



Ecological traditions in Indian thought

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Abstract

Environmental ethics as an academic discipline came into the scene in west during 1970's and is accepted as a major academic discipline throughout the world. Although conceived under the philosophy of applied ethics, environmental ethics surpasses all the academic barriers and this subject is not limited to academic world alone. Still, there is a general sense of feeling that as compared to Eastern traditions of ecological heritage, environmental ethics has many pitfalls. Therefore, the major concern of this study is what makes the Eastern tradition, especially Indian tradition of ecological heritage preferable to western oriented environmental ethics. It is not because India is having the oldest civilization, but it is because unlike west, Indian ecological tradition is not an outcome of environmental crisis. Our ecological heritage is the outcome of man's communion with nature. While Western community saw nature as a mechanism to be experimented, Indian community realised nature as a thing to be experienced.

Keywords: ecology, ecological movements, Indian philosophy, Indian thought

1. Introduction

Environmental ethics as an academic discipline came into the scene in west during 1970's and is accepted as a major academic discipline throughout the world. Although conceived under the philosophy of applied ethics, environmental ethics surpasses all the academic barriers and this subject is not limited to academic world alone. Still, there is a general sense of feeling that as compared to Eastern traditions of ecological heritage, environmental ethics has many pitfalls. Therefore, the major concern of this study is what makes the Eastern tradition, especially Indian tradition of ecological heritage preferable to western oriented environmental ethics. It is not because India is having the oldest civilization, but it is because unlike west, Indian ecological tradition is not an outcome of environmental crisis. Our ecological heritage is the outcome of man's communion with nature. While Western community saw nature as a mechanism to be experimented, Indian community realised nature as a thing to be experienced. Westerners' attitude to nature as a thing to be exploited resulted in losing harmony and balance in nature.

Almost all the Indian philosophical systems teach that man is part of the divine, an integral part of the divine being. There is also an integral bond between nature and divinity. Since divinity is an integral part of both man and nature, Indian philosophical systems maintain a harmonious and holistic relation between man and nature. Indian literature is rich with vivid description of nature, throughout the time, from ancient period to present day. According to Banwari:

We never had merely a utilitarian relationship with nature. Our bond with nature was not founded merely on the general qualities of its greenway and the comforts

accruing from it. In India, the meaning of the term 'nature' is not just restricted to the world of vegetations, or to the physical world. We have comprehended nature as a cosmic system and that is why we have always tried to be natural in all our activities^[1].

2. Indian philosophical and cultural traditions in ecology

Philosophy and philosophical systems are commonly perceived as pertaining exclusively spiritual and metaphysical content and it has nothing to do with man's day to day affairs. In contrast to this, science and technology are viewed as systems to develop man's material progress and have no connection with spiritual process of man. Therefore, the compartmentalization of materialism and spirituality created the crisis. This crisis is deep rooted in ecological problems because value is attached with spirituality or philosophy and practice is attached with science or materialism. Thus, the crisis mounts when science aims at only material progress without any due care to value system. Now, we are in a paradox that our science and technological systems fail to give basic material facilities. The resources of earth are replenishing fast and science and technology stand helplessly to refill the resource basis. In fact, this situation is a chance to reappraise our traditional philosophical and cultural attitude toward materialism in general and ecology in particular.

According to Indian philosophical tradition, the world of man, animal, the flora and the fauna, everything thing is existing only because the elements made of everything is similar. Those five elements comprise the sky (*akasa*), air (*vayu*), fire or energy (*Agni*), water (*Jala*) and earth (*Prithvi*). This concept stands for the crucial lesson of ecology, i.e. harmonious balance of all beings. These are the life supporting systems of whole earth. "Man's urge to participate

in the cosmic drama is expressed daily through gestures: by offering water with folded hands to the sun God, by kindling the sacred fire, by attrition of the two *aranis* or lighting the home fire, by pouring ghee on fire, by fumigating the house, by pouring water at the foot of trees, by ritual bathing in rivers, by the conservation of sacred groves, by garlanding of domestic animals in fact, by all acts of daily life that becomes rituals in that they associate man with nature^[2].

An investigation into the traditional Indian philosophical systems reveals two crucial aspects in relation with ecology.

1. All the traditional systems prescribe about man's relationship with nature/environment as a mode of sustenance and material prosperity.
2. Such prescription is also important from the point of view of harmonious balance between all creatures. This also provides social harmony and peaceful co-existence.

