

Environment in Popular Culture and Ancient Indian Literature

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Introduction

The health of its people forms the real wealth of any Nation. The world is majorly struggling with population explosion, poverty and pollution, of which presently, pollution forms the main cause¹. Through technological and scientific inventions and advancements, we humans have been trying to overpower nature. These inventions have directly or indirectly resulted in thoughtless exploitation of natural resources. Hence, bringing awareness through education to people at large to value natural resources and maintaining environmental balance is an important need. Study of the environment and its constituents in recent times has become important, giving rise to terminologies such as ecosystem, biodiversity, ecology, ethnobiology etc. to facilitate its study in a wider sense. Disciplines of Environmental Science and Ecology have been established to study minute details. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, demographic rise and to some extent pilgrimages too, leading to more and more exploitation of natural resources, of which many are non-renewable (fossil fuels etc), are wrecking havoc on nature, thus leading the human species towards self-destruction. Human beings have always been connected to environment since the time of their evolution and have been mostly benefitted by it. But in a hurry to modernise and develop and to satisfy our greed for more luxury, we have neglected the limit to which environment could be exploited. This has brought us to a stage where nature has begun retaliating with various natural disasters, most of which can be said to be man-made. Recent examples are the Uttarakhand disasters of 2013 and 2021 at Kedarnath and Chamoli respectively, for which the ecologists and environmentalists have held responsible, human interference through excessive and long drawn

exploitation of the environment. Such disasters have raised many questions on our ecological conservation and preservation policies and have also made us realize the importance of its conservation.

Our ancestors were wise enough to understand the importance of their immediate environment, which led them to survive even the harshest of conditions without any of modern tools and technologies. During Neolithic phase, sometime around the ninth millennium, their interaction with, and understanding of the environment over millennia led them to begin controlling it through domesticating plants and animals². Still, they were sensible enough not to over-exploit the natural resources which was in abundance then. The real deterioration began with the emergence of civilisation, when forests were denuded to build houses, grow crops, graze animals and settle the rising population in expanding cities and towns. As environment was one of the most crucial factors for the emergence of civilization, similarly it also became a major factor for its decline³. Scholars such as H.T. Lambrick, Robert Raikes, M.R. Mughal, Walter A. Fairservis JR. and many others have highlighted various environmental occurrences as well as man-made causes, for the decline of the Harappan Civilization⁴. Scholars have also identified environmental decline as being responsible for the collapse of other contemporary civilizations to that of the Harappan-the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian civilizations⁵.

In prehistoric times people were closer to nature and respected it for its benefits and had certain socio-religious ways of conserving it. While many of those traditions have continued in the present, people at large still act in ignorance about them and bring destruction to the natural resources. In modern times, people are far from nature, yet harming it directly or indirectly and therefore, teaching or transacting environmental values becomes all the more important. Through the valuable information given in our ancient texts, traditional and cultural practices, mythological stories and by other methods,

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people can be made aware and a sense of responsibility, sensibility and sensitivity about their environment can be inculcated among the present and future generations. We need to take steps towards building sensitivity towards our environment by inculcating an understanding about environmental values. It is testimony to the worth that we as a community or society place on environmentally related values and experiences. The love for nature—plants, trees, animals, rivers, animal kingdom, forests, mountains etc—is attached to the values laid forth by UNESCO. Improving the quality of life by understanding the environment, the ecosystem, and the factors that affect living things, along with improving the responsibility towards environmental conservation, is the aim of disseminating environmental values⁶. Enhancing people's understanding about the nature of our traditions, cultures and practices becomes important. Largely, it is noticed that no economic value is attached to the natural resources, leading to excessive exploitation⁷. Therefore, focus must be kept on the current and potential environmental situations, while taking historical perspectives into account.

Environment in Popular Culture

Symbolic Representations

To begin with symbolic representations, David Frawley, a famous Indologist rightly said, 'The modern mind has yet to penetrate the veil protecting the ancient mysteries.'⁸Humans, since the time of evolution, have been affected by their environment. Relationship of humans with their immediate environment became more and more intimate through various geological periods and as evolutionary process progressed, both Humans and Environment became interdependent. Our ancestors cruised through many vagaries of nature and tried to understand and decode its mysteries. With passing time, they began trying to control their surrounding environment, which till present times is beyond our control. The prehistoric human could not decode various natural phenomena such as storm, lightning, flood, drought, fierceness of wild animals and so on. These natural occurrences, which were beyond their understanding, led to the beginning of beliefs in the supernatural powers which gradually took the shape of religion. The vagaries of nature generated fear within people, leading them to look for different ways to please the powers behind these occurrences. Thereafter, humans began to develop processes of worshipping, offering oblations and making sacrifices towards various natural phenomena. Symbols and images became fundamental to communicate and represent for the supernatural

forces and ideas, since these phenomena behaved in an unpredictable manner. These symbolic representations gave shape to abstract imaginations by human beings, which could be easily communicated and understood.

