

# Environmental Consciousness as Reflected in Indian Literature Since Vedic Era

Bishakh Choudhury<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Ashok K Choudhury<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar, University School of Environment Management, Guru Gobind Singh, Indraprastha University, Dwarka, Delhi

<sup>2</sup>D.Litt. in Literature, Ph.D., Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, (Formerly with Lakshmibai College, University of Delhi)

## Abstract:

Since the dawn of ancient era, the scriptures and Vedas have portrayed the inter-relation between man and environment. It preaches us its importance and how to protect the environment and use its resources judiciously. A hymn from the 'Atharva Veda', 'Prithvi Sukta' describes that 'Earth is my mother and I am her son'. The Hindu scriptures also present a message that God is present in every element of the world and spreads a message of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (The whole world is one family). Hence, every organism should be treated equally. These evidences prove that people back then whole heartedly followed the scriptures and traditions and developed a linkage of religion with conservation of the ecosystem. The present study aims to identify the essence of environmental thoughts present in the Vedas and other sacred books, our rich folklore, and literature, including Indian English and our Bhasa literature, written since Vedic era to the modern time.

**Keywords:** Environment, Environmental Consciousness, Sacred Scriptures, Folklore, Indian English Literature, Bhasa Literature, Eco-criticism.

## Introduction:

Man finds expression, fulfillment and meaning of life in relation to environment in which they live. With the advent of modern civilization, development and industrial growth, human being has developed a rivalry with nature. (Mandal, 2022). The ancient form of nature-worship and environmental awareness finds expression in Vedas, written in India between about 1500 and 1000 BCE, which informs the religion of Sanatan Dharma, known as Hinduism. It preaches not only about the way of living, rather the importance of environment and its conservation through various spiritual poems, prayers, and formulas. Scriptures describe Vedas as the breathing air of God. Since time immemorial, the Hindu scriptures proclaim that God sleeps in the rocks, dreams in the plants, stirs toward wakefulness in the animals, and spreads in mankind the message of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' – The Whole Universe is one Family (Mandal, 2022).

Environment, earth and nature, considered as one of the supreme and divine entities since primitive days, were preserved by various sustainable measures. The Vedic prayer, "madhu vātāḥ ṛitāyate madhu kṣaranti sindhavaḥ mādviḥ naḥ santuṣadhi madhu naktamutusāsu madhumatpārthiva rajah madhu kṣorastu suryah mādhirgābo bhavantu naḥ" (Environment provides bliss to people leading their life perfectly. Rivers bliss us with sacred water and provide us health, night, morning, vegetation. Sun bliss

us with peaceful life. Our cows provide us milk) (Rigveda,1/90/6,7). The five elements: Akash (Ether), Vayu (Air), Agni (Fire), Jala (Water) and Prithvi (Earth), known as 'Pancha Mahabhuta' theory, explain the theory of the formation of Prakriti (Environment). Even Indian mythology highlights these environmental elements significant to God, i.e., Agni Deva (the Fire God), Surya Deva (the Sun God), Vayu Deva (God of Wind), Varun Deva (the Water God) Prithivi Devi (Goddess of Earth), Soma Deva (the Moon God), and Samudra Deva (the Sea God) (Taori, 2022). Even the ideology of Buddhism and Jainism popularized the concept of 'Ahimsa' (non-violence). They disregarded killing of animals for the sake of rituals/sacrifices and advised for a caring attitude towards environment (Bithin, 2019).

### **Vedic Era and Environment Conservation**

Irrespective of the religion, prevalent in the Indian national setting, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Christianity preach saving the environment and preserving nature to maintain harmony through their treasure of rich sacred texts. The holy texts of each religion with different cultures promote the interdependency of nature and humans on each other and expel the concept of conservation of plants, animals, valleys, rivers, mountains, trees, birds, insects, every element of nature. The sacred texts instruct not to pollute the rivers, ponds, and wells. (Chanyal, 2022). The Vedic literature includes Vedas, Aranyakas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, Samhitas and Upavedas, are full of evidences about the ecological wisdom. 'Prithvi Sukta', a hymn from the 'Atharva Veda', dedicated to goddess Earth, says "Mata Bhumi Putroham Prithivyah" meaning 'Earth is my mother and I am her son'. The 'Atharva Veda' also explains importance of pure water that can treat a variety of illnesses and avoid diseases. The 'Padma Purana' idolized trees to God because it emphasized to protect forests and not cutting the trees. The 'Agni Purana' affirmed death sentence to the one who pollutes the pond water (Bithin, 2019).

