

Environmental Conservation and Indian Consciousness



RAJENDRA SINGH

*Ishavasyamind Sarvam Yatinchit Jagatyam Jagat
Tyen Tyakten Ma Gridhakasya Svidd Dhanam.
— Ishavasyopanishad*

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Foreword

Today we are all entrapped in the pursuit of fine living and the search for assorted luxuries that make our daily lives more comfortable. With time, we have gotten used to increasingly comfortable lifestyles and are becoming increasingly dependent on modern conveniences. This has resulted in our moving away from mother nature, such that there is an ever-widening gulf between our natural surroundings and ourselves. It would not be entirely incorrect to suggest that we have, in fact, become mute slaves of modern amenities and that humanity is becoming insignificant in contrast to technology.

Conveniences and comforts encourage an inherently dangerous culture: each one conditions the consumer into looking for more comfort, and propagates the purchase of yet another amenity. With the purchase of the second, newer commodity the first one becomes obsolete, and the market continues to grow, thereby perpetuating this growing obsolescence. Markets, of course, respond only to the power of money. All bargaining power is based on one single variable – the quantum of finances that one commands. In a world driven purely by monetary consideration, man's own value is paling in to insignificance. The little value that is still attached to human resources is also on the decline.

Thus we are facing a dual crises today: on the one hand we are turning into lifeless, soulless cripples as a result of our dependence on modern conveniences, and on the other hand we enslave

ourselves to markets, whereby we diminish humanity's own value instead of adding to it.

In one sense, this loss of value is also causing a loss of *values*. In other words, human values and principles are under attack from this new lifestyle. Every now and then this surrender of human values manifests itself in violence, hatred and cruelty. In fact, it is more than mere manifestation; it is a full-fledged challenge. These dark traits sporadically rise to the surface and create such dilemmas for us that we forget all our principles. The loss of values like compassion, kindness, peace and nonviolence is increasingly making us hollow beings. This is unarguably the biggest crisis our culture faces today – a crisis of morals, and indeed of our very identity. This cultural crisis has even put our environment at threat. Thus, our society is facing two daunting challenges – one is to rekindle man's capacity for industry and initiative, whilst the second is to safeguard our fragile environment. In this difficult hour we must look back to our old traditions. It is on the strength of our roots that we must search for the panacea, and build the foundations of a new era.

Rajendra Singh's writing in this essay is a commendable effort in this direction. It is an attempt to meet the present challenge head on, and simultaneously re-connect with our traditional values and morals.

– Ramesh Thanvi

Environmental Conservation and Indian Consciousness

Historical evidence suggests that in ancient India the natural environment was considered a creation of Lord Brahmha, the supreme creator and a member of the Holy Trinity in the Hindu pantheon – Brahmha the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the Annihilator.

The various components of our ecosystem, in their myriad transformations from birth to death, mirror the cosmic cycle of creation and destruction. Whenever we humans manufacture any product or commodity, we are not actually 'creating' it, we merely transform nature from one form to another. Thus, nature is constant, eternal; it is the subcomponents of nature that are born and then die out. This natural cycle of life and death is imprinted on every Indian's psyche. According to our scriptures, this cycle is ceaseless, perpetual, without end. Time also follows this cycle of birth and death. Each great age dawns, a new civilization flourishes, and then declines. From the ashes of the old rises the new - a phoenix-like regeneration of a new era, a new civilization.

The first great cosmic age in Indian tradition was the 'Kritayuga'. It is so named because men and women were closely bound to their creator. It was the age when every man respected the

dharmic obligation of doing the work he was assigned. In this age of joy and euphoria, there was no distinction between man and his environment. All creatures of god were treated alike. Human society was not stratified, and the vices of greed, avarice, desire and attraction had not raised their destructive heads. People's lifestyle was exceedingly simple, and their needs were limited. Thus people's activities and occupations were also simple as the need to make ends meet had not arisen. People were content and blissful, and thus there were no attempts to seek answers or diversify human knowledge. Thus the Vedas had not been written at this stage.

