

Relevance of Vedic Concept of Environmental Ethics in the 21st Century

¹Dr. Dipen Tayung and ²Nirupama Roy

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy
Bhattadev University, Bajali.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy
Saraighat College, Changsari

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the concept of Environmental Ethics as reflected in the Vedic tradition and its importance in present scenario. It basically deals with the environmental ethics which is a part of environmental philosophy that studies the ethical relationship of human beings too, and also the value and moral status of the environment and its non-human contents. Environmental ethics tries to realise people that human beings live with and in Nature; therefore, we have to understand the importance and value of the environment. In the Vedic tradition we see many of the concept that represents the respective attitude towards the natural world. In Vedic tradition, not only human beings but also environmental elements were respected. Vedic texts particularly the Rigveda, Atharva Veda, the Upanishads and its rituals and sacrifices recognizes the interconnectedness between human, nature, and the divine. The Vedic concern for environment emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with nature and people's responsibility towards the non-human beings.

Keywords:

Veda, Environmental Ethics, Human Being, Nature, Sacrifice etc.

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Introduction

Environmental ethics is a branch of applied philosophy that studies the relationship between humans and the environment, and the ethical and moral obligations that humans have to the natural world. It examines the values that should be placed on the environment, and how to live in a way that protects and sustains the planet. In our day today life we see the degradation of the environment therefore it is high time to realize the importance of environment. Environmental ethics is that branch of applied philosophy that discusses about the relationship between human and environment, humans' responsibility towards the nature.

Due to the excessive and uncontrolled use of the natural environment by humans for a long time, there has been irreparable damage to the environment and the consequences of which are being faced not only by humans but also by other species. Hence, importance of the thought of environment conservation is increasing day by day. But the environmental concern is not only today's concern we have seen it from the ancient time. We can see the interconnectedness between human and nature and respect for the natural objects in the Vedic tradition too. The Vedic concept of the environment is deeply rooted in the idea of harmony and balance between nature and human beings. The Vedas, which are ancient sacred texts of India, present a holistic view of the universe and emphasize the interconnectedness of all life forms.

Objectives

The main objectives of this study are —

1. To discuss about the concept of Environmental Ethics.
2. To analyze the Environmental Ethics as reflected in the Vedas.
3. To discuss about the relevance of Vedic Concept of Environmental Ethics.

Methodology

The proposed study is based on secondary sources. The secondary data are collected from the different sources, viz. books, articles, internet, library etc. To sort out the data we have gone through descriptive method as well as analytical method.

Review of Literature

Sinha, J. (2002) in his book "*Outlines of Indian Philosophy*" described the philosophy of the Vedas that represent different phases of religious thought. In Vedic period the grand, sublime, beautiful and useful aspects of nature are personified and deified. Dasgupta, S (1922) in his work "*A History of Indian Philosophy*" discusses about the classification of the Vedas, where we found a brief description about the Aranyakas; which is also known as the forest treatise. Here, we came to know that instead of sacrificing an actual conscious being, there were meditations on certain symbols that were supposed to be of great merit. Hiriyanna, M. (2005) in his book "*The Essentials of Indian Philosophy*" explained about the man's duty is to obey and to propitiate the Gods. The Gods are the powerful ruler of the universe as well as the righteous-minded, that must lead a morally pure life. The book "*Guide to Indian Philosophy*" (2003) is written by Jagadiswar Sanyal. In this book we have

seen the discussion about the Vedic Gods, which are mentioned in the Vedic mantras. All the Vedic God's Indra, Agni, Varuna etc. are the representation of the different objects of nature; viz., rain, fire, lightening, storm etc. It is believed that the conscious reality lying behind each natural object is a God. The book "*History of Indian Philosophy*" is authored by R. N. Sharma in 1994. In this book we have found some interpretation of the Vedic hymns that includes the naturalistic interpretation as well. This book also discussed about the theory of Rta. It means the order in the object of the universe. It is a cosmic and moral order and is similar to that of karma in human life.

