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Human and the Nature: Assimilating Indian Tradition with Modern Practices

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Abstract

Almost all civilizations as well as ancient texts have an ingrained thrust for environmental overtones which pertains to observing some norms and practicing one's conduct towards nature and its creations. They contain the earliest messages for preservation of the environment and ecological balance. Going by that understanding, there was a significance attached to the natural environment in ancient Indian tradition too. Preservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance have always been regarded with utmost importance as per the traditional way of life. This paper tries to interrogate the approach of the traditional Indian culture and the western approach towards environmental protection and ecological imbalance and further points out the need to amalgamate the two approaches for better results. Modern approach depends on awareness generation and enforcement of State laws and international treatises in order to protect the environment. Many a time people do not comply. A more effective approach may be to combine this with community driven protection that emanated from love and respect for nature, as existed in traditional practices.

Keywords: Nature Protection, Ecological Balance, Dhamma, Rock Edicts, Ashokan Edicts, Community, Preservation

Introduction

Environmentalism and its modern-day awareness pins down the need for protecting our natural resources like mountains, trees, forests, lakes, rivers, other water bodies; thereby make our climate sustainable and free from pollution. It also speaks about protecting animal and plant diversity; thereby taking care of the entire ecology.

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Emphasis is on preventing degradation of the environment that occurs due to human intervention and human activity centering on over-exploitation of our natural resources. Modern environmentalism which propagates safe and sustainable use of the environment is a response to global environmental crises; it arises out of the fear that if human activities go the way they are going, there will soon be a situation whereby the interaction between humans and their environment will raise the question of struggle for existence.

The concern for environment and natural resources is not a product of the modern era. It existed in the past and even in the ancient period. Traditional Indian, Chinese cultures too laid emphasis on respect for nature, environment and natural resources. Just as ancient Chinese culture, rooted in Taoism and Confucianism, emphasised harmony with nature and interconnectedness of all things in the universe, traditional Indian culture, rooted in Hindu way of life, also believed in survival and well-being in an interconnected manner and respect for each and every creation in the universe. Believing in the piety of nature and the existence of gods and deities in all forms of nature, the traditional man living in India believed that they cannot exist by harming nature; any destruction of nature disturbs the totality and the balance that exists in the ecosystem. It underscores the need to preserve nature as we are all part of it and are integrally unified with it. If the integral is destroyed we are destroyed. Thus, concern for the environment was intricately intertwined with theological thinking (Hunt & Marlow, 2019).

Significance of Nature in Indian Tradition

In traditional Vedic texts, components of nature like rivers, mountains, and lakes were all objects of extreme reverence. It was believed that every object has a God within. Given this philosophical foundation, it is unsurprising that respect for nature has been deeply embedded in Hindu society. Ancient Indians felt God's presence around them through nature; they considered all the natural forces to be the manifestations of the Supreme Being or God called Brahman. This perspective encouraged them to treat nature with reverence and respect. They also held a strong belief that nature is God's creation and deserves complete respect and submission to the Almighty. They revered

objects of nature like Sun, Moon, Stars, trees, forests, lakes, rivers and saw these as the building blocks of the Universe. Vedic hymns were all in praise of these objects of nature (Thakur, 2019). In ancient times people prayed to nature gods like Agni (Fire), Vayu (Air), Prithvi (Earth), Water (Jal), and Akash (Space) and these were considered the five elements of nature that constitute our cosmic life. These elements of nature had great power of life as well as destruction. People saw them with awe and fear. They also considered these places as abodes of deities.