The next cosmic age was one called the 'Tretayuga'. This era was heralded by the growing complexities in human society. Human needs grew, and with it human failings like greed, selfishness, arrogance, desire and deceit. Alongside the complexity in human society, the environment also grew steadily more complex, and diverse. The minimal resources that had sustained life in the Kritayuga became inadequate to meet these changing needs and there was a general decline in human standard of living. In contrast to the earlier harmonious coexistence, people began competing for resources. Men had to evolve social etiquette and norms to ensure smooth interaction, and in order to curb the manifestation of vices. Despite these attempts, the situation had deteriorated to such a degree that it necessitated the descent of the lord in one of his most revered 'avatars' – the avatar of Lord Rama.

Despite being the King of Ayodhya, Rama made it his life's mission to curtail the degeneration and debauchery spreading through society. As royalty, he could have enjoyed many worldly pleasures and superficial comforts, but instead, he chose the path of righteousness and virtue. His most memorable achievement was vanquishing the demon king Ravana. In this fight of good against

evil, he sought the partnership of other creatures of God, like monkeys, bears, birds and squirrels. In a sense, his victory was a victory for nature.

Ravana was a technical expert in the art of war and his force was technologically superior to Rama's army. Also, his years of meditation and penance had enabled him to control natural forces like rain, water, wind, fire and earth. Theologically, this is indicated by verses in the Ramayana which say that Indra [the deity of rain], Varuna [the deity of water], Vayu [the deity of wind], Agni [the deity of fire] and others were under Ravana's spell and in his captivity. The demon had appropriated all powers and become a totalitarian. His dictatorship was also run on principles of centralization that we see in today's governmental structures.

Natural resources were considered precious during that era. For his own personal amusement Ravana had created the 'Ashok Vatika' [the grove of Ashoka], which is akin to our present-day zoos and sanctuaries. It was home to a variety of bird and animal species, and entry was restricted to only those of a certain social rank. This too mirrors the present-day tendency of 'eco tourism' to let only the rich enjoy pristine natural splendor, and the inclination to raise animals in captivity as a source of entertainment. However, the epic Ramayana makes it clear that while Ravana used nature for his own enjoyment, he also had a tremendous respect for it.

Lord Hanuman [the leader of a group of primates who had pledged allegiance to Lord Rama] was one of the most important characters in the Ramayana. Lord Hanuman's forced entry into this sanctuary is actually a metaphor for how those who are one with nature have the right to utilize natural resources, emerge triumphant over unnatural forces that deny them access to these resources. Furthermore, his setting fire to the sanctuary before he took flight

from there also has a parallel in today's regime in the form of the dissatisfaction of forest-dwelling communities. These communities resent the stranglehold of the forest department over their resources and often engage in destructive activities only because they feel alienated from their home. In effect, Hanuman's destruction of Lanka is symbolic of nature triumphing. Thus, according to Indian tradition, the Gods always smite civilizations that seek to control resources and deny them to others.

Contrary to popular wisdom, it is my belief that these events were actually set in motion deliberately by a woman with great foresight – Rama's stepmother Kaikeyi – who probably created the situation of Rama's exile in the knowledge that only Rama had the strength of character to put an end to Ravana's reign of terror. Just like crime, cheating, violence and exploitation characterize today's world, Lanka too was a theater for such negative phenomena. Human depravity in Lanka is exemplified by Ravana's abduction of Rama's wife, Sita, by tempting her with a gilded deer. It is ironic, then, that the very same Kaikeyi, who was responsible for the destruction of this evil at the hands of virtue, is the subject of universal condemnation. In this respect that society has parallels with ours, where those who are responsible for changes that reaffirm moral values are subject to ostracism and ridicule.

The battle between Rama and Ravana was, in a sense, a war between the love of nature and the love of ostentation and power. This theme is apparent through the course of the entire epic, for example Rama's appeal to birds and forest-dwelling creatures to fight alongside him. The peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence of nature and man is also exemplified in Rama's bridge-building efforts. Rama was never once let down by the creatures he put faith in, while the opposing forces from Lanka were riddled with factious behaviour and deceit. Ravana's defeat also stands

testament to the fact that no amount of technology or scientific advancement can save a deviant society from the wrath of nature.