The Concept of Environmental Ethics

Though the concept of ethics is as old as philosophy but environmental ethics is very new. Environmental ethics is a branch of applied philosophy that studies the conceptual foundations of environmental values as well as more concrete issues surrounding societal attitudes, actions, and policies to protect and sustain biodiversity and ecological systems. It also studies the moral relationship of human beings with every other thing. It seeks to understand and recognizes the intrinsic value of nature, the interconnection of all living things, and the responsibility of humans to act in accordance with ethical principles to protect and preserve the environment. The practical purpose of environmental ethics is to provide moral grounds for social policies aimed at protecting the earth's environment and remedying environmental degradation. There are many different perspectives in environmental ethics such as human-centered or "anthropocentric" that gives a greater amount of intrinsic value to human beings than to any non-human things and believes that the protection or promotion of human interests or well-being at the expense of non-human things turns out to be nearly always justified and the value of non-human things are merely instrumental. But other perspective of environmental ethics such as "Biocentrism," or the life-centered approach believes that all living things deserve equal moral consideration. They give emphasized on the preservation of biodiversity, animal rights, and protection of the environment etc. Another perspective of environmental ethics is "Ecocentrism," or the ecosystem-centered approach. It emphasizes the importance of all living and non-living things in the environment. It seeks to de-emphasize human importance while promoting the importance of plants, animals, and other organisms as well as non-living things such as water, soil etc. It gives importance on the intrinsic value of all the living and non-living things.

Environmental Issues

Environmental issues are the problems and challenges that affect the natural world and ecosystems. These issues can be caused by natural events or human activities. Though human beings live in and depends on nature but with the advancement of society due to liberalization or modernity and industrialization the life of people has become mechanical and robotic and they have little opportunity to look after the welfare of others. Hence, people's unthoughtful activities on environment increases environmental issues day by day. Environmental issues include all the problems related to the environment such as ozone layer depletion, depletion of natural resources, pollution, deforestation, global warming and climate change etc. These issues can harm the environment, human health and biodiversity. Some of the major environmental issues are pollution, deforestation, overpopulation, loss of biodiversity and climate change.

Role of Environmental Ethics on Environmental Issues

Environmental ethics helps people understand their relationship with the natural world and their responsibility towards it. It deals with the moral obligation of human beings towards nature. Environmental ethics is one of the best ways for human beings to realize the importance of the environment and makes people aware about the impact of their actions have on the environment. It emphasizes on sustainable practices and can help to protect the environment, species and resources etc. It also stresses upon the interdependence of all things, that cultivates respect for the existence of all things in the world. It gives importance on the preservation of biodiversity, animal rights, and protection of the environment. Environmental ethics can help to control almost all the problems related to environment, as it has several principles such as, respect for the intrinsic value of nature, justice and sustainability, sufficiency and compassion, solidarity and participation etc.

Meaning of the Vedas

The Vedas are the sacred books of India and is generally believed to be the earliest literary record of the Indo-European race. The word "Veda" means "knowledge" in Sanskrit. The Vedas are the collection of ancient Hindu religious texts and the oldest surviving religious literature in the world. The Vedas are regarded as the foundation of Hinduism; because all the obligatory duties of the Hindus at birth, marriage, death etc. are performed according to the old Vedic rituals.

There are four Vedas: the Rigveda, the Yajurveda, the Samaveda and the Atharvaveda. Rigveda contains hymns about mythology; Yajurveda contains instructions for religious

rituals; Samaveda contains hymns about religious rituals and Atharvaveda contains spells against diseases, sorcerers, and enemies. Each of the Veda has also four parts. These are the collection of Mantra or Samhita; Brahmanas or the commentaries on rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices; the Aranyaka is the “wilderness texts” or “forest treaties” which is concerned with the rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices, and symbolic sacrifices and the last part of the Vedas are called Upanishad that discusses mainly spiritual knowledge.