The 'Yajur Veda' apprised against killing of animals as they are asset to the ecosystem. Chanakya's 'Arthashastra', an exposition on economics and government of ancient India, describes about the soil types, rainfall regimes and irrigation techniques. It divides the country between the Himalayas and oceans into different regions- Forests (Aranya), Mountains (Parvata), Wet or humid areas (Audaka), Dry lands (Bhauma), Uneven lands (Visawa) and Plains (Sama). It elaborates role of King to protect forests and its products obtained should be utilized in a sustainable manner. Special designations were also created like directors of forests, animal slaughter supervisor, superintendent of cattle, horses and pastures whose job was to protect wildlife, forests, stop poaching of wild animals, ensure proper care of domestic animals (Bhattacharya, 2014).

Maharshi Manu's 'Manusmriti' evidences, religion can be integrated to protect the environment. There are phrases mentioned for ecological awareness; biodiversity is defined as all living creatures divided as Chara (movable living world) and Achara (immovable, like plants). He mentioned, killing of asva (horse), mrga (deer), khara (donkey), ibha (elephant), ahi (snake), ahisa (buffalo), aja (goat) is heinous (Bhattacharya, 2014), and one who practiced cow slaughtering would die as many times as there were hairs on its skin (Bithin, 2019).

It's evident that people back then interlinked plants with religion to conserve the ecological balance. They cherished various plants including neem, pipal, tulsi, bel, sal, vat (banyan) as they had both medicinal and religious values. The respect for rivers, animals, mountains, birds indicate the closeness of Indians to nature. The Bhutayajna, one of the five rituals required of a Hindu householder, involves offerings of food to animals, birds and other creatures regularly as an important mechanism to preserve ecological integrity (Durga et al., 2023).

### **Ramayana and Environment Conservation**

A close relation between men and nature or forest is observed in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (Das, 2020). In *Ramayana* (c.1000/900 BCE), the chronicle of life of Lord Ram, the largest portion of the tale is in the forest. Valmiki, its creator, presents the beauty of forests, experiences of the animal world. Ram was pleased to reside in the forests with brother Lakshmana, and wife Sita. While entering into the hermitage at Chitrakuta, they worshipped the entire nature, the forests, trees, and sacred Mandakini River. Valmiki describes Ram as an adorable protagonist who is always willing to cooperate and live in harmony with other human beings (Vajpayee, 2020). His reign, Ayodhya was called 'Ramrajya' as Ram always cared for the wellbeing and safety of his kingdom. There was equality, discipline, peace, stability, justice, prosperity and happiness because people lived in harmony with the nature. Agriculture also flourished due to favorable atmosphere and rainfall. There was an incident when Ram was given a boon, he sought welfare and happiness of all living organisms, flourishing nature and free flowing rivers. Goddess Sita, known to have taken birth out of soil, is considered as an 'Ideal' of Indian women. Even the nature had expressed its gratitude towards Ram when Sita was held hostage by Ravana and paved way for Ram's victory over Ravana which strongly displays the close bond between man and nature (Bithin, 2019)

### **Mahabharata and Environment Conservation**

In *Mahabharata* (c.900/800 BCE), nature is looked as an extension of same consciousness. Everyone is a product of nature and its elements (Bithin, 2019). While describing Gandhamadhana, Vyasa, the author of *Mahabharata*, describes a healthy environment is created by multitudes of trees (Mandal, 2022). Lord Krishna, one who protects cows, and even his brother, Balarama, played a role in developing plans for protection of cows. Krishna killed the demon Kalya and purified Yamuna River, and swallowed the forest fire to save the forests. He always promoted respecting Mother Nature (Bhattacharya, 2014). In the *Bhagavad Gita* (Sloka 20, Chapter 10), Lord Krishna said, "I am self-seated in the heart of all creatures. I am the beginning, the middle and the very end of all beings. All beings have, therefore, to be treated alike". The Pandavas, spent thirteen years in exile in the dense forests, made alliances with tribes, which benefited them in the Kurukshetra War. During the period, they acquired higher knowledge and forest became both a place of higher learning of truth and a source of understanding (Bithin, 2019).