While one cannot vouch for the historicity of the epic Ramayana, personally I do place reliance on this work as a reliable representation of those times. The very fact that the author of this epic Valmiki [and later its most celebrated translator Tulsidas] expressed these sentiments, and that the lesson preached in this story has been accepted by millions of Indians, make it self-evident that the story's message resonates within the Indian psyche. What better evidence can there be of the accuracy of the work than its widespread acceptance over centuries? In my personal opinion, this epic is even more accurate than any contemporary historian's account, since the latter may only be based on scant archaeological evidence.

After Lanka perished, taking with it its degenerate lifestyle, Rama anointed the nature-loving Vibhishana as the new king of Lanka, and assigned him the task of rebuilding a strong, moralistic society in harmony with nature. Normalcy returned to Ayodhya as well, and civilization carried on. This was the start of the 'Dwapar Yuga'. More scriptures were written during this period, and most Indians regard the Dwapar Yuga as the dawn of history. Society prospered, the arts and sciences were patronized, new crafts and occupations arose and once again complexities emerged in social interaction. In order to deal with the growing complexity, and to allocate labour to different activities, social stratification occurred and the caste system came into being. Concurrently, this age once again saw the rise of ills like envy, jealousy, bigotry and prejudice. Moral values that are essential for the sustenance of a righteous society diminished and once again tensions started to grow. The rulers stopped mingling with the common man and started dressing

in regal attire. The world was slowly veering towards great catastrophe, just as it is today.

It was at this juncture in history that the earth prayed to lord Vishnu to once again come to its rescue and redeem society. The lord descended in a dual avatar – Lord Krishna and Balarama – and once again there occurred a clash between moral and material powers. As is the case in every great age, it was morality that triumphed over materialism. This clash came in the form of the greatest battle ever, the Mahabharata, and may be interpreted as a clash between two opposing ideologies: one that wanted to capture and control the earth and all its resources, versus one that sought to protect the earth from this assault by reestablishing the rule of virtue and dharma. The Kauravas represented the former and the Pandavas the latter.

The Kauravas relied on advanced technologies, technical skill and limitless wealth to fuel the conflict. The Pandavas relied on righteousness and devotion to God. They were led by the Cowherd Krishna, and this army's ranks were made up of farmers, shepherds, cowherds and forest-dwellers. The five Pandavas – Yudhishthir the virtuous, Arjuna the valiant, Bhima the Powerful, and Nakul-Sahdev who loved nature deeply and who could understand the voices of all living creatures – spearheaded the forces of good against evil.

The Bhagavada Gita is Lord Krishna's divine sermon to Arjuna in his moment of self-doubt before he steps onto the battlefield. It is the touchstone upon which all Hindus evaluate their actions. One of the Gita's verses is important for our discussion here. Lord Krishna says that in our greed and lethargy, we avoid hard labour and thereby endanger all natural cycles. Greed propels us towards accumulation of wealth, and towards exploiting nature beyond all

limits. Thus the natural cycle breaks and the environment collapses under this burden. These words must be recalled by us in today's terrible times and must become the foundation of Indian dharma once again.

Diversity in nature complements itself, i.e., every component complements another. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "There is enough for every man's need, but not every man's greed." Nature has created enough to meet the requirements of every living creature, but there is an essential element of give-and-take that we cannot forget. We must remember that in reality, sacrifice and enjoyment are two sides of the same coin. Today, however, we have erroneously set our sights on enjoyment alone, and avoid any form of giving-back. Our enjoying benefits without contributing back to the environment is tantamount to theft. This is explicitly mentioned in Chapter 3, verse 2 of the Gita, where Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna that the Gods will shower Arjuna with worldly pleasures and luxuries if he is industrious. His labour will be richly rewarded. The Lord clarifies that it is possible to enjoy the same benefits without using one's labour, but then it would cease to be a reward, and thus doing so would be nothing short of theft.

This spirit of give-and-take is also underscored in a verse from the Ishavasyopanishad that mandates that only after contributing productively should one seek gratification. This is actually the most fundamental tenet of environmental conservation. However, the Mahabharata was the last phase of true environmental preservation and soon after the nature-loving Yadavas – alongwith their king Lord Krishna – perished. An era of environmental destruction began anew and this started the final dark age called the 'Kalyuga', which continues into the present day.

