

# Environmental Protection: Vedic Culture and Philosophy

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The meaning of Bhartiya is the *green vasundhara*, even in our culture, trees and creepers have been considered as deities. Where this prayer has been echoed since time immemorial - 'O Mother Earth, let your forests fill us with joy and enthusiasm'. Evidence of trees and plants being alive exists in Indian literature. In Vedas, environment enumerates many ways, such as water, air, sound, rain, food, soil, vegetation, flora, fauna, birds etc. Air is essential for a living being and the cover of air is present around the earth.

Explaining the qualities of Vayu in the Veda is 'वात आ वातु भेशजं मयोभु नो हृदे प्रण आयुशि तारिशत' 'Pure fresh air is an invaluable medicine', the pure air is priceless and necessary for keeping our body healthy to live long life. It is said in the Veda, all the vegetation that gives food and health is produced on the land only. Likewise, Vedas describe the environment and the relationship between nature and man.

The simplest meaning of environment is the covering of nature. It has been said that "परितः आवरणं पर्यावरणम्, means all the elements that surround the living world, which we directly and indirectly consume and fulfill our physical, spiritual and mental desires, This environment has been said to be of three types physical, biological and cultural. The composition and variability of the overall environment is determined by the interaction of terrestrial, aquatic, soil, mineral, etc. as physical, elements such as plant, animal, microorganism and human etc. as biological and economic, social, political etc. as cultural environment.

All living beings are constantly affected by their environment and vice-versa. There are two elements that provide protection to the entire biosphere - 'Natural elements (air, water, rain, land, river, mountain etc.) and human elements (protection received from nature in the realization of the non-attainable).

Vedic culture is inextricably related to nature. The entire activity of Vedic culture is completely tied to nature (Prakriti). There are many verses in the Vedas related to nature conservation i.e. environment. The Vedas emphasize on keeping the purity of two types of (mental and physical) environment. All the phenomena that occur in the environment are the result of our mentality. In *Bhagavad Gita*, the mind is said to be very fickle, but it has also been taught to subdue it with practice and self-control.

चंचलं हि मनः कृष्ण प्रमाथि बलवद्दृढम्। तस्याहं निग्रहं मन्ये वायोरिव सुदुष्करम्॥

असंशयं महाबाहो मनो दुर्निग्रहं चलत्। अभ्यासेन तु कौन्तेय वैराग्येण च गृह्यते॥ (भगवद्गीता ६:३४)

Environmental and mental consciousness is compatible with each other, the more the mind is pure, more pure is the environment. As stated in the Vedas, purification of mind is the first step for purification of the environment. According

to *Aetereyopanishad*, the universe is made up of the five elements earth, air, sky, water and fire.

इमानि पंचमहाभूतानि पृथिवीं, वायुः, आकाशः, आपज्योतिषि। (३:३)

The balance of these five elements has been taken care of in the *Vedas*. The result of any kind of imbalance in these elements is resulted into natural disasters. Each component of nature has been given a divine form in the *Vedas*. Seasonality is the universal law of the universe. This is called the law of nature. According to the *Rigveda* -

सत्येनोत्तमिता भूमिः सूर्येणोत्तमिता द्यौः ऋतेनादित्यास्तितन्ति दिवि सोमो अधिश्रितः (ऋग्वेद १०:८५:१)

Gods are also the origin of Seasonality and are bound by the rules of Seasonality. It keeps the Sun in the sky. In the Vedas, Varuna has been called the god of the seasons. Although Varuna is known as god of water and ocean (वरुणस्य गोपः), but mainly its main function is to run this universe smoothly.

*For the protection of the environment, proper harmony between nature and human is required. A description of both these elements is available in the Vedas.*

ॐ पूर्णभद्रः पूर्णभद्रिदं पूर्णात्पूर्णमुदच्यते। पूर्णस्य पूर्णमादाय पूर्णमेवावशिष्यते॥

It is clear that we should take as much from nature as is necessary for us and do not damage the wholeness of nature. Mothers and grandmothers in our families break basil leaves (instead of whole plants) in this sense. A similar prayer is offered in the Veda to the mother earth that *O land mother! Whatever I harm you, be compensated soon. We should be careful in digging to great depths (gold-coal etc.). We should not waste his power by digging him in vain* and teach us the sustainable use of natural resource.

यत्ते भूमे विखनामि क्षिप्रं तदपि रोहतु। मां ते मर्म विमृगरी या ते हृदयमर्पितम्॥

Indian culture is deeply associated with trees. In the *Rigveda* the whole of Vanadevi has been worshiped by the flora that - Now I worship Vanadevi (Aranyayi) who is full of sweet fragrance and is the mother of all the flora and is a storehouse of hard-to-eat food.

आजनगन्धिं सुरभि बहवन्नामडुषीवलाम् प्राहं मृगाणां मातररमण्याभिर्शांसिषम् (ऋग्वेद १०:१४६:६)

That is why in our culture, special fasts and festivals come in which a particular plant or tree is worshiped. Here is a good example of celebrating the Hindu New Year on *Chaitra Shukla Pratipada*, because all the trees and climbers break out the dryness and dullness of autumn, and become green with colourful flowers in *Chaitra* (March-April). At this time, people used to grow and worship barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) in *Basantiya Navratri* (festival of Mother Durga), as a symbol of power of new creations.