### **Folklore and Environment**

Folklore, which plays a valuable role in environmental concerns, highlights relation of human and nature in the form of songs, tales, ballads, dances, and poetry. Much of the scientific ideas and policies about the Mother Nature are established from myths and modern folklore (Saikia, 2008). The beliefs and knowledge affect how people relate to wild animals. The Hindu deities are embellished with their respective 'bahan' (animals that carry them) like lions, elephant, tiger and birds like owl, swan, and peacock. Such beliefs and practices still continue to prevail in some sections of our society in the form of rural folk and tribes of forest (Pramanik and Nandi, 2019). Understanding these diverse values about wildlife can allow designing culturally meaningful action plan for human wildlife coexistence (Bhatia et al., 2021).

Folk songs, a blend of representation of human life and nature, sung in celebrations and gatherings. Rich source of knowledge and cultural identity of a region, it expresses the traditions, customs, testimony of past war events, rites and rituals. Folk songs also describe the region's climate, topography, flora, fauna

and agriculture. Folk songs of Rajasthan glorify the beautiful creature, peacock because it is linked with weather forecasting. Its dance is associated with arrival of Saavan (rainy season) and romance. A phrase of such folk song which reads; “Mor bole re, o malji, Abu re pahada me o malji, mor bole re Bega aaijo re, o malji, Abu ridharti me o malji, begaaaijo re” (The peacocks are singing in the hills of Abu, Return my love, to the land of Abu). Another bird mentioned in the folksongs of Rajasthan is common hawk cuckoo that has a melodious voice that makes the people happy: “Meetho meetho bol papiha, pyaaro pyaaro bol baagam bharo mewarsi meetho meetho bol” (Sing sweetly, oh cuckoo bird, fill these gardens with your sweet voice) (Sharma, 2020).

Kurichiyans, a tribal group of Wayanad district, Kerala, believes that nature and its elements like climate, sea and mountains are blessings of God. Therefore, they worship paddy, turmeric, hibiscus and other plants as the origin of divine existence. Their folk song Kumbhappatu mentions a common practice of worshipping mountains. According to them, it is the devasthanam (residence) of Lord Shiva (Ramachandran, 2003). Songs of North-East of India convey the human emotions by describing landscapes (Mago and Anand, 2022).

Ghagh Kavi, an ancient agriculture poet of Bihar of 16<sup>th</sup> Century, whose poems are still recited there, is a great source of folk knowledge. One of his phrases informs about rainfall: “Assadhipunodina, gaaj, beej, barasna. Naaselakshankaalka, aanand mane saant” (If it rains in Assadh (June and July) then it is symbolic to good rainfall, which makes good weather and people will be relieved from intense heat waves that blows in these months) (Kumari et al., 2020). Taboo for nature conservation, observed in North India, gained impetus in late 80s. In Chamoli District, Uttarakhand, there is a cultural ritual that when a village girl gets married, the new couple has to plant a tree in bride’s house. There is another instance of conservation; through local customs, the alpine plants *Saussureaobvallata* and *Delphiniumvestitum*, locally called Dongar and Loshkar, are protected because they are worshipped as deities and no one in the village is allowed to pluck its flowers. Such religious beliefs act as an instrument of protection of the nature and its species (Kandari et al., 2014).

Folktales, passed through generations, are internally connected with culture. These are recited by the grandparents to their grandchildren and other members of the family. Mostly, women who spend maximum time in household, broadcast these tales. It plays an important role in molding the lives of individuals in a way they remain sensitive, informed, respectful and friendly towards the environment. In states like Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh, the folktales manifest the nature with God, and mostly speak of the eco-friendly practices of their community. These stories are recited to their children which clearly states that folktales can be utilized as tools to mitigate degraded ecosystem as children are the future of the nation. The cultural significance of animals, plants and sacred groves determines how they are kept protected by the ethnic communities. It’s, therefore, mandatory to hold on to indigenous practices of folklores to restore ecological sustainability (Mago and Anand, 2022).

### Literature and Environment

Folk practices, over the years, have established a remarkable contribution to various socio-ecological problems. In addition, literature has a significant role to accomplish restoration of ecological balance. The interrelationship between literature and environment is studied by the ecocritics (Mago and Anand, 2022). The term eco-criticism was coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his article 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism', mete out with critical writings that depict the relationship between literature and environment. It explores the work of the writers in view of environmental and