Conservation and Preservation

The symbolic representations gradually became part and parcel of human society and have continued in the form of popular culture. As these symbols entered into the belief systems and later took the shape of religion as well, they became sacred for human society. In the time to come religion became a major force for conservation. Every religion began to revere certain animal or plant such as Cow, Cobra snake, Pipal and Banyan tree in Hinduism, Christmas tree in Christianity, the Tree of Knowledge in Judaism and Christianity, the Bodhi tree in Buddhism, and so forth. People have refrained from hurting the objects of their beliefs, which has continued even in the present times. This act of humans has led to conservation of environment to some extent. Conservation and preservation of environment in ancient times also came through various other methods such as creating sacred groves (orchards). Orchards were a kind of shelter and meditating place where trees were planted and where any kind of violent activity was prohibited. Not only in India, sacred groves were popular in various cultures world over. For example, the grove in Beersheba planted by Abraham in Ancient Near East, the Oak Grove at Dodona in Greece, the grove of Ariccia in Italy, and the sacred grove called *Nemeton* of Celts etc. Sacred groves of Buddhist origins are popular in India. Indian epics and other sacred books also refer to various *vanas* or forests such as *Panchavati*, or cluster of five trees representing five elements- Earth, Fire, Water, Air and Ether; *Tapovan*, *Mahavan*, *Khandavavan*, *Sreevan* and so forth⁹.

Even today many local communities maintain groves in their region. For example, Bishnois in Rajasthan maintain scrub forests, rain forests in Kerala Western Ghats, groves in Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh. Kodavas of Karnataka in Kodagu preserve about 1000 groves alone, presently. Interestingly, through ritualistic dances and dramatizations portraying local deities who protect these groves, the communities of Kerala and Karnataka try to protect and conserve sacred groves. These rituals here are called *Theyyam* and *Nagmandalam* respectively. Due to rapid urbanization processes, many of these sacred groves were being destroyed but in recent time the government, through the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act, 2002 has taken steps to provide protection to all community-held lands, including the sacred groves. Reverence for nature in different forms continues since ancient times.

Nature in popular culture is continued to be seen in the worship of various plants and animals, which have been mentioned in many ancient texts as well. Customs such as tying of thread around tree trunk, offering water, applying vermilion and circumambulating or doing *pradakshina* round the Piplal and Banyan trees are some of the extremely popular traditions of our country. Revering Piplal tree can be seen even on the Harappan seals. These trees are symbolized as wish fulfilling and are attached to some god and goddesses. For example, Piplal tree is attached to Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi and Lord Shiva to the Banyan tree whose matted hairs symbolizes the entangled roots of the tree. Similarly, our popular culture is replete with such references where not only trees, but various flowers, leaves and fruits are also attached with gods and goddesses¹⁰. For example, *kaner*, a type of yellow coloured bell-like flower is offered to Shiva and Sun-god while flower *ketaki* to goddess Laxmi. Fruits like *bel*, *ber*, banana, mango and many others are offered to gods and goddesses and used in making *prasada*. Leaves of *tulsi* plant, mango, *bel*, banana, pipal, palash and banyan trees are regularly used on all auspicious occasions. In popular culture we also see that wood of certain trees such as pipal, *bel*, *bargad*, palash and sami etc are never used as fuel, as it is believed to bring on the wrath of the gods. In Buddhism too, the Sal, pipal and banyan trees are considered sacred since they connect with events occurring in different stages — birth, meditation, attaining supreme knowledge and nirvana — of Lord Buddha's life. The Jain Tirthankaras have also been connected to different trees such as banyan with Rishabhath, *sala* with Mahavira, *kadamba* with Vasupujya, pipal with Ananta and so forth. Similarly, *ber* and *ritha* trees are associated with Guru Nanak Dev and Guru Govind Singh at different stages of their lives.