Indian philosophical systems provide an environmental philosophy based on ethics and a cultural system which cares for all natural entities. Our great seers foresaw the dangers of environmental crisis even when there is no chaos. They prescribed certain rules for the protection of environment in relation with religion, so that men may follow these rules in the fear of God.

The belief of ancient people that culture was born and developed in the forests and forests stands as a resource for human survival made them to have respectful attitude to nature. The forests played a vital part in evolving cultural patterns of India. "Most of the ancient books like *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Brahmans* and *Aranyakas* were written by Rishis' living in forests. One finds reference to three main types of *vana* of ancient times i.e. *Mahavana*, *Tapovana*, and *Srivana*. *Mahavana* was devoid of human habitation and the human interference was therefore negligible. Such forests were dense, virgin and natural covering large mountainous and low lying areas. Lord Siva is believed to be the presiding deity of these forests. *Tapovana* was the forests where the sages did *tapas*. Our *Upanisads* and *Aranyakas* were written in those forests. Most of the *Tapovanas* are extinct now. These forests were actually full of plants and trees which gave edible and medicinal leaves, roots, fruits, shades and soothing climates. *Srivanas* were local forests and were managed by village and town panchayats. They were full of various kinds of trees, depending on soil, climate and other environmental conditions and local needs. Thus the concept of social forestry was born to Indians even in that hoary past"^[3].

The entire ecological crisis in present day society is mainly because the so called modern society is built up in parallel with industrial society. In the past, Indian society was deeply rooted in nature and Indian civilization is a major contribution of nature. In contrast to this, the present day society has an antagonistic attitude towards the nature.

3. Environment in Vedic literature

Ranchor Prime in his seminal work *Hinduism and Ecology* says that "Western civilization needs to rediscover the balance and harmony which it has lost. We must take advantage of the fact that we are now a global community and are no longer limited to learning from only one tradition. There are many sources of wisdom left to us all over the world. The west has

much to learn from the wisdom traditions of India"^[4].

The great saints reordered the details about each tree in detail and particularly about medicinal plants. This system of scientific recording excels even modern classification, "because they lived in the forest the early *Vedic* teachers attached great importance to trees. Beneath a tree was the correct place for a disciple to receive spiritual instruction from a guru. The tree was the symbol of patience and tolerance. The sages carefully studied and recorded the herbal and medicinal properties of the forest. Some trees gained special significance and poems and prayers were composed about them and the spirits dwelling within them"^[5]. Indian sages identified human with nature. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*, the sage Yajnavalkya equates man with a tree-"As is the mighty tree so indeed is a man: this is true. His hairs are the leaves and his skin is the outer bark"^[6].

India's cultural heritage is rich with stories and descriptions about mutual harmony between man and nature. The *Vedic* man was in a transition stage, a stage he had developed with his intellectual capacity, and considered himself that nature had blessed him by giving such a life. *Vedic* man treated himself as part of nature. He believed that the Supreme Being incarnates in the form of different species. Therefore, each species is important and sacred. So for *Vedic* man, God and nature were same. At the same time, *Vedic* societies felled trees for agricultural purpose and cleared land and killed wild animals but still, they were conscious of the ecological worthiness which is evident through their literatures. A *Vedic* person describes plants as mothers and Goddesses.

"O plants, I pray you as mothers and Goddesses"^[7].

The *Vedic* literature is full of stories with sentimental relationship of man and environment. He was more closely attached with environment and conceived environment as equal partners. During this period, human habits and ways of living were influenced by the environment and surroundings. His concept of family includes not only humans but also cattle, pets etc. "Feeling of love and attachment towards environment, expression of belief, gratitude and sacrifice in special circumstances for environmental conservation are true human sentiments. If we feel oneness with all the constituents of environment of a particular area, feel happy if it prospers and feel sad if it degrades; this is the best of our environmental consciousness. This is the *Vedic* concept towards environment and its constituents"^[8].