ecology issues (Tripathi and Bhattacharjee, 2016). Indian writers have dealt with nature and environment from a different standpoint (Taori, 2022). Kalidas, a poet of environment, described environment in all his poetry (Das, 2020). His poem, 'Rtusamharam', delivers a message of environment protection, which conveys his love for nature. Begins with summer season, it ends by presenting 'Vasant Rtu' (Spring Season), king of the seasons, as nature at that time is beautified with jasmine flowers, Ashoka tree, chirping of cuckoo, bumble bee's melodious sounds and the fragrance of mango tree makes the air very intoxicating. Thus, spring season brings joy and happiness to all. 'Meghadutam' presents cloud as an enriched force for nature. During rain buds, automatically, develop to fertile the soil and consumed by deer, trees bloom to their fullest and gardens fragrant with lotus pollens, draws attention to protect nature (Chanyal, 2022). 'Abhijana Shakunthalam' identified the duties of the king, humans and sages, to protect the nature. The story says, when King Dushiyantha saw Shakuntala (the female protagonist), noticed that her beauty had a close relation with the objects of nature; her pretty lips and tender like tender leaves, arms like small tree branches and body as beautiful as flower (Rajeev, 2013). Shakuntala loved to live in the green world, take care of nature and other living beings, when she was asked for the reason by her friends, she replied that she is taking care of it not just to obey her father, but she loves them as her brothers and sisters. Shakuntala shares a remarkable message to the modern mankind that we should love nature and its components as we love our siblings (Chanyal, 2022).

In 20<sup>th</sup> century, environmental and fundamental issues are penned down in the writings of Indian writers. The authors like Amativ Ghosh, R. K. Narayan, Manohar Malgonkar, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai and Arundhati Rao have portrayed nature and nature-centered elements for expressing their thoughts for social environment (Yadav and Wani, 2019). R. K. Narayan, one of the noted authors in Indian writing in English, has written novels on anthropocentric attitude of humans, like 'Swami and His Friends', 'The Guide' and 'The Man Eater of Malgudi'. The stories highlight a common fact that humans consider them as the only supreme species of the world and other life forms are less important, which is the definition of anthropocentrism. This narrow focus has led to numerous problems like species extinction; habitat loss and climate change (Sing, 2023). His image as a witty story writer has cast a pall over his environment spirit. His characters do not surprise or shock us as they are regular facets of nature, both human and non-human. Narayan's characters are peasants, laborers, drivers, and common man who have beautiful relationship with Mother Nature. (Mishra, 2013)

Amitav Ghosh, the significant figures in Indian writing in English, is the forthright exponent on climate change. His work, 'The Hungry Tide' deals with naturalism and eco-psychology, which whirls around the wildlife of Sundarbans. The wide and composite web of salt and fresh water bodies, semi-submerged forests and the search for rare dolphin species are the heart of the novel. It describes nature in its full beauty and its ugliness (Choudhury, 2019). His non-fiction, 'The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable', address why modern literature has failed to address issues of climate change. He extends his sight beyond the human to other living creatures, arguing that "the Anthropocene has forced as to recognize that there are other, fully aware eyes looking over our shoulders". Ghosh puts forth the imaginative failure in the face of global warming. He explains the inability at the level of literature, history, and politics to grasp the scale and violence of climate change. In both volumes, he emphasizes environmental issues- climate change and the danger to fish from chemical waste dumped into rivers by factories (Choudhury, 2019).

Ruskin Bond, an environmental savvy writer, as all of his writings is unimaginable without trees, animals and soft breeze of mountains. Motivated by his grandmother's words, "A blessing rests on the

house where the shadow of a tree falls”, in 'Death of the Trees', he mentions that there is hardly anyone who really believes that trees and shrubs are necessary. In 'Mountains are in My Blood', he compares the presence of mother affection if one lives in the blossom of hills. He well describes in 'The Tunnel' that forests are safest place for animals to live and rascals (humans) live only in town (Tiwari, 2016). The 2006 Man Booker Prize winning novel, 'The Inheritance of Loss' of Kiran Desai discusses the crucial impact of globalization of Indian village life; where past and future live in an uneasy juxtaposition. Begins with the beauty of Kanchenjunga, it picturizes various natural scenes and landscapes of Himalayan mountains, as well, depicts the crucial impact of globalization of Indian village life. Set in Kalimpong, which is ecologically rich, situated in northeastern Himalayas, fighting for their own country, where Indians blurred into Bhutan and Sikkim. Its environmental beauty and richness created hunger to possess this land in Chinese (Choudhury, 2008).

Another 2008 Man Booker winning novel, 'The White Tiger' of Arvind Adiga presents environmental issues as well, attempts how air and water pollution polluted Ganga, a perennial river. Flows through U P, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, it provides water facilities to domestic, agricultural, hydro-projects and industries situated on its bank. Adiga describes how Ganga is polluted with human faeces, and sever different kinds of industrial acids, which now became a threat to human health. (Krishna and Ramesh, 2019).