Ancient Indian Texts

Writing of texts in India began with the Vedas, of which *Rigveda* is the earliest, that is about 1500 BCE, followed by *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*. Later followed by texts such as *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, *Dharmashastras*, *Dharmasutras*, *Upanishads* and the *Purana* along with the two epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Then there are Buddhist and Jain texts. Nature has also been well represented in many secular literature such as *Charaksamhita*, *Sushrutsamhita*, *Arthashastra*, Ashokan Pillars, accounts of foreign travellers and so on. *Mahakavyas* of poet Kalidas — *Meghadutam*, *Abhigyanashakuntalam*, *Raghuvamsham*, etc — mostly have vivid description of the surrounding environment and various flora and fauna have played fundamental character in building the story. Northern India in Ancient times has been richly explored

in the above-mentioned classical texts. Environmental diversity in South India, however has been extensively discussed in Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions (c. 200 BC) and *Sangam* literature.

The references to forests or *vanas* in the Vedic texts conform to protected areas, production forests and forest of religion. A Rigvedic hymn X.146 is addressed to forest goddess *Aranyani* where she is referred to as the mother of all things wild, food provider, protector of the plants and animals and kills only when a murderous foe approaches.¹¹This indicates the harmless character of forest components unless pushed to limits. A hymn in *Atharvaveda* (12.1.35) says, 'Whatever I dig out from you, O Earth! May that have quick regeneration again; may we not damage thy vital habitat and heart.'¹² The statement points towards an intimate relationship that existed between our ancestors and their surrounding environment. Over-exploitation or exploitation beyond repair was inconceivable. Prayers were offered for nature's quick regeneration even when it was exploited for basic needs only. Conservation and preservation seemed inherent to utilisation by the communities in ancient period. *Prakriti* or nature stand not only for nature but for cosmic matter as well. It possesses divine power and, along with *purusha*, is responsible for creation. Hence all the elements of nature — water, earth, fire, ether/space and air are considered sacred. *Atharvaveda* mentions the three components — air, water and plants — which are referred to as *chandamsi* meaning 'coverings available everywhere.' (18.1.17) In addition, terms such as *Vritavrita* (12.1.52), *Abhivarah* (1.32.4), *Avritah* (10.1.30), *Pariivrita* (10.8.31) are also mentioned in *Atharvaveda*¹³ meaning of which are equivalent to environment. The word *Paryavarana* in modern Sanskrit means environment. Vedic texts invoke various gods and goddesses such as Sun, Fire, Varun, Indra, Savitri as well and hymns are addressed to them. These deities symbolically represent various environmental components and are responsible for controlling them. Similarly, rivers, mountains, plants, medicinal plants and various natural calamities have been mentioned. All these references made in various ancient texts indicate early humans understanding of their surrounding environment and judicious usage of the resources without harming its balance.

Texts like *Charak* and *Shusrutasamhitas*, and other ancient Medical books by Dhanwantri, Nagarjuna, Valmiki and other ancient scholars, accept Himalayas as a vast repository of medicinal plants and other resources.¹⁴King Ashoka among the ancient rulers seems to be one of the most enthusiastic and sympathetic towards environmental conservation, evident in the Ashokan inscriptions. IInd Rock Edict and Pillar Edict VII clearly claim to have constructed roads with planting of

medicinal herbs and trees besides shade trees, and wells along the road sides. Planting of fruit plants on wastelands was mandatory, much like social and agroforestry in the present times. King Ashoka also showed sympathy toward animals, clearly evident from his Pillar Edict VII, which mentions about 'veterinary hospitals,' probably the first in the world, being established for the medical treatment of both, humans and animals.¹⁵ His determination to follow the path of non-violence towards animals as well, is very evident from his Pillar Edict V and Rock Edict I which declare the names of animals to be refrained from killing — parrot, varieties of goose and duck, the Gangetic dolphin, sea-cow, snake, cobra, pigeons etc, and all the quadrupeds, not of humans' use, nor for eating purposes and for any ritual purposes. King Ashoka was sensitive enough to mark certain days when some particular animals were not to be killed.¹⁶