The chronology of events I have detailed in the preceding pages is based on myths, legends and great Indian epics. It is more of a theological division of time. Yet, even if we trace the history of Indian environmental consciousness through the timelines preferred by contemporary historians, we will see the same trend.

The Indus valley Civilization began prior to the Vedic era, almost five thousand years ago in the year 3000 BC. This civilization, also called the Harappan civilization [after one of its most significant centers], was highly advanced and urbanised. It was nevertheless a nature-loving civilization that worshipped the Peepal tree [*Ficus Religiosa*], as evidenced by the many seals found at excavation sites. This tree was considered the giver of life, and Gods were depicted as protectors of the tree, wearing crowns made of its leaves. Gods were depicted as warding off demons that wanted to devour the trees. Legend has it that only once were the demons successful in gaining control over the trees, but even that once the Gods joined ranks and fought valiantly till the Peepal was theirs again. This is indicative that the Indus Valley Civilization considered nature a form of divinity.

There are descriptions of how all interactions between Gods, kings, warriors and scholars used to take place only around the Peepal tree. Thus it was central to all social activities. Divine spirits were the designated caretakers of this tree, and their illustrations are of even greater interest in our present context, as they have been depicted as having human heads with bodies of various animals. Sometime even the various limbs of these spirits were those of different creatures. Thus these spirits were shown as having the wisdom of man, the speed of a gazelle, the valour of a lion, the poisonous sting of a cobra etc. On one seal the Peepal has been shown as being protected by a Rhinoceros. The same seal shows the bull Nandi warding off a demon. Nandi has also been shown

on many seals as protecting the Acacia tree. A few seals even show the Cobra baring its fangs to deter any attack on the trees.

Strikingly, many seals show railings and enclosures around the Peepal and Acacia tree – the very techniques used in modern-day India. There are also illustrations of that quintessential village institution, the *Chabutra* [a circular parapet build around the tree trunk, for village elders to sit and discuss matters of great import, or for evening gatherings]. The seals discovered from excavation sites show single trees as well as groups of trees, thickets and forests being worshipped, thus setting back the clock several thousands of years on the question of when ritual worship began. It is clear that worshipping nature has been part of the Indian psyche since the dawn of civilization. The fact that the tree was the center of all social interaction indicates that the Harappans were great nature-lovers, and their lives were one with nature. Not only was the environment considered the source of all food and nourishment, they also recognized it as being a repository of all medicinal herbs and therapies and the singular source of all human happiness. In the Indus Valley Civilization, people used trees and plants for their food, as well as for materials to make arts and crafts, and even items of clothing. Evidently, the people recognised that human civilization could not possibly persist without the natural environment. If historical indications are to be believed, then even the Gods perceived this interdependence. People seemed to have internalized the knowledge that any harm befalls a living tree or plant, it could have dangerous consequences for human society too.

Thus, the Indus Valley Civilization was structured around trees. It was only towards the fag end of the civilization that people started living in 'pukka' or burnt-brick houses, constructed drainage systems and started using brass coins. Even at this advanced stage

the illustrations on the coins and seals continued to depict that society's traditional proximity to nature.

After the Harappan culture came to its abrupt end, the Vedic age started. There are detailed descriptions of this age in our scriptures and mythological stories. The Vedic civilization sprang up on the banks of the Ganges. Primarily a civilization based on hunting-gathering, it also saw for the first time certain groups becoming artisans or ascetics who lived in the forests. These ascetics followed a strictly natural lifestyle and have left us with valuable accounts of life in those years. Even the artisans used only natural materials to make simple tools. Early man, at this stage, never viewed the destruction wrought by natural forces as disasters. On the contrary, these were considered blessings from Gods and accepted with due humility.