4. Hinduism and natural environment

To study the development of Hindu Philosophical Systems' attitude towards nature, we should start from *Vedic* period where the earliest hymns of human thought is dedicated to natural powers. When the earliest man passed the evolutionary form from animal to rational man, he was stuck by the powers and charms of nature. He started learning the forces of nature by worshipping them in all forms. It was nature which nurtured human intellect with food for thought and food for body. Consequently the whole culture of *Vedic* man developed by worshipping nature and he glorified the nature's powers. Nature, for *Vedic* man provided a firm platform to develop and harness skills for human survival. Nature was his guide in

all stages of development, from satisfying bodily needs to spiritual needs. This dependence resulted in personifying various deities like sun, (Surya) fire (Agni) etc. Initially such worshipping was in the form of mass worshipping and people demanded favors for such worshipping in return. The cultural aspect of Hindu Philosophy is expressed as 'Forest culture'. This forest culture or Aranya Sanskriti started from *Vedic* period. The importance given to trees and to forests is clearly mentioned in *Vedas*, since forests played a vital role in shaping the culture of ancient man. It taught him the most important lessons of living, made him to survive in his own terms, educated him in the importance of human collectiveness Domesticated animals and fruit bearing trees made him to believe that he is one among nature's sons. Medicinal plants made him conscious of nature's worthiness. Indian culture is not wholly spiritual oriented or material oriented, as we kept a balance between the two. Our attitudes and concepts of material prosperity are not limited in man alone, but includes all living beings including plants and trees. "Only that culture can prosper which is beneficial to all, in which people's interest do not clash unnecessarily, in which even the life of birds and animals is being made comfortable, and along with this the resources provided by nature are being used in such a way that as we use them we can also increase them in the same proportion" [9]. We formulated elaborate rules for farming. Such rules ensured that the land is used properly and fertility is maintained through organic farming. According to Indian concept, all vegetation, animals and humans emerge from the first principle of world order, i.e. seed and womb; both are energized by *prana* (breath) [10]. Our ancient culture always encouraged planting of trees and such acts of planting trees and maintaining gardens of different flowers were told to inherit *swarga*, or a place in the heaven. At the same time, we also encouraged superstitions in order to ban the cutting of trees. Indian folklores such as *Yaksas* were made to believe that some deities inhabited in trees and should not cut down. For cutting the trees for material purpose like construction activities, an elaborated ritual should be followed. Our ancestors identified each trees with particular God or Goddess so that such trees may be preserved for the benefit of humanity. Such concept is not mere animistic form, but they contained wisdom and this wisdom is expressed through the language of myth and innumerable symbols. "The pivot, around which Indian myth moves, not unlike that of other parts of ancient world, is ecological balance" [11]. The villagers of India considered the trees as their natural friends which helped them to maintain a fertile soil and which checks the soil erosion.

Prithvi Sukta is an important hymn dedicated to the earth. In the name of this hymn, India received much acclaim for carefully presenting the beautiful expression of nature through ancient cultural philosophy. *Prithvi Sukta* advises mankind to use the resources of nature in an intelligent way, so that future generation is also benefited from it. In a sense, *Prithvi Sukta* can be called as a reminder about man's dependence on mother earth. The earth is seen as abode of a family of plants, animals, man and every living and non-living entities. 'Vasudha' means "this earth", while 'kutumba' means "extended family" including human beings, animals and all living beings. Every entity and organism is part of one large

extended family system presided over by the eternal mother Earth. It is she who supports us with her abundant endowments and riches; it is she who nourishes us; it is she who provides us with a sustainable environment; and it is she who, when angered by the misdeeds of her children, punishes them with disasters" [12].

Prithvi Sukta gives a detailed elaboration about water, air and soil. In *Prithvi Sukta*, the earth is conceived as mother who represents ecological balance. For evoking the mother earth, the Rishis recite: "Oh mother earth sacred are thy hills, Snowy mountains and deep forests. Be kind to us and bestow upon us happiness. May you be fertile, arable and nourisher of all. May you continue supporting people of all races and nations May you protect us from your anger. And no one exploits and subjugate your children" [13]. This reiterates that the mother earth treats all the elements of nature in an equal manner, so that the equilibrium is maintained in a rational manner. It maintains that "no group or nation has any authority over the attributes of earth" [14].

According to Indian Philosophical tradition every living being is constituted by five basic elements. Kapila Vatsyayan observes that five elements of water, earth, air, space and fire comprise the microcosm of the biological man as also the macrocosm of the universe. But no single element is autonomous in itself. It is in their ecological interaction that they assume significance [15]. However, according to *Sankhya* Philosophy, *Prakriti* is the root cause of all objects. All worldly effects are latent in *Prakriti*, which is the potentiality of nature. *Prakriti* is conceived as unity of three *gunas* which are held in equilibrium. The three *gunas* are *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. "They are constituents of *Prakriti*, and though it is of the worldly objects" [16]. According to *Sankhya*, *Prakriti* needs to be viewed with affection and adoration. Dealing with forces of nature, one should take judicious decisions.