Another source from supposedly the same time (though contested) as the Mauryan dynasty, *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, emphasizes the importance of forest wealth. The text declares forests and mines to be State property and any damage or illegal exploitation of these resources was liable for severe punishment. In fact metals being crucial for making coins, agriculture, warfare weapons and so on, mining of metals was kept under State control. Minister with proper knowledge about the properties of various metals were appointed to look after its affairs. Proper rules were made to ensure controlled utilisation of resources, wasteland clearance for agriculture and settlement of the people. *Arthashastra* (II.2.7, 10) and Pillar Edict V¹⁷ of king Ashoka also speak of the elephant forests (*hasti-vanas* or *nagavana*). Again, since Elephants formed an important wing of defence during the Mauryas, their use and maintenance needed to be supervised. Therefore, detailed guidelines were laid down for the Protector of the Elephant Forests; even tusks of the animal after its death were to be handed over to the government. Nearly eight *hasti-vanas* have been mentioned in the text. *Arthashastra* and Rock Edict XIII of the Ashokan inscriptions, distinctively emphasize the strained relationship between Ashoka and the tribes residing in forests (*atavis*) as they subsisted on animal flesh of all kinds. When king Ashoka embraced Buddhism, he vowed to shun even the royal hunt and passed orders against killing of a large number of birds and animals in the royal kitchen. However, both these sources of Mauryan times give a picture of what was desired and not clearly what was happening.¹⁸

Rise of two powerful social movements — Buddhism and Jainism — in the sixth century BCE, also was connected to environmental destruction to some extent. Both the religions raised their voice against Brahmanical practices, explicitly against sacrificial killings, wastage in oblation offerings, clearing of forests for agriculture,

and so forth. The Buddhist and Jain sources are replete with numerous stories projecting peaceful co-existence of woman and their environment. The Jataka tales, which forms a part of the Buddhist text *Khudakka Nikaya*, tells the stories of previous births of Buddha, and makes animals and plants the main protagonist in many of its stories. Buddha took birth in the form of various animal and plant and through those characters, different social and moral messages were delivered. Later, sometime between 200 BCE to 300 CE, another text, *Panchatantra*, was written purely depending on variety of animals as its characters. The writer is unknown according to scholars but has been attributed to Vishnu Sharma and Vasubhaga in some recensions. The fables in *Panchatantra* strive to teach principles of good governance and virtues and vices of humans. This is one of the most translated Indian text and has nearly 200 versions. Patrick Olivelle has studied the text extensively and is of the opinion, that the collection of stories in the *Panchatantra* has been woven into delightful stories with pithy proverbs, ageless and practical wisdom. He also reiterates that one of its appeal and success is that it is a complex book that 'does not reduce the complexities of human life, government policy, political strategies, and ethical dilemmas into simple solutions; it can and does speak to different readers at different levels.'¹⁹ According to him, in the Indian tradition, the work is a literature of the *Shashtra* genre, more specifically a *Nitishastra* text.²⁰ Similar to *Panchatantra*, we have *Aesop's fables* written by Aesop, a storyteller who lived in Greece sometime around late fifth century BCE. The classical literature are strong representation of inter-relationship developed between people in the past with their environment. These fables first originated in oral traditions and were later put into the written form. Through these classical tales and fables, our ancestors passed on social, moral, cultural and political lessons to their children and community at large. These texts formed a powerful medium for sensitizing and bringing awareness to the future generations on how the environment played a central role.

The *Sangam* literature is the earliest literary source for Southern India. It is a collection of anthologies of poetry on popular themes of early societies in this region. The *Sangam* corpus is supposed to have been composed over a period of nearly five centuries, ranging between 200 BCE to 300CE, and were written during the three *Sangams* or assemblies of scholars. Interestingly, apart from love, war and heroic poems, importance of environmental relationship between nature and human have also been well-defined. In fact environment plays a pivotal role in all socio-economic, cultural, religious and political aspects of the Tamil land. For example, the entire Tamil land has been divided into five eco-zones known as *tinai*. Romila

Thapar opines that the poems show remarkable awareness to its surrounding environment and the activities which are correlated to ecological perceptions.²¹ Each eco-zone has certain specific ecosystem based on soil type, climate, rainfall and availability of other resources according to which people chose their profession and maintained varied social groups. Each had specific deity associated with particular flower or tree to them. *Kurinja* was hilly or mountain land, where people took to hunting and gathering and revered Murugan or Seyon, the god of war. *Marutamor* the fertile land was the zone where people did cultivation. This region was characterized by red flower of the same name and people here worshipped the deity known as Vendan. The people in *Palaior* desert region herded and looted the travellers for earning livelihood.²² Goddess Korravai was worshipped in this region and others as well, for her fertility and was equivalent to goddess Durga of the Hindu pantheon. In *Neytal* or the coastal region, fishing and salt making were ways of livelihood. The characteristic flower of the region was water lily and the presiding deity was Varuna, the rain god. whereas the people of *Mullai* or pastoral tracts practised animal husbandry and shifting agriculture. The presiding deity in *Mullai* was Mayon or the 'dark one,' who is associated with Krishna. Thus, *Tamilakam* or *Tamilaham* as it is called, followed varied subsistence patterns which were determined by the ecological conditions of the five *tinais*.²³