Forests were regarded as sacred dwellings of deities and sages. Woods and villages near the forests were considered spiritual spaces where people can meditate and achieve salvation. Even today, Hindus continue to revere various elements of nature, including celestial bodies like the Sun, the Moon, and planets such as Jupiter, Venus and Saturn. Sacred mountains like Kailash and Govardhan hold deep spiritual significance, as do trees and plants like the Peepal, Neem, and Tulsi. Water bodies such as rivers (like the Ganga and Yamuna), lakes, and oceans are also honoured. For instance, lakes like Mansarovar and the Kshirasagara are considered especially sacred. Additionally, animals like the cow, bull (Nandi), monkey and elephant, along with birds such as the peacock and swan, are worshipped. This highlights the deep connection between the traditional way of life and the natural world.

Forests were ecologically precious and preserving them was considered our sacred duty. Since time immemorial, trees have bestowed us with fruits, flowers, medicines, fuel, manure, much required shade from the Sun, and shelter to birds and animals. Thus destruction of forests can potentially destroy human life. In Bhagavad Gita, it is said that since Vishnu is the Sustainer and upholds divine balance and unity in nature, we should follow him and help preserve the divine creation, sacrificing self-interest to common good (*Sarva bhuta hitaya*). A dharmic person is one who lives with nature will always think of common good and not his own interest. This feeling is completely in contrast with the modern day capitalist idea of maximizing profit and exploiting natural resources for that objective. Thus the dharmic man is an ecologically friendly person and lives in a state of harmony.

Ecological Ethics and Nature Preservation in Ancient India

At a time when traditional ethical practices started declining, brahmanical practices started rampantly progressing, emphasising on rites, rituals, dogmatic practices, animal sacrifices, resulting from an element of fear and superstitions creeping into social life. It gave way to quick destruction of nature (frequent animal sacrifice and wood logging for religious ceremonies). This process got further intensified by the rise of the kingly class and their warriors who started indulging in warfare, killing of men and animals and other inhumane practices in quest for furthering their goal of political survival and expansion. These concerns were found as early as Ashokan era. Ashokan edicts find mention of a code of conduct for the subjects that evidently included these things. In this context it may be said that King Ashoka's preachings during the second century BC, were certainly way ahead of his times. He propagated *dhamma* (moral or ethical code of conduct) to emphasise, among other things, the need to preserve nature.

As is evident from inscriptions dating back to the Mauryan era, he would often describe his own good actions so that common subjects in his kingdom could get inspired and follow his footsteps (Kangle, 2006). It is often said that King Ashoka was equally altruistic and charitable towards both humans and animals. He never made much distinction between them. He set up treatment and care facilities for animals not only within his kingdom, but elsewhere too. He would regularly plant saplings and fruit trees. This also included planting banyan trees for providing shade and shelter to animals and humans alike. Mango tree orchards were constructed and maintained by the king's administration, wells were also dug every eight *kos* (also *krosh* in Sanskrit and *kuroh* in Persian) [1]. All this evidence can be found inscribed in Ashokan pillars, caves and edicts throughout the country. The inscriptions were found to be in Prakrit language, mostly in Brahmi or Kharosthi script (Bhatt, 1957: 25). Rock edicts found near Girnar hills in present day Junagadh in Gujarat, describe Ashoka's love for the environment and the natural surroundings. Through the inscription, King Ashoka instructed that no animal sacrifices should be conducted in his kingdom for the purpose of conducting 'sacred' fire rituals (*homa*), nor such social activities (like *mela*, festivals and gatherings) be held that inflict violence upon animals. It is further written that "... earlier, several animals would be killed in the royal kitchen for making *shorba* (soup) as offerings for the gods; especially deers and peacocks." Instructions were given to

stop those practices. The same words also find mention in the first rock edict in Kalsi, in present-day Uttarakhand. (Bhatt, 1957: 34-37)

In the second edict (Girnar), it was written that in God's favourite King Priyadarshi's (King Ashoka) kingdom, two types of treatment facilities were set up – one for humans, another for animals. Medicinal plants and trees were sown for the benefit of both. They were planted wherever these medicinal plants were absent. For comfort and shade, wells were dug up and trees were planted on roads (Bhatt, 1957: 28). The same was also found written in the second rock edict in Kalsi, and the second rock edict in Shahbaz Garhi in present-day Pakistan. The third rock edict of Girnar mentions that twelve years after the King's coronation, he instructed his officials to tour the kingdom and propagate some ideas on his behalf. Among them were the four main ideas inscribed on the rock. One specified that not being violent towards animals is considered a good practice.