Vedic Perspective of Environment

The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 defines the environment as ‘Environment includes water, air and land and the inter-relationship which exists among and between water, air and land and human beings, other living creatures, plants, micro-organisms and property’. An environment is the sum total of all the living and non-living elements and their effects which influence human life. Vedic views revolve around the concept of nature and life. The Vedic perspective on the environment is deeply rooted in the principles of interconnectedness, reverence for nature, and sustainability. In the Vedas nature is not seen as a resource to be exploited but as a manifestation of the divine and a reflection of the cosmic order known as Rta. They believed that nature is divine and should not be harmed. Natural elements like the earth, water, fire, air and space all are considered as sacred and are personified as deities. In Vedas there are many hymns to seek the blessings of these five basic gross elements or the pancha mahabhoota of nature. Ancient people understood that the well-being of Mother Earth depended on the preservation and sustenance of the environment. The Rig-Veda specifically mentions about the environment through one of its verses i.e., “the sky is like their father, the earth like their mother, and the space like their son.”

The Vedic Concept of Environmental Ethics

In ancient time, the Vedic literatures describe the sense of respect for nature and attempt to make awareness of the environmental crisis. Through the holistic view of the nature the Vedas describe the interconnectedness of natural objects. The Vedas refers that the first seed from which the world and other planets came into existence was the sound, a combination of A, U, M which is known as Omkara. A-kara means form or shape like earth, trees or any other object. U-kara means formless or shapeless like water, air or fire. M-kara means neither shape nor shapeless (but still exists) like the dark matter in the Universe.

Even the earliest form of religion consists in the worship of natural powers. In Vedic tradition man personifies the powers of nature which in virtue of their great strength become

his Gods. People cultivate a spirit of awe and reverence towards them, sing their praises and offer worship or sacrifice to them with a view either to propitiate them or to secure their favor. This reflects the interconnectedness between human being and the natural objects. The Vedic tradition shows that all living beings, including humans, animals, plants, and even non-living entities, are interconnected. Therefore, the destruction of one element of nature disrupts the balance of the universe, leading to consequences for all living beings. Hence, the Vedas consist mostly of hymns in praise of nature gods, such as fire, water, wind, sun etc. The Vedic texts encourage practices that foster respect for nature, urging humans to live in harmony with it.

According to Rig Veda the universe is like a family, and any harm done to any one of them upsets the balance of the universe. Therefore, humans must refrain from causing harm to the planet and engage in continuous forestation in order to survive; otherwise, ecological balance of the planet would be disrupted. Again, we can see the interconnectedness between human and nature in one of the parts of the Vedas which is called Aranyaka or forest treatises. This part was composed in the calmness of the forests for old men who had retired into the forest. This part shows that forest is the most peaceful place for meditation and spiritual practices. The Vedas instruct that forest should not be destroyed as it is the main source of herbs, pure air and habitat of birds and animals. The Veda believed that pure air as an irreplaceable remedy for human health and prolonged life.

In Vedic tradition there was the concept of Yajna or Sacrifice. It is a ritual of offering and worship that involves chanting mantras in front of a sacred fire to save the worldly creatures from natural hazards. It is believed that Yajna purifies the environment and promotes sustainable living. Yajnas are an act of gratitude for the environment, the five elements, and the gods. The Vedic people believed that the environment belongs to all living beings and should be protected for the welfare of all. They believed that the environment should be clean, peaceful, and unpolluted to live a life of a hundred years. In Hindu tradition duties and responsibilities of human life are regarded as the five great Yajnas and one of that Yajnas is Bhuta Yajna. Bhuta Yajna is regarded as the feeding of all living creatures.

Another important concept in Vedic tradition is the concept of Rta, which refers to the fundamental principle of cosmic order, harmony and truth that governs the Universe. Rta also reflects the interconnectedness and balance inherent in nature and influence people how they should interact with the environment. The concept of Rta suggests that the universe operates

in a balanced, harmonious way. Any disruption to this balance by human actions such as pollution, deforestation, or over-exploitation of resources is seen as unethical because it disturbs the natural order. Adhering to the principle of Rta fosters a sense of responsibility towards oneself, society and environment. It encourages people to act in ways that promote ethical conduct to save harmony and to respect for nature.