However, with time a gradual distance grew between man and his environment. The human mind is inherently hedonistic, and seeks greater happiness and pleasures. These desires slowly resulted in man indiscriminately hunting animals, fishing in the rivers beyond the water's natural regenerative capacities, and also in the manufacture of different types of weapons. The utensils, tools, spinning wheels, handlooms, furniture and weaponry that have been found by archaeologists help us reconstruct the lifestyles during this era. The gulf betwixt man and his environs started widening as a result of growing social complexity¹. It is difficult to understand how this happened, yet it is essential we do so as this understanding can guide our future policy decisions.

¹ The only community that still lived in harmony with nature at that stage was the 'Gadar' community of the forests in South India. These people were primitive hunter-gatherers, and subsisted on forest-based resources.

It is likely that with the growing social complexity, and the emergence of many new occupations, trade was born. People started bartering their accumulated resources in exchange for those collected by others. It follows that the emergence of the first class-system happened contemporaneously. While this did lead to division of labour, and boosted investment and production, it also enabled a few privileged classes to gain a monopoly over natural resources. They exploited nature to serve their own ends, and centralized all power structures. Thus began Indian feudalism, which has left its impact on every phase in Indian history thereafter.

Man began spending less time in prayer and devotion, but had not lost respect for nature altogether. Their respect, however, was based more on the material value of these animals, for example the cow was respected for its milk-giving properties. Despite the technological progress made, man did not have the temerity to think they could control nature. Men still feared storms, floods and earthquakes. While man's dependence on nature was decreasing, the Vedic society still gave natural beings a significant place in its traditions and theology. This is reflected in the Indian practice of 'Gotra' that is still in evidence today². Even the exemplary 'Dharadi' tradition began during this period³. Thus, towards the end of the early Vedic era, man accorded ceremonial respect to nature, but his lifestyle had changed from one that depended on the physical world around him to a more advanced one.

The later-Vedic age saw a gradual change from men being hunter-gatherers to becoming agriculturists. This external change also

² Families adopted symbols of a particular animal to identify themselves as one single entity and to differentiate themselves from others. This is the precursor of the modern 'surname', and is still in practice today.

³ Each family chose one particular plant as a family symbol and planted these trees on every important occasion. The family protected and nourished every such plant in their home or the neighborhood. This practice too survives till today in many parts.

wrought many internal changes in human nature. Nature was not feared any longer, although it was worshipped as a source of prosperity during sowing, reaping and harvesting seasons. Unlike earlier times when men prayed to Gods for preservation and safety, they now started praying for greater accumulation of wealth. According to Barnal, a commentator, the influence of the natural environment, animals, birds and the five elements was different in the previous hunting-gathering civilization and in the new agrarian society. While nature was previously considered a force to fear, in later times [due to the dependence of agriculture on rain and sunshine] it became synonymous with good fortune and a source of wealth. People correlated the fertility of a woman giving birth to children to the earth giving birth to living beings.

Thus although the basis of respect for the environment and its manifestation had changed, people in later-Vedic times still recognised that the environment was integral to their survival and prosperity. Human existence was still inextricably linked to the environment and people always surrounded themselves with nature. Yet, the desire for increased amenities and luxuries that had been born with the emergence of trade continued to proliferate. Thus it was only a matter of time before degenerations set in. Ostentation and opulence were the calls of the day.

The ruling class and other powerful people started devoting much more of their time to outer appearances, expensive attire and fine living, than they did to prayer and meditation. Thus this new age is also termed the 'Arya' era, after the noblemen. Even in this age, society did not altogether divorce itself from the Supreme Being. Gods were prayed to in times of need. For example, when enemies attacked or the armies of neighboring kingdoms invades the Arya lands, they sought help from the Gods. It was then that the practice of praying to Indra [the God of war] started. One such prayer is as follows:

'O lord Indra! Unfaltering and Unafraid! We beseech you to strike our enemies down! O Mighty Lord, empower us to smite our enemies and use our swords as you use lightning, and give us the strength to intimidate them as you do with your thunder and set the entire cosmos quivering! Let us divide their ranks as you have divided the sky into so many different parts!'