Ashokan edicts or inscriptions on stone pillars also detail his moral and administrative policies, his understanding of '*dhamma*' or righteousness and non-violence. The second pillar edict from Meerut (now in Delhi) elaborates on the meaning of *dhamma*. It states that among the many good deeds performed by King Priyadarshi, he has shown kindness towards all two-legged, four-legged creatures, birds and aquatic species (Bhatt, 1957: 66). He has worked for their welfare, and had mercy on their life. The purpose behind writing the edicts on the pillars was to ensure that common people could emulate the king's ideas and actions. Moreover, any person following *dhamma* could perform a good or pious deed. Many authors believe that the prohibition of animal sacrifice and the order against festive gatherings was a serious blow to Vedic Brahmanism, and this made Ashoka unpopular with many sections of his subjects. Yet, the preaching and enforcement of moral values or dhamma through writings inscribed on rocks and pillars made him much ahead of his time.

Ashoka's emphasis on non-violence, sanctity of life (whether animals or humans), and planting of trees closely matches nature preservation and biodiversity conservation in modern times. By making his subjects more conscious about flora and fauna, he tried to maintain ecological balance in his kingdom. (Jha, 2004, pp.209-217). Even

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* mentioned the post of Director of Agriculture or *Sītādhyakṣa*, and his responsibility towards overseeing agricultural practices; which makes it evident that even during his times the King was supposed to give importance to agricultural matters (Shamasastry, 1915: 163-171). There were other posts too, including Superintendent of Pasture Lands or *Gorūpādhakṣa,* who was assigned the responsibility of maintaining herds, protecting cattle, and managing grazing grounds, and the Director of Forest Produce or *Kupyādhakṣa* who was responsible for regulating forest extraction, protecting trees and managing forest trade during his time (Shamasastry, 1915: 139-142, 179-182). Thus forest and pasture management was not only left to individuals, but also institutionalised with the creation of official posts whose duties were clearly demarcated. In fact, there were strict bans on killing of certain animals like elephants and productive cattle, with heavy penalties imposed on those who failed to comply (Shamasastry, 1915: 65). As per the *Arthashastra*, reverence towards nature was considered significant, but it was also believed that this reverence emanates from the very idea that nature and its elements have been a great source of human sustenance and well being. So it was a combination of the idea of reverence and utility.

The sacred act of *daan*,[2] or giving, as mentioned in the *Bhaviṣya Purana*, is also considered to be one of the most pious activities as per the ancient Indian practices, and reflects how informal community-based practices evolved regarding distribution and sharing of food – a form of natural resource (Mahadevan et. al., 2022: 87). *Anna* daan, which involves giving food; *bhoo* daan, which involves giving land; *vidya* daan, which involves giving knowledge; and *go* daan, which involves giving cattle were considered to be the four most important types of *daan* in Hinduism.

Since food is a necessity which sustains life on the planet, it was also regarded as divine. From production to consumption, the journey of food was intertwined with spiritual practices. It was regarded as a sacred duty to produce food in an ethical manner, cook it with love, and share it with both humans and animals. Giving food to the needy and the poor was considered a mahadaan, the highest form of almsgiving. In fact, anna daan was not only practiced by ordinary individuals; it was also expected of kings, households, and temples to guarantee that no one went hungry. Religious organisations