या देवी सर्व भूतेषु प्रकृति रूपेण संस्थिता, नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्य नमस्तस्य नमो नमः

Similarly, worship of Peepal tree on Somavati Amavasya (Amavasya on Monday)

मूलतो ब्रह्मरुपाय मध्यतो विष्णुरुपिणे । अग्रतः शिवरुपाय वृक्षराजाय ते नमः ॥

आयुः प्रजां धनं धान्यं सौभाग्यं सर्वसम्पदम् । देहि देव महावृक्ष त्वामहं शरणं गतः ॥

and Vatavriksha is worshiped on the day of Vatsavritri fast. अवैधव्यं च सौभाग्यं देहि त्वं मम् सुव्रते, यथा शाखाभिर्वृद्धोऽसि त्वं महीतले ।

Apart from *Peepal* and *Vatavriksha*, many plants are also widely recognized in Indian culture particularly in astrology. According to astrology, the micro-cycles, glands and main energy centers are in our body, through these the energy of these planets and constellation enters into our body. Just as these planets and constellation have special mantras, gems and colors, similarly trees related to these planets and constellations are also present on the earth.

There are nine (*Grah*), twelve zodiacs (*Rashiyam*) and twenty-seven constellation (*Nakshtras*) and their associated herbs, shrubs, climbers and trees are mentioned in astrology are as follow:

**The planets and the trees related to them are as follows-**

**Sun**-Bell (*Aegle marmelos*), **Moon**-Palash (*Butea monosperma*), **Mars**-Khair (*Senegalia catechu*), **Mercury**- Apamarg (*Achyranthes aspera*), **Jupiter**- Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), **Venus**-Gular (*Ficus racemosa*), **Saturn**-Shami and Madar (*Prosopis cineraria* & *Calotropis gigantean*), **Rahu**- Durva and Chandan (*Cynodon dactylon* & *Santalum album*) and **Ketu**- Kusha and Ashwagandha (*Desmostachya bipinnata* & *Withania somnifera*)

**The zodiac and the trees related to them are as follows**

**Aries**- Khadir (*Senegalia catechu*), **Taurus**- Gular (*Ficus racemosa*), **Gemini**- Apamarg (*Achyranthes aspera*), **Cancer**-Palash (*Butea monosperma*), **Leo**- Bell (*Aegle marmelos*), **Virgo**- Apamarg (*Achyranthes aspera*), **Libra**- Gular (*Ficus racemosa*), **Scorpio**- Khair (*Senegalia catechu*), **Sagittarius**-Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), **Capricorn**- Durva and Chandan (*Cynodon dactylon* & *Santalum album*), **Aquarius**- Durva and Chandan (*Cynodon dactylon* & *Santalum album*), and **Pisces**-Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*).

**The Constellation and the trees related to them from the constellations are as follows-**

**Ashwini**- Kuchla (*Strychnos nux-vomica*), **Bharni**- Aamla (*Phyllanthus emblica*), **Kritika**- Gular (*Ficus racemosa*), **Rohini**- Jamun (*Syzygium cumini*), **Mrigashira**- Khadir (*Senegalia catechu*), **Adra**- Shisam (*Dalbergia sisso*), **Punavasu** – Bans (*Bambusa vulgaris*), **Pushya** – Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), **Ashlesha** – Nagkeshar (*Mesua ferrea*), **Magha** - Bargad (*Ficus benghalensis*), **Purva Phalguni** - Palash (*Butea monosperma*), **Uttara Phalguni** - Patha (*Cissampelos pareira*), **Hasta** - Reetha (*Sapindus mukorossi*), **Chitra** – Bilvapatra (*Aegle marmelos*), **Swati** - Arjuna (*Terminalia arjuna*), **Vishakha** - Kataai (*Pennisetum ciliare*), **Anuradha** – Molshri (*Attar shamama*), **Jyestha** – Chir (*Pinus roxburghii*), **Mool** – Saal (*Shorea robusta*), **Purvashada** – Jalvetas (*Salix tetrasperma*), **Uttarasadha** – Kathal (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), **Shravan** - Madar (*Calotropis gigantean*), **Ghanishtha**- Shami (*Prosopis cineraria*), **Shatabhisha** – Kadamb (*Neolamarckia cadamba*), **Purva Bhadrapada** - Aam (*Mangifera indica*), **Uttara Bhadrapada** - Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) and **Revathi** - Mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*).

The sages have prayed to calm the entire natural powers and maintain public welfare. *Shanti Sukta* mentioned in *Atharvaveda* has infinite importance in environmental protection

शान्ता द्यौः शान्ता पृथ्वी शान्तामिदमुर्वन्तुन्तरिक्षम् । शान्ता उदन्वतीरापः शान्ता नः सन्त्वोषधी ॥

शं नो मित्रः शं वरुणः शं विष्णुः शं प्रजापतिः । शं नो इन्द्रो बृहस्पतिः शं भवत्वयमा ॥

Hundreds of years ago, our sage became aware about nature, environment, ecology as well as the importance of plants. At the same time, they also realized that it would not be easy to motivate the common man for protection and conservation of plant resource due to their abundance. Therefore, by connecting the protection of the environment with religious sentiments, they created the best practice to protect these valuable assets and that is somewhat working till day.