The five elements which constitute nature are evolutes of *Prakriti*. Each of the elements possesses peculiar quality and has its own life but all are interdependent. The *Taittiriya Upanisad* says that from *Brahman* arises *akasa*; from *akasa* arises *vayu*; from *vayu* arises *tejas*, from *tejas* arises *ap*; and from *ap* arises *Prithvi*" [17]. "In the *Maintrayani Upanisad*, it is stated that the three quartered *Brahman* has its roots above, and its branches below; the branches are earth, water, fire, air and space" [18].

Indian Philosophical systems have the same attitude towards all objects. Although we accept the material stand point of the five elements we also perceive divinity in *Panchabhutas*. The same divinity is perceived in trees, mountains, lakes etc. and subsequently, Ancient India was having the wisdom of perceiving divinity in everything that exists in nature. This helped us to have a harmonious relationship with all elements of nature. This harmonious relationship creates balance and equilibrium in nature. All the civilizations which took birth in India contained this eternal wisdom and this wisdom keeps all such civilizations continue to thrive on from generations to generations. *Bhagavat Gita* also points out this harmonious marriage between matter and spirit. "The spiritual factor (*purusha*) presiding over a given matter envelopment, dynamises the inert matter and makes the insentient mineral assembly to act, as though it is intelligent and vital" [19].

Out of the five primary elements "water is the first principle of

fertility and Varuna finds its support in water [20]. Varuna is considered to be the God of water and the great custodian of rivers and water bodies. Water is considered to be the life purifying element. All the major civilization of the world took birth in the river banks. An ancient *Vedic* hymn describes water as great cleanser and has the great understanding of water cycles in nature.

There are innumerable myths woven around the concept of water. The *Banalinga* from Narmada and *Shaligrama* are symbols of water and solar energy respectively and they stand as ecological symbols [21]. The lotus is another peaceful symbol of ecology. Lotus is an important vegetative form connected to the mythical centre of the earth through its stem. Water is considered to be one of the primary reasons for creation. The *Upanishadic* thinkers explained the reality of Supreme Being from the elements of nature. At one point, water is said to be the source of all things. "From water, satya emerges" [22]. The seers also explained the creation theory in the form of *Trivrikarana Vidya* i.e. the knowledge of that which is consisting of three-everything is composed of three elements-*Prithvi* (earth), *Ap* (water) and *Tejas* (luster) [23]. Another important element namely, the earth is a living system and shelters all the species including man. It is a home to all beings, both animate and inanimate. We consider earth as mother which nourishes and sustains all forms of life. Earth is the prime reason behind all the material prosperity of man. *Prithvi Sukta* is one greatest hymns dedicated to earth. Indian literature is rich with innumerable names of earth. The concept of green earth is an ideal one for all the beings and dream of every man. Air is the most essential part of our natural environment. Air is the reason that there is life in the planet. Air, according to Indian myth is limitless and crosses all boundaries of land, sea earth and water. Air is considered to be pure breath (*prana*) which takes one to the ultimate state of consciousness. *Vayu Purana* is a famous book which is wholly dedicated to air. Fire or *Agni* is considered as divine element. In the *Vedic* period, *Agni* is treated as the sacrificial fire of the *Yajna*. Sun is the source of the fire and India is a unique country which is having temples wholly dedicated to sun. The natural forces which the Indian sages worshipped were not on the basis of dogmatism, instead, on the basis of scientific and philosophical understanding of nature. The great Saint Sayanacharya worships the sun as follows,

*Yojananam sahasre dwe
Deve shante deve cha yojane
Ekena nimishardhena
Karma mana namastuthe*

"I salute you (Sunlight) who travels two thousand two hundred and two *Yojanas* by half of a *nimisha*" [24].

It reveals that we have the scientific calculations of natural forces in a systematic manner. *Akasa* is used to denote space, which is the most subtle of the five elements. Space is qualified by sound. *Akasa* is omnipresent and fills all voids. In Indian philosophy, there are innumerable myths in relation to *akasa*. All these myths are produced by those who are having high consciousness and intuitive knowledge about the elements. They were masters in developing their knowledge about all the five elements. "The *akasa*, verily, is the highest

goal of all beings. For all beings are born from the *akasa*; from the *akasa* after they are born, they live; and depart from here, they are again merged in the *akasa*" [25].