Accounts of foreign travellers such as Strabo, Pliny, Hieun-Tsang or Xuan Zhuang, Yi Jing or I-tsing and many others who travelled or not to India have given extensive details of the ecological diversity here. Diodorus, a famous Greek historian, has well-portrayed the Indian environment, 'Now India has many lofty mountains that abound in trees of every variety including those that bear fruit, and many large and fertile plains, which are remarkable for their beauty and are supplied with water by a multitude of rivers. The larger part of the country is well watered and for this reason yields two crops each year; and it abound in all kinds of animals.'²⁴ Eratosthenes and Aristobulus visited and learnt extensively about the Indian ecology and geography. Later Strabo acquired information from their texts and devoted a chapter on Indian environment in his book, *Geography*. Similarly, Pliny the Elder mentioned many facts about Indian biota in his *Natural History*, the source for which was Theophrastus²⁵. Greek authors however gained much information about India through indirect sources. They either imagined, heard, read or visited regions limited to Indus watershed but still showed the rich environmental resource that India had. The text composed by Hieun Tsang or Xuanzang, the Chinese traveller, who visited India in seventh century AD, and travelled almost

throughout the country within a long period of seventeen years, supports the information given by the Greek scholars. Hieun Tsang penned his detailed experience in which he lavishly praised the vastness of the forested areas which made travelling difficult. He also emphasized on the fear among people leading to veneration of various natural elements. In one of the passages (II.17), quoted by Habib and Rangarajan, he says, 'Those who ate the flesh of the ox, elephant, horse, pig, dog, etc, belonged to the ranks of the outcastes.'²⁶ The text *Harshacharita* of Banabhatt, also written in c. seventh century CE, provides extensive description of the Vindhya forests (Chapter 7) in the context when King Harsha enters it in search of his sister. Similarly, there is an enormous corpus of ancient literature, along with literature from other time periods and place, which describe our environment and its relations with humanity.

Conclusion

The survey of ancient Indian literature gives us a vivid picture of the kind of importance environment held in the lives of our ancestors. Many traditional practices related to environment and its occurrences, that emerged in our past, such as feeding or donating a cow, have continued through times to the present and are still thought to be auspicious. Worshipping and feeding with milk, a highly venomous snake like cobra or *naag* and not killing it even out of fear, still continues. People even celebrate festival of *Naagpanchami* with enthusiasm. Serpent is important in tradition because of its association with *Lord Vishnu*, who lay on the bed of *Sheshnaga* and is also significant since *Lord Shiva* wraps around his neck the divine serpent. Ancient literature is also replete with various Naga clans such as *Karkota*, *Vasuki*, *Shesha*, and *Manibhadra* etc. who seem to have originated from *Nagavanshis*, a *Kshatriya* dynasty with serpent as their totem. Some other totemic and zoomorphic representations were also deified. Even seals/amulets unearthed from the Indus Valley Civilization represent 'unicorn' or a single horned, humpless bull; half-human, half-tiger goddess; a horned deity with three faces, sitting in yogic posture, surrounded by a tiger, elephant, rhinoceros, antelope, deer and water buffalo; a seal-amulet with a horned goddess in midst of Pipal or sacred fig-tree before which another horned deity is kneeling and doing obeisance, etc. which show how strongly nature affected human imaginations. Not only animals but various fruits and flowers too are revered in popular culture, since in various ancient literature, saints and seers have eulogized them. Similarly, many other plants like *Bel*, *Rudraksha* and *Ber* are worshipped for being dear to Lord Shiva.²⁷ These are just a few references from the vast repository of our ancient literature and

through these, even in present times, we can sensitize our youth and people at large, towards the rapidly depleting environment. Our literature, not only ancient but even those written through different phases of historical periods, encourages us to preserve and conserve nature for the better and healthy future of generations to come and our own wellbeing. Now pollution, population, diseases, man-made disasters and poverty have majorly infested the countries large or small, developed or under-developed. This makes reading and understanding our ancient texts all the more valuable for the present society.

Notes

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