There are descriptions from that era of the army of the Gods. Varuna, the deity of water, was the Commander-in-Chief, who was the one responsible for raising the skies so high and creating this unbridgeable distance betwixt earth and the heavens above. He was also the one whose powers prevented the oceans from spilling over and flooding the earth, despite the ever-increasing quantities of water that would flow into the oceans from all the rivers and streams. The Rigveda has described Varuna as the supreme God who is responsible for charting out the earth's future and steering it along the predetermined path. One of its verses states that Varuna created the beauty in our forests, made the focks strong so that we could build our homes with them. Varuna's powers extended from making human beings righteous, to miracles like placing the burning sun in the sky to provide us a source of energy and sustenance.

Similarly, the Arya civilization also revered Agni, the deity of fire. Other deities whom they worshipped included the Sun God and the Goddess of dawn and Dusk. The Vedas enumerate prayers such as the following:

'Oh Lord Who Illuminates All! You Lit The Spark That Ignited The Sun And Set It On Its Journey Through The Sky! It Is You Who Gave Us Light!'⁴

⁴ The Rig Veda, Chapter 10, Verse 130- 135

'Oh Lord of Fire! Protect Us O Protector Of Our Mortal Bodies! Bless Me With A Long Life, O Giver Of Immortality! Bless Me With Ingenuity, And Rid My Mortal Body Of All Deficiencies!'⁵

With time, the idea emerged that all Gods are a mere embodiment of one single Supreme Being. This is exemplified by some verse such as the following:

'Fire is Him, the Sun also Him;
The Wind is Him, the Moon also Him;
Light is Him, the Mind is also Him;
Water is Him and the King is also an embodiment of Him.'⁶

'One calls Him Indra, Varuna, Agni, But He also manifests Himself as the Sun, or Yama the God of death! The throat that sings the melodies is but one, and the pulchritudinous melodies are many.'⁷

Thus, by the end of the Vedic era, there was growing knowledge that the Universe is one immense entity and that all the unknown forces in the Universe are actually different aspects on the same Cosmic force. The scriptures interpreted this as all the smaller deities obeying the command of one Supreme Being. This resulted in a fall in the status of minor Gods. In fact, with time, most of Vedic Gods were forgotten and their worship ceased. Most people forgot what powers each individual Deity was vested with. For example, Indra, who was the Deity of lightning and thunder, was also revered for having the power to destroy cities in storms, protect cattle and even bless mankind with a bountiful harvest. But, towards the end of the Vedic era, Indra was relegated to being merely the God of war and thus merely the deity of Kshatriyas [the warrior

⁵ The Rig Veda, Chapter 8, Verse 58.2

⁶ The Yajur Veda, Verse 32.1

⁷ The Rig Veda, Chapter 1, Verse 164.46

class]. Nevertheless, the practice of praying to Gods and seeking their blessings persisted, and exists till date.

The Vedas are the best source of knowledge of ancient civilizations and they are replete with instances of how learned men in those times devoted their lives to understand the bond between nature and man. The very last volumes and annexures of the Vedas, which are also known as the Upanishads or Aaranyakas, also stress on the importance of prayer. For instance, the Mundakopanishad states that meditation and deep thinking expands the human consciousness, and that increases our productive capabilities. Thus we have more food, the food keeps our minds healthy, we live in harmony with the five elements and we preserve our culture and our values. It implies that by adhering to these dharmic principles, we uphold virtue and move closer to immortality. The Brihadaranyopanishad describes the creation of the cosmos. It says, "In the beginning, there was water everywhere. It is from this water that Life originated. Lord Brahmha guided all creation and anointed Prajapati the King of all Gods. It was this Prajapati who then created the other gods, who in turn molded the Lifeforce into various shapes, colors and textures." This description is carried forth in the Taittiriya Upanishad, where the verses state that the Universal Consciousness created the sky, the natural environment and Man, and that this one singular soul was imbibed by every single creature created. Thus we are all one. But perhaps the most significant verse, for the purposes of our present discussion, is one in the Brihadaranyopanishad that clarifies that this Universal Consciousness that is responsible for all creation, is none other than Nature.

