

## Environmental Science: References from Sacred Texts

### Introduction:

Nature of any species on the earth is such that it cannot live by itself. They like to interact each other and live together maintaining harmony among themselves. When we talk about environment, we mean all these species and organisms on earth such as plants, animals, human beings and physical surroundings - living and non-livings existing along with them. Protection and preservation of environment is the essence of ancient Indian culture. If we look into the depths of ancient traditions as reflected in the sacred texts, we find that many steps were taken to protect the environment from pollution with a view to ensure existence of all species on the earth and simultaneously keep the ecological balance.



### *The Vedas (2500 to 1500 B.C.):*

Various instructions for preservation of the environment and conservation of bio diversity are given in all the four major Vedas – Rig (RV), Sama (SV), Yajur (JV) and Atharva (AV). Vedas recognize that inappropriate human actions cause climate change and alteration of seasons' cycles. According to Vedas, Universe (nature) is composed of five basic elements or ***panchabhutas***, namely, Earth (Prithvi), Water (Apah), Fire (Agni), Air (Vayu) and Ether/Space (Akasha). Human body is also composed of these five elements. Each of these five elements is considered as God.

**Earth** is the mother; she is the creator and the sustainer. She protects all (AV.12.1.1). **Water** pervades everything – big or small. It grants procreative power (RV.7.49.4 and RV.1.23.16). **Fire**, the force of energy pervades the whole Universe (RV.10.5.7 and 1.127.4). **Air**, giver of life and health, is the vital breath of the Universe (RV.X.137 and 188). **Sky** (Space) is regarded as the father rich in procreative seed (RV.1.90.7; 1.159.2; 1.160.2; 1.33.3). It is also considered as wing of God (RV.10.81.3). There are several Vedic hymns which celebrate these five elements (Rg Veda 10.58; 10.18.10; 10.56.1; 10.16.3; AV.10.7.32-34; 12.1.11; 12.1.14). Vedas preach that all should keep these elements as pure in order to enjoy a happy, healthy and long life.



**RV** mainly focuses on different components of the ecosystem and their importance. It says that *the sky resembles like a father, the earth as a mother and the space as their son. This universe is considered as a family and if any harm is subjected to any one of the three mentioned above then the universe will suffer from a state of imbalance.* RV strictly prohibits deforestation and soil erosion. **AV** states that the *trees are adobe of Gods.* Cutting down of trees will harm sanctity of their religion. It further ordains that nearby lakes, ponds, rivers, etc should not be polluted in any manner as this leads to the spread of diseases. In AV, the earth is narrated in one hymn of 63 verses, the famous hym being *Bhumisukta or Prithvisukta* which proclaims environmental consciousness. The **YV** directs that forests should be well protected for protection of the country. It further states that *no person should kill animals which are helpful to all*, meaning thereby that animals should be treated with mutual respect and kindness.

### ***The Upanishads (1500 to 600 B.C.):***

The Upanishads played an important role in the post Vedic age in preserving ecological harmony. It states that any disruption in the percentage of any constituents of the environment leads to the alteration in natural balance causing enormous problems to all the living organisms. The Iso-Upanishad tells us about the secrets of existence of life on earth and also regarding the

importance of all living creatures for interactive survival. It is the Iso-Upanishad which taught us the concept of ‘Sustainable development’. Now, the environmentalists have started giving importance to this concept. The Upanishad scholars became aware of the existence of God in air, water, fire and also in trees and herbs and advised men to treat them with deep respect.

***The Purans ( 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.):***

The Puranic verse also consists of messages connected with environmental conservation. Narasimhapuran prohibits killing of birds for eating. According to Vishnu Puran, ***God Keshava is grateful to those who doesn't harm or destroy other creatures and animals.*** The Puranas also recollects the benefits of plants and trees and also emphasizes on the need to plant trees. According to Varah Purans (172.39), ***if one plants a peepal, one neem, one banyan, two pomegranates, two oranges, five mango trees and ten flowering plants or creepers, then that person shall never go to Hell.*** The Matsya puran encourages celebration of ‘*Vanmahotsava*’. Agnipuran mentions that ***tree plantation and making gardens lead to the elimination of sins.*** In Padma Puran, ***cutting of a green tree by a person is considered as a serious crime which leads him to Hell.***

***Manu-Samhita:***

Manu-Samhita, a dharmashastra discusses topics like creation of universe, living creatures, chaturbarna (four principal castes) and their duties, kingship and duties of a king. The text provides a key guide to the direct and indirect instructions for the conservation of biodiversity. It tells that all the plants and animals are created by Brahma and these animals and birds residing in the forests should not be used as articles for sale. Cutting down of trees for constructing even dams, bridges etc is considered as a punishable offence. Teasing of animals is also strictly prohibited. Interestingly, it suggests that one should see the ground before setting foot and drink water only after straining it with cloth in order to avoid killing small creatures.

***The Quran:***

Environmental protection is one of the most important features in Quran. Environmental conservation is considered as a religious duty as well as social obligation in the Holy Quran. According to the Islamic law, the basic elements of nature- land, water, fire, forest and light-belong to all living things. It directs ***not to waste excess of water.*** Water (***‘maa’ is used in the Quran 60 times***) is regarded as the source and origin of life. Hadiths or the traditions of

Prophet Muhammad stressed mainly on the conservation of natural resources, land reclamation and environmental hygiene. In order to protect lands, forests and wildlife, the Prophet even created inviolable zones, known as *Haram* (applied to protection of groundwater in order to avoid over pumping) and *Hima* (applied to wildlife and forestry conservation, which used to classify an area of land where grazing and woodcutting was strictly prohibited). In Quran, plants are treated with respect as the green colour symbolizes peace.

#### ***The Bible:***

Christians mainly believed in three general principles of environmental ethic, namely, *Principle of Creation Value, Principle of Sustained Order and Purpose and Principle of Universal Corruption and Redemption*. Christians believe that the earth belongs to the God (Psalm 24:1). Protection and conservation of environment are, therefore, main responsibilities of all Christians.

#### **Chinese Traditions:**

The Chinese traditions speak of *Ch'i* consisting of both matter and energy. *Yang* and *Yin* are specific form of *Ch'i*. By transformation of *yang* and its union with *yin*, the five elements – Water, Fire, Wood, Metal and Earth arise. Chinese texts advise protection of these five elements for happy and peaceful life.

#### **Tibetan Traditions:**

In Tibetan bön culture, these five elements are also considered to be sacred and human being must protect these elements from impurity.

#### **Conclusion:**

In today's world, we are facing many issues related to managing the environment and overexploitation of natural resources. Environmental ethics give valuable codes to each individual and society so that they get guidance for protection of environment. All religions have laid down code and ethics through messages and texts for protection of environment and for maintaining ecological balance. If we follow such codes and ethics in our daily life, it becomes easy for the people to maintain an environmental harmony. These messages, texts, code and ethics, if followed with spiritual thrust from within, may effectively create awareness amongst people and foster spirit to protect our Mother Earth from its peril.