India is also the land of richest biogenetic resources in the world. Our forefathers were aware of the varieties of flora and fauna in their area. Ancient Indian literature contains detailed studies about plants and trees and their conservation strategies. We have a unique tradition of classifying and listing of plants according to its characteristics. The main such varieties of classification are as following [26].

- Vrikshayurveda yoga - Treatment for plants
- Buruhaanam dohada - the art of grating trees
- Vrksharohanam - Growth of trees
- Pushparthoranam - Decorations with flowers etc.

Throughout ancient literature, we can find detailed descriptions about plant treatment and forest conservation. In modern sense, it is a part of environmental ethics in general. However, the growth of modern western environmental ethics cannot match with the rich knowledge of ancient Indian literature. We have detailed description about evolution of plants, nature of plant and feature of forests. "Almost all the plants and trees that we make use of in India today were known to our ancestors. The ancient Indian texts contain names of about thirty thousand plants which were used as medicines in our day to day life, whereas the western pharmaceutical companies still prepare medicines from roughly thirty plants" [27].

Indian approach to the plant life is unique one as we treat each plant as that having a direct or indirect bearing on our social and economic life. Another special characteristic of *Vriksayurveda* is that our understanding of plants was not in a peripheral level of identifying and classification of plants. We possessed deep knowledge of interrelationship and inter dependence of each plants with other plants and animals, soil characteristics and other agrarian phenomena. *Charaka Samhita* defines a physician as one who is well equipped with all knowledge about names and external features of plants and able to use them wisely according to the properties of plants [28].

Vriksayurveda contains a detailed and organized description about plant life and its various usages. It contains most particular details about the season in which a tree bears flowers and yields fruits. The cultivators possessed a fair knowledge about the preparation of manure, treatment of plants, and detailed knowledge about the medicinal properties of different parts of a tree. They knew about the diseases associated with plants in different seasons. They also calculated the life plan of trees and fertility of the soil with such details. Detailed rules about watering of plants have been dealt in *Vrikshayurveda*. It is believed that those who accrue *punya* by planting trees are greater than that from begetting a son. It is generally believed that a place without trees is a disease prone place and people should avoid such places.

Various plant disorders and diseases and their treatment are explicitly explained in detail in the works of *Agnipurana* and Varahamihira's *Brihatsamhita*. This tradition of preparing encyclopedia of plants is unique to our country and plants are classified into three types based on their constitution. This

method of classification followed the same pattern in which we classify human beings according to Ayurveda, namely *Vaatha*, *Pitta* and *Kapha* constitution.

Koutilya's *Arthashastra* also mentions about *Vriksayurveda*, or the knowledge of the long life of trees. He mentions about the sources of revenue collected from forests and forest products. A man was given charge for supervising forest produce and medicines. He was specialist in the field of plants and especially medicinal plants. In modern terms he was a botanist who took special care on plants. The *Vedic Rishis* identified man with trees and therefore man should be in unity with nature. For example, *Brahadaranyaka Upanishad* speaks that "as is the mighty tree so indeed is man: this is true his hairs are leaves and his skin is the outer bark" [29].

5. Ecological villages in India

In ancient India, the distinction between village and *vana* was not strictly maintained. We considered that the entire space is *vana*. The whole cosmos was seen as *Mahavana* and there is no beginning or end in *Mahavana*. A *vana* is meant to include not only trees but also villages, ponds, gardens etc. For ancient people, the lord of *vana*, namely *Vanaspathi* was most important God and was the source for all material comforts. Villagers differentiated the vegetable world into *Oushadhi* or *Virudha* (plants) and *vana* or *vriksha* (trees). The *Vedic* people believed that all plants and trees are sacred because souls migrate into the plants according to work and knowledge [30]. Every villagers put forward their own rules and regulations in order to preserve their village ecology so that they can have a sustainable life style. In ancient villages, the relationship between man and nature were never seen as the basis of economic prosperity. The relationship between man and nature was described as divine and for well-being of man. Trees not only provide us with precious wood, fruits and medicines, but they also purify the environment and stabilize the cycle of rains. We, in India, are well aware of the usefulness of trees, but our relationship with trees is moral and ethical. If tomorrow someone claims that the benefits being derived from trees can be obtained even without trees, even then, no body in our country would break off the relationship with them [31].

