



Environmental Ethos In Vedic Times

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Today, the natural resources of the earth are being mindlessly exploited globally far beyond need, resulting in a poor state of their regeneration and causing irreversible damage to the planet. This year's World Environment Day theme – 'Seven billion dreams. One planet. Consume with care' – therefore, is highly relevant.

Starting from space, a Vedic mantra, 'prithivy apah tejah vayuh akashat' depicts sequential primal appearance of the five basic gross substances, called 'panch mahabhuta' – namely, space, air, fire or energy, water and earth – from which all universal matter is created.

Water has enjoyed the highest social and religious status in ancient Indic culture. Prayers in all four main Vedas refer to water as nectar, honey, source of life, protector of earth and environment, cleanser of sins, generator of prosperity, and ambrosia. Sages in Yajur Veda pray thus, "O Water, thou art the reservoir of welfare and propriety, sustain us to become strong. We

look up to thee to be blessed by thy kind ambrosia on this earth. O water, we approach thee to get rid of our sins." Rivers were considered divine and worshipped as goddesses and people were ordained to use their life-sustaining waters most judiciously and with greatest reverence.

Today, we have lost sight of the fact that the resources are finite. Of all of earth's water, only 0.007% is accessible for human use. Today, globally more than 1.1 billion people have inadequate availability of water.

In Vedic cosmology, Prithvi or earth symbolises material base as mother and the Dyaus, upper sky or heaven, symbolises the unmanifested immortal source as father, which together and between them, provide paryavaran, the environment.

An Atharva Veda hymn says, "Mata bhoomih putroham prithivyaah," reminding us of our responsibility not only towards our motherland but also to

Planet Earth. The mantra refers to earth differently as 'bhoomi' and 'prithvi' implying that while my motherland is my mother, I am also a child of Planet Earth.

The Yajur Veda addresses Prithvi as a guardian, praised for being benevolent to humankind, and is prayed to for continued protection: "O Earth! Fill up your broad heart with the vital healing air, waters and flora. May the benevolent life-giving air circulate for a bountiful Earth." Another prayer says, "Pleasant be you to us, O Earth, without a thorn be our habitation. May your development grant us bliss and sustenance."

In hymns of the Rig Veda, seers seek blessings of the sun and wish every part of the earth to be prosperous and mountains, waters, and rivers to be propitious. The importance of vital healing air, fresh unpolluted waters and healthy flora on earth was recognised and wished for in the hymns of the Atharva Veda.

Nature and its seasons are governed

by cosmic laws of integration and balance, called 'Rit' in the Vedas. Keeping an eye on Rit, human activities can be directed to global sustainable development. A hymn of the Yajur Veda says, "O learned people, fully realise your conduct towards different objects of the universe." But, in today's world we are misusing scientific and technological breakthroughs to indiscreetly and greedily exploit natural resources, thereby causing imbalances that make it difficult to maintain natural harmony.

Ancient Indic philosophy always wished for everyone to be happy and free from ailments, "Sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarve santu niraamayaah" – Let everyone be well and happy – and pleaded for an all-inclusive holistic development on the planet for harmony, "Saa no bhoomirvardhayad vardhamaanaa" as in the 'Bhumi Sukta' of Atharva Veda.

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