found a way to serve local communities. There was also the concept of langar[3] in gurudwaras or the distribution of prasad[4] in temples to everyone regardless of their socioeconomic background. Serving food was not just a mundane chore. Instead, it was an opportunity to show kindness and promote equitable sharing. As per many ancient scriptures, the farming community was accorded divine status as they toiled continuously to feed everyone. Eating also had spiritual significance; one was supposed to eat with appreciation, acknowledging that food is the life-giving force. This all-encompassing approach to eating mirrored the larger cosmic order, bringing morality and individual behavior into harmony. Only pure, plant-based, and non-violent satvik[5] food was thought to provide clarity to the mind and balance to the human body. Therefore, food not only nourished the physical self, but also helped lift one's inner state. In contrast, meat and other tamasik foods, linked to harm and heaviness, were discouraged. Flesh or meat can cause harm or violence to an animal, so it should be avoided. These foods were believed to disrupt the mind and attract negative thoughts. In essence, Indian tradition viewed food as both nourishment and something sacred. It was meant to be respected, shared, and enjoyed.

Comparing Ancient and the Modern Understanding of Nature

The roots of the modern approach to nature lie in western philosophical traditions. According to Western philosophy, humans are encouraged to think of themselves as conquerors of nature, as someone who succeeds in imposing an order over natural wilderness. Thus, nature is to be dominated and exploited for human well-being. For instance, in the *Book of Genesis,* a sin committed by Adam results in nature becoming hostile. Adam therefore had to forcefully dominate nature as a means to survive. This required harsh effort. Ultimately, humans became farmers and later on spontaneous cultivation was substituted by heavy labour. Hence, Western understanding towards nature is consonant with an anthropocentric view of the world. Sir Francis Bacon in Novum Organon writes "Let the human race recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest." (Bacon, 1620).

The Graeco-Christian anthropocentric view, firmly rooted in Stoicism, believed that nature exists primarily as a human resource. Humans have the right to use nature for

their own end. Nature is not sacred even if it comes from God, it is other than God. The human domination over nature emanated from the idea that we alone have the power over nature, the sea, rivers and the winds, thanks to the service of navigation; we give fertility to soil by irrigating it, we control the rivers by diverting their courses. In a way, Western philosophy never considered human domination over nature to be problematic. The modern man with his knowledge of science and technology believes that it can use and control nature for human good. Environmental movements originating in the West in the early 20th century are activism-oriented and believe in protection of nature for future human use. Thus, environment or nature conservation is important only because of its instrumental value.

This idea is fundamentally opposed to the modern idea of dominating nature. ancient Indian traditions believed that nature is endowed with an inherent value. In other words, nature acquires importance not because humans derive value from it, but because nature is sacred and interconnected, with divine presence and manifestations of the universal consciousness (*Brahman*). Earlier people in the East never thought of controlling nature, or exploiting it. They were like the trustees who took care of the assets of nature. In Hinduism, it is believed that objects in nature experience emotions and sensation just as humans do. For example, in the *Puranas*, it is written that trees possess consciousness, experience joy and suffering, and are regarded as living beings. Trees, like humans, are considered part of this cosmic world or the *samsara*. We as humans are the trustees of nature. We are not to destroy it but to protect it.

Whereas, as per western understanding, humans are at the centre of any civilization, and everything including the environment is meant to fulfil human needs, the Indian traditional beliefs and practices considers it our duty to preserve and see all aspects of nature with reverence. Thus, the need for resource extraction, resource control and resource management and a more recent urge for sustainable environmental practices in the West arise out of human needs and the needs of future generations of humans. There is a legal aspect also added whereby it is made part of laws and treaties. The idea is, we ought to preserve it otherwise law will enforce it. Traditional Indian society believed in coexistence with nature (Gunjika, 2020). The idea was that, just as humans, these are all creations of God and therefore God exists everywhere. We have no other

way but to show respect towards them. Thus we pray to all forms of nature; rivers, mountains, forests, trees, animals in some form or other. We not only need nature, we also exist as a whole where humans without nature and vice versa cannot exist.