This apart, many Indian English authors Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Jayant Mahapatra, Ramanujan, Bhavani Bhattacharya, have highlighted environmental problems and ecological imbalance very enthusiastically. They use nature as a background in their works and portrayed the characters that are directly or indirectly influence with the ecology (Yadav and Wani, 2019). However, 'The Climate Countdown' of Sagar Pradhan, a young Odia environment activist-author digs details into climate change issue and offers a solution for reducing our carbon footprint and a roadmap to save planet for future generation (Guru, 2023). Besides, a wide range of Indian Bhasa literature provides introspection and engagement of environmental issues. Our regional writers have always been keenly attuned to the changing pattern, particularly when come to seamlessly waving the vagaries of the climate into the literary narratives. Indeed, Indian literature replete with reference to the importance of climate patterns and could help leave a green tinge in the global consciousness (The Telegraph, 2022).

Well known author of Bangla, Mahasweta Devi, through 'Byadhkhanda' (The Book of the Hunter) incorporates deep concern for the ecosystem and its importance for the continuity of the human species. She shows the concepts of deep ecological perspective to create eco-consciousness among the mass. She offers a significant commentary on forest dwelling 'Shabar Tribes' of Odisha and West Bengal towards the ecological management and illustrate the effect of growing number of settlements encroaching upon the forest (Pachkawade, 2021).

As the first quarter of 21<sup>st</sup> century, a significant body of Odia Literature on climate change, forced displacement were published, the brilliant depiction of Bhima Prusty's novel 'Jambuloka' (The People from Jamun Islands) centres with the human struggle against the furry of climate change. He captures the lost world of 'Satabhaya', the first victims of climate change in Odisha, as the sea mouth has been swallowing the villages of the region one by one. With this submerged village, an entire worldview is forever lost (Mishra, 2022). 'Parti Parikatha' of acclaimed Hindi writer Phaniswar Nath Renu, set across the volatile river Kosi, unfolds against the backdrop of newly Independent India. It portrays on the vast tracts of barren (Parti) land in the Paranpur village. It focuses on vast tracts of land in the area, rendered barren due to the perennial flooding of Kosi in every monsoon. Represented through Jatin, the protagonist undertakes

mysterious efforts to increase fertile land for agriculture. He tries to engage the residents to discuss the communal and ecological benefits (Gayawali, 2017).

During our research, we have come across many regional writers who have made a meaningful impact in creating consciousness of environmental preservation. To understand the urgency of climate crisis, they have shed light upon the life changing perils of natural calamities. However, Cho Dharman, a Tamil daily-wager-turned novelist, depicts the stark picture of environmental and ecological disasters in Tamil Nadu in his novel ‘Sool’, which won him the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award in 2019. It emphasizes Urulaikudi, a remote village in Tuticorin, as the development has destroyed its natural resources. It discusses what we face today, when there is no rain and no water. ‘Sool’ is relevant in many directions particularly to environment and social space of people (Saju, 2019).

### **Conclusion:**

Environmental problems reflected in literary work prompt more concern, provoke attitude and inspire action. The whole world today runs after controlling the man-made pollution by various means of scientific processes. If the world community learns the basic values of Vedas, which our seers gave us thousands of years back, it will serve in a great extent for the protection of the environment. The close relationship between nature and literature is evident in the works of poets and other writers down the ages in India. The world of literature throngs with works, dealing with power of nature not only in the modern times, rather time immemorial. Right from the beginning, Indian society is founded on Vedic philosophical tradition and has established itself in tune with the nature and surroundings. Saints and sages have given importance to protection of flora and fauna and emphasized on protecting Panchmahabhuts, emphasized on performing Yajnas and enacting rules related to environment. Ancient Vedas have several references in them on environmental protection, ecological balance, weather cycles, rainfall phenomena, hydrologic cycle, and related subjects that directly indicate the high level of awareness of the seers and people of that time. The study analyzes, with a glance of ancient Indian Vedic literature with a focus, how literature has been an effective vehicle to create awareness on environmental issues from Vedic times to the present period. Literature is the impressive way to develop such consciousness in the common mass. We have tried to present the various statements relating to environment as reflected in the greater Vedic literature, and how the authors have emerged as powerful voices to highlight on the urgency of our planet’s wellbeing. But it’s the individual’s basic duty to safeguard environment as Article 51-A (g) of our Constitution envisages, “It shall be the duty of every citizen to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures”.

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### Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare for this paper.

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