Nonetheless, after independence and after decades of planning, Indian mass is still in the grips of poverty. It is clear that in the name of development, we deviated from our stand of village oriented ecology. Every developmental activity in progress is directly linked to commercial exploitation of natural resources. Obsession with big projects and gigantic buildings is the curse of post-independence India. Yet, in ancient India, a village was enough to meet its own needs and man considered the space around his village as *vana* and thereby he recognized the primacy of nature. The ancient people never thought of economic advantage whenever they developed the concept of relationship with man and nature. Whenever they cut down trees for common purpose or individual purpose, they prayed to *Vanaspathi* for permission. Cutting down of trees were never considered as an act of *adharma* (injustice) if it were for practical purposes. On the otherhand, it was considered as *adharma* when trees were cut down for commercial exploitation. The agricultural practices of ancient people were having the following main

characteristics.

1. Diversity of crops: People produced almost all types of crops as it was not for commercial purpose. The present day system of large scale production of single crops for commercial profit was never followed. Each village produced for its own sustenance.
2. Protecting genetic diversity of crops: The ancient people were having a large amount of knowledge regarding different varieties of crops. They were very keen to follow different cropping patterns according to the suitability of seasons.
3. Avoidance of chemical pesticides: They never used pesticides to control the weeds. The organic farming of ancient people was very rich with nutritious products. Now, there is a hue and cry for organic farming in order to avoid negative effects of using chemical pesticides. The evil effects of chemical agriculture is that after the initial increase in production there is a decline in productivity and fertility of soil is being loosened.

Apart from agricultural importance, the village forests played a vital role in preserving and nurturing medicinal plants and trees. The ancient texts give detailed description of varieties of medicinal plants grown in village forests. For example, in *Manusmriti*, it is said that the creepers and trees which can be grown either by sowing seeds or grafting are called *Udbhija*. Those which perish after their fruit is ripened and those which bear fruits and flowers in abundance are called *Oushadhi* [32]. The trees grown in village courtyards were selected in utmost care keeping in mind about the medicinal properties of plants and trees. The coconut trees are considered as *kalpavriksha* (A wish granting tree) and its leaves are used for decorating auspicious functions like marriages.

The villagers believed that some trees are having the spiritual power to ward off evil spirits. Consequently, conservation of trees and gardens was means of avoiding sins and the attainment of heaven too. *Mastya Purana* mentions that if anybody plants at least one tree, then he will be able to stay heaven of *Indra* for thirty thousand years, some *puranas* equates trees with sons for a sonless man. A house without any tree is considered as a home without child. It is being criticized that those who points about the merits of ancient village ecologies were against the concept of development and past societies were not free from demerits. However, one should remember that simple life styles in the past do not mean putting the clock back. The present day development is clearly one sided and such concepts of development cannot last long. The environmentally degrading factors like pollution cannot be justified in the name of development. It may give us comfort for present society, but if the degradation continues in the way it is being done in present day society, then, it will drive us back to the climatic conditions of thousands of years ago. Eventually, the earth will become a haven land without any plants or trees. We are remaking this earth as an unfit place to live, which was not like this in the past. The universal vision of our Rishis who conceived the world as one, the nature as one, and our environment as one, was that all men belong to single unity, namely humanity. Our forefathers prayed for peace and calmness to prevail in this country. There is a wonderful verse in *Isavasyopanisad* that there is no

need for hatredness between each other beings: “Yastu sarvani Bhutani atmaneyevanupasyati, Sarvabhutesu catmanamtato navijugupsate”. This means, whoever sees all beings in the self and recognizes his own self in all beings does not feel (by reason of such an outlook) repelled by any being^[34].

Living in unity with all creatures of nature was the life style of our forefathers. Their objective was clear and they reached their goal through austere living. The main purpose of all the literature of the Upanishad is concluded in the well-known prayer:

*From unreal lead me to the real
From darkness lead me to the light
From death lead me to immortality*^[35].

6. Women and ecology

Indian women come from various cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds. Their role has been interpreted and reinterpreted in various ways according to traditional, social and historical reasons. However, irrespective of all the differences, Indian women are influencing factors in all respects especially when it comes to ecological preservation and regulation. There is a saying that if you teach a man, he can use his knowledge for his sustenance, but if you teach a woman, she uses the knowledge for the sustenance of the family as well.

