of an animal park for his recreation] another animal park where all animals are [welcomed] as guests [and protected]. ... On the border [of the kingdom], he should establish a forest for elephants guarded by foresters. ... They should kill anyone slaying an elephant. (2.2.4, 6, 8)

Punishments for hurting animals

The Superintendent of Slaughter should impose the highest fine for binding, killing or injuring deer, beasts, birds or fish for whom safety has been proclaimed. ... The calf, the bull and the milch-cow are not to be killed. For killing [them, there shall be a] fine of fifty paṇas, also for torturing [them] to death. (2.26.1, 10)

For causing hurt to small animals with wood and other things, the fine shall be one paṇa or two paṇas, double that for causing bleeding. For these same offences concerning big animals, the fine shall be double and [payment of] expenses for treatment and cure.

Punishments for hurting trees and other plants

For cutting the shoots of trees in city parks that bear flowers or fruit or yield shade [the fine shall be] six paṇas, for cutting small branches twelve paṇas, for cutting stout branches twenty-four paṇas, for destroying trunks the lowest fine for violence, for uprooting [the tree] the middle [fine]. In the case of bushes and creepers bearing flowers or fruit or yielding shade the fine shall be half, also in the case of trees in holy places, penance-groves and cremation grounds. In the case of trees at the boundaries, in sanctuaries, and of trees that are prominent, these same fines doubled shall be imposed, also [in the case of trees] in royal parks. (3.19.26–30. tr. R.P. Kangle)

Note: These passages from Kautilya's famous treatise of governance and administration, show the importance attached to animal sanctuaries (called abhayāranya or abhayavana, i.e. 'forest free from fear'), and the penalties imposed on those killing protected animals (the paṇa was the currency in vogue in Kautilya's time). Note that slaughter of some animals was allowed in a controlled way for meat consumption. It is remarkable that even trees and other plants in municipal areas were protected, and any harm done to them was fined.