Today, when the urge to preserve nature has become so significant, it will be better to bring together both the Indian as well as the western perspective. This will not only provide us with a technological-scientific-legal perspective that is absolutely need based and the traditional Indian perspective that is based on respect for each other. These two perspectives in unison can make ecological balance and environmental protection more sustainable and easier to practice. In the wake of climate change and rapid global warming, maintaining ecological balance and conserving natural resources takes the form of adopting stringent adaptation and mitigation measures. More stress is laid on framing guidelines and enacting legislation which enforce good behaviour upon individuals, society and the government. Subject to violation of regulatory measures and laws, hefty fines and punitive actions are imposed by the State. Thus, it goes without saying that the modern notion of environmentalism and climate action relies heavily on legal enforcement of rules, norms and international agreements. However, as is most often seen, such laws rarely impact the behaviour of common people. Decisions taken at climate change summits rarely percolate down to the level of individual action and that of small businesses. Fear of punitive action alters human behaviour only to the extent that nobody wants to be penalized. But it does little to incentivize a real change in human behaviour and actions. This rather Eurocentric way of combating environmental degradation has its limitations. In contrast, ancient Indian practices imbibed good ecological values in individuals through raising moral conscience. Protecting nature was seen as a virtuous practice, one that evoked moral action. It was genuinely felt that conserving the natural environment had an inherent intrinsic value. Thus, it was to be protected not only because of its utility value or fear of enforcement of laws. In other words, people respected nature not only because they ascribed some material utility to resources extracted from nature which can be commodified and traded in markets, but also because all humans are an intrinsic part of nature and the cosmic world. Conserving nature was equivalent to protecting human life itself. Religion was also invoked to instill a sense of love and reverence for nature.

Simply put, ancient means of nature preservation relied on respect and love for the environment, and not fear of violating stringent laws.

Conclusion

For thousands of years humans have used the environment for their own survival. This process accelerated after the dawn of modern capitalist development when resources in nature were used as raw material for industrial manufacturing and agrarian growth. Speedy development resulted in swift destruction of nature in all its forms. Objects of nature have been considered soulless and to be used and controlled by the humans for their own welfare and good living. Today the world has realized that environmental degradation has created an unprecedented crisis which needs to be tackled. The entire world is trying to grapple with this issue. Countries are signing conventions and treaties on climate change, protection of biodiversity, and setting up sustainable development goals. The idea is to call for carefulness as human life may, otherwise, be in danger. The instrumental value ascribed to nature here is what matters. Contrary to that, the traditional way of seeing nature was to respect nature and pray to them as that is what the belief system condoned. Even traditional Indian agricultural practices were sustainable and could address contemporary challenges such as climate change, soil degradation, and food insecurity.

Nature and religion were integrally connected in human minds. So, nature was considered sacred and was to be preserved (UNEP, 2024). It was to be saved not just because it saves human life, but because that is what was considered the dharmic way of life. Thus, the approaches are different and distinct. Any effort in balancing the two may be fruitful as humans would not only deter from environmental destruction just to follow rules and laws but also find it their sacred duty to protect and save the environment. The Earth itself is seen as a Goddess and humanity has to live with blessings and compassion of mother earth is the traditional philosophical idea that resonates with the contemporary call for environmental protection and ecological balance. The timeless wisdom of ages that still resonates among us, along with modern scientific knowledge, can help us to expedite environmental progress and open new frontiers in resolving ecological crises. Solutions to today's environmental problems lie

in fostering community resilience. Clearly, the traditional Indian knowledge system should not be considered incompatible with modern scientific practices. Instead, the two approaches should complement each other in addressing climate change, environmental challenges and resource depletion.

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Notes

[1] An unit of measurement used in ancient India roughly equivalent to 3.22 kilometers or 2 miles

[2] Act of charity, donation, or act of giving.

[3] Community kitchen in gurudwaras

[4] Items offered to God and later distributed among devotees as divine blessings

[5] Pure and virtuous