The role of Indian women in ecology is one of the most important aspects because in all the environmental movements in India, the prime support came from women. Although we consider women as one of the weaker sections of the society, it is this weaker section that brought a positive change in the environmental movements. Whether it be Chipko movement or Narmada Bachao Aandolan, it is women who spread the seeds of environmental movements: “Interestingly, it was from the lower strata of society, that it trickled up to the sensitive part at the middle class and informed urban citizens, who then conceptualized environmentalism and provided the intellectual and communicational infrastructure to the movement through their newly formed NGO’s^[36].

In the ancient period, family structures were patriarchal and patrilineal but still, women held high positions. There were some hymns in Rig Veda which were attributed to women seers alone like Ghosa, Visvarana and Lopamudra^[37]. Vandana Shiva, the strong exponent of women’s liberation movements argues that the negligence of recognizing nature’s diversity and treating nature with commercial values alone is the basis of all environmental problems. According to her, “the marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand. Diversity is the price paid in the patriarchal model of progress which pushes inexorably towards monocultures, uniformity and homogeneity. In this perverted logic of progress, even conservation suffers”^[38]. Educating women, especially rural women, about concerns in environmental ethics is productive in all ways. It is because women are considered as custodians of biodiversity. In all cultures, forests are worshipped as *Vana Durgas* or tree goddess. Another significant factor in women’s ways of conservation of nature is that they are strongly partners of non-violent methods in nature conservation.

All the popular worships in Hinduism are centered on

feminine aspects. This feminine dimension of divine is the most stressed aspect in worshipping nature. The nature is worshipped in the form of mother and it evolves in all forms, both animate and inanimate forms. The common Indian men worshipped nature as mother without delving into the intricacies of philosophy. He worshipped mother earth mainly because that it is the earth that creates, preserves and sustains life. The rural women played an influencing role in preserving the nature and natural resources. The rural Hindu women consider that violence against nature is violence against them. The scientific reasons for the concept are that all forms of life are seemed to be evolving from feminine principles.

For example, many women consider *Tulsi* (basil plant) as a sacred plant and worship it daily. It is prescribed by *Ayurveda* and perceived as the plant which has therapeutic and curative powers. To ensure that each home has a *Tulsi* plant, the practice of worshipping it daily has been entrusted with women. “*Tulsi* is sacred as a plant with beneficial and medicinal property and is considered as Vrindavan, the symbol of cosmos, with her daily watering and lighting a lamp before if for worship, a woman reflects the relationship at her home with the cosmos and the nature. The west views nature in the frame work of the dichotomy between man and women and person and nature. In Indian cosmological view, the concept of *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, person and nature are a duality in unity^[39].

The “Marriage Tree” is a common custom among some groups in India. This tree is necessary for wedding and is adorned as a part of ceremony. This function is celebrated mainly to teach the bride and bridegroom about the fertility of nature. The verses attributed to *Devi Vasundhara*, mother Earth in the *Prithvi Sukta* clearly demonstrates ancient seer’s vision of nature and its relation with women. The image of earth as mother clearly indicates that conflict with nature is self-destructive activity. The earth is a mother in the sense that earth alone has the capacity to nurture all forms of life. In Indian tradition, woman is considered as *Sakthi* or energy, which is the creative power. The powers of earth are considered to be feminine because it nurtures and protects. For example, a tree or plant cares its seeds and gives protective layers according to its capacity. Another significant feature of Indian tradition is that as far as ecological aspect is concerned, there were no separate feminist protest movements in ancient India. This does not undermine women’s role in nature conservation. Whether it is a female God or common woman, every female has significant role in preserving nature according to Indian tradition.

7. Conclusion

According to Indian philosophy, everything is part of the Supreme Being. Therefore, our perception of nature was a thing to be experienced, not a thing to be exploited. In all the Indian philosophical systems, there is not a single instance of antagonism towards nature. Whether it is *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharatha* or *Puranas*, all preach about the holy relation between man and nature. For an Indian, starting from a stone to the animal, everything is a thing to be worshipped. Western modern society criticized Indian attitude towards nature as animism as they could not find any value to nature and considered only man is having values. Now, they

are looking for alternative ways of environment protection and found that only Asian traditions, especially Indian tradition, is having complete philosophy of ecological view. This ecological view is not limited in abstract concepts but each Indian's day is supposed to start with reverence to nature. This includes every morning getting up from bed touching the floor and chanting the Mantra seeking forgiveness before stepping into her. Therefore, application oriented philosophy, especially applied environmental philosophy, has been practiced by Indians for centuries.

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