Ahimsa or non- violence is one of the ethical concepts evolved in the Vedic texts. The oldest scriptures indirectly mention Ahimsa, which means “non injury”. Though “Ahimsa” (non-violence) is more prominently associated with later texts of Jainism, and Buddhism; the Vedic texts strongly advocate for non-violent attitudes and actions toward all forms of life. The Rig Veda uses the words Satya (truthfulness) and Ahimsa in a prayer to deity Indra. The Rigveda speaks of the importance of harmony in society and the natural world, and the avoidance of unnecessary harm to others. The concept of “Dharma” or righteousness in the Vedic texts suggests that one should live in accordance with universal laws of fairness, justice, and moral conduct, which includes refraining from harm. Although, Vedic sacrificial rites often involve the offering of animals, over time, the Vedic tradition evolved the importance of offering symbolic sacrifices such as offerings of fruits, flowers, and grains etc. instead of actual animals. The Vedas believed that since everything is connected, harming one part of creation is seen as ultimately harming oneself.

Importance of Vedic Concept of Environmental Ethics

Though the Vedas were composed thousands of years ago, its teachings on environmental ethics still have relevance in the 21st century. In our day-to-day life we can see that the concept, theories and principles of traditional Indian ethical philosophy can be applied to the environmental issues that have recently emerged. Man is a natural being and thus remains subject to Nature’s law whether or not we are aware of this dependence or desire it. Though it is said that human beings are superior to others yet we cannot live without the dependence of Nature. The Vedic Concept and Vedic attitude towards nature show the interconnectedness of all living things, at that time they realized the importance of Nature and gave emphasized on the holistic aspects of the world. The Vedas teach that natural resources belong to everyone and should be shared.

In present time the world is burning with many environmental issues such as, pollution, degradation, global warming and climate change, bio diversity loss etc. These are the effects of people’s unthoughtful work on the environment. Hence, to face these global

environmental challenges, the Vedic principles are the way that make people aware about the importance of living in harmony with nature. The interconnectedness and sacredness of the natural world, the principle of non-violence, and the idea of cosmic balance all provide a moral foundation for addressing modern environmental crisis. The Vedic concept of Rta promote sustainability, environmental conservation and ethical living. It emphasized on the importance of living in harmony with Nature. Again, In Vedic tradition Yajnas performed with ghee to purify the environment. It reduces air pollution by improving moisture content, reducing particulate matter, and reducing harmful gases. The Vedas gives importance on the protection of environment to maintain ecological balance and for the welfare of all. The Rig Veda also emphasized on planting trees and not harming the planet. The Vedas forbid wasting of any natural resources or polluting them. All the Vedic Concepts reminds us our place in the environment and responsibility towards the Nature. It does not permit the excessive use of environment rather it taught that human should use natural resources as per their need and ensure the protection of environment.

Conclusion

From the above discussion we see that environmental ethics can help people critically engage with questions about how to live in harmony with the natural world. Though it is a new concept yet we can see the root of environmental ethics from the ancient time. Many of the Vedic concept such as Rta, Yajna, the concept of Gods, Ahimsa all shows a deep respect towards the Nature. Through the holistic attitude towards natural objects the Vedic tradition reminds us the responsibility to protect environment for our better future. It makes us aware about the interdependence on one another in the environment. We the human being cannot exist without a proper environment. Environmental issues are a warning of the upcoming disaster. If these issues are not controlled, there will soon be no life on earth. The Vedic people also understand the fact that people can live a life of hundred years only when environment will be unpolluted, clean and peaceful. Therefore, in present scenario it is the high time to realize the importance of environment and we have to do the needful action to protect environment and we should stop our harmful activities on environment.

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