The age of Upanishads was followed by the age of the 'Brahmanas', texts which elucidated aspects of human nature like the thirst for knowledge, wisdom, respect for others, gratitude and other conduct

within human society. Once again people began directing all their energies towards social intercourse and the pursuit of happiness, and became far removed from their natural surroundings. But the more people pursued pleasures, the more society was afflicted with violence, unhappiness, hurt, pain and general degradation. Power-structures fell into the hands of people who had no respect for nature, and saw it merely as a source of personal riches. People, entrapped by greed and arrogance, began competing for these resources. Thus the age-old conflicts were reborn.

Once more, God came to the rescue of the earth. He had painstakingly created, in the form of Lord Buddha. Lord Buddha spread the message of peace, non-violence, universal brotherhood and reminded people of the righteous path that they should follow to attain enlightenment. Lord Mahavira also spread the same messages and wrote, in his book entitled 'Ayaro', that mountains, trees, rocks, flowers, rain, soil and man are all made up of the same constituents. We share the same spirit and must, therefore, treat all other living creatures like we treat ourselves. He wrote that we humans must be kind to all other residents of this miraculous planet and preached true nonviolence. This great book contains the essence of all modern environmentalism, yet even those who proclaim themselves 'nature lovers' today do not adhere to the principles enshrined within this tome. Perhaps only the Jain community upholds Lord Mahavira's ideals, but with time even this community developed factions and sub-sects, thereby diluting the tenets in this great tome.

As was the case with all the other avatars, the period that followed these holy men briefly saw a reinstatement of human values and virtue in society. People once more regarded nature as a powerful and eternal force. This was the period of the 'Saankhya' culture, which believed that it is nature that is the source of all progress,

and which has ushered man from one great age to another. This philosophy instructed man through its twenty-five tenets that all knowledge and prosperity is the product of nature, 'just as cream is the product of milk'. An ascetic named Kanaad Rishi studied atoms and molecules, and wrote down how it is these very building blocks that created every single component of the earth. He said that everything on earth is made up of combinations of water, fire, air, sky, spirit, time, space, soul and mind. He demonstrated that atoms are not stable, and that matter cannot be created, nor destroyed. His attempt at dividing all material substances into an elementary table preceded Mendeleev by many centuries. His division was simplistic, yet it demonstrates how ancient Indian culture possessed rich traditions of science and scholarship. What is central to our analysis here is that he included the human soul in his list of the nine all-pervasive elements, and thereby laid a theoretical foundation for the intrinsic relation between man and his environment.

The age of Kautilya [Chanakya] saw the development of ideas of justice and law. Despite the Arthashastra's emphasis on material wealth and societal relations, it also mentions that these five elements, water, fire, earth, wind and sky are immortal and all-pervasive. The Arthashastra stressed that it was these natural elements that made up the entire cosmos, and that it was natural processes, not God, which were responsible for life on earth. Towards the end of his life, however, Kautilya did modify his views and make room for the role of the creator.

The Indian tradition of yoga also accords immense importance to the natural world around us. The essence of yoga is to concentrate and meditate on certain slokas or prayers that help purify the mind, body and spirit. Over the years, yoga has emerged the most powerful mode of disciplining one's body and adhering to a natural lifestyle.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Indian consciousness has always recognized the power and supremacy of nature. While things have changed for the worse over time and contemporary society is far removed from the environment, ancient India is a splendid contrast. Ancient civilizations respected nature, as reflected both by their lifestyles and the complex web of mythology and legends that have been passed down to us from those days. This love for nature coexisted with a deep reverence for God. At regular intervals in history, societies grew more complex, and less intimate with nature. Yet each time that humankind forgot the power of nature, it was only divine intervention that prevented certain apocalypse. Today's society, unfortunately, is neither nature loving nor God-fearing. We worship only material wealth, and think nothing of exploiting our natural surroundings in order to increase this wealth. Today we are standing on the verge of another great cataclysm, but it is unlikely that God will intervene this time to rescue a people who have forgotten him and have discarded their traditions so completely. It is the need of the hour that we look back into our past and adopt the rich traditions that will enable us to live in harmony with nature. We must rediscover our roots, value morality and strength of character more than we value money and we must strive to follow the ancients' path of virtue and righteousness, which will lead to God.



[Translated from Hindi by Shravya K. Reddy, The National University of Juridical Sciences, Calcutta]

