



HUMANS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS NATURE

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Ancient Period:

There is no question of doubt that in the course of time the relationship between man and nature has been changed beyond imagination. Due to some extraneous influences man has been gradually alienated from nature. As a matter of fact the close proximity between man and nature has been shattered. In the ancient period man was fully devoted towards nature. At that time humans' attitude towards nature was soft and cordial. However with the development of science and technology men's attitude towards nature has been drastically changed. In the ancient period, nature was worshiped by man in many ways. During *Vedic* times, human lifestyle was totally depending on nature. At that time people believed that nature possesses wonderful powers which can deliver well or bring harm to them. *Vedic* philosophers believed in the theory of "as the man, so the universe". They believed that human life is comparable to the whole universe and man does not live in isolation but leads a collective life. This reflects the affection of man towards nature in *Vedic* period. It was said in *Āyukla-Yajurveda*, "Let there be balance in the space! Let there be balance in the sky! Let there be peace in the earth! Let there be calmness in waters! Let there be growth in the plants! Let there be growth in the trees! Let there be grace in all gods! Let there be bliss in the Brahman! Let there be balance in everything! Let there be peace and peace! Let such peace be with everyone of us!"

It is noteworthy that man, in *Vedic* age, considers himself as an integral part of nature. It is said that the whole world "nature is a creation of *yajzīya-puruna* (a person born from the sacrifice). He has created the earth, air, water, light, space etc. from his body. He has also created various creatures like horse, goat etc. Along with all these elements of the environment he has created human beings. In this regard, he has treated at par with other creatures. Thus, in *Vedic* age, a person was treating environmental factors at par and therefore he cares them and wishes well being of them.



It is farther noted, in *Vedic* age, man was obliged to nature, because *Vedic* man realized that without nature any activity of well-being is impossible. They also realized that they utilized nature for their own sake. They breathe in, breath out and cultivated land. *Vedic* person also realized that it is the grace of Nature-God that the basic needs are fulfill and as a matter of fact he is always indebted to nature. Thus a *Vedic* man expressed his indebtedness towards nature by variously. As his respect of nature, he deified almost all factors of the environment such as heaven and earth, fire, rain, down, night, sun etc. He describes the Sun as the soul of the Universe! He calls water as Goddess waters! He calls earth as *Devi Vasundhara* and he has motherly feelings towards water also. A *Vedic* person describes plants as Mothers and Goddess. *Vedic* people also realized the cosmic order. They did not want to violate or disturb this order.

According to our indigenous theory, the Universe is constituted of five basic elements, such as earth (*ksiti*), water (*âpah*), light (*tejah*), air (*marut*) and ether (*vyoma*). Water plays a cosmic role in our living organism. Even in *rgveda* 10.129.3, it was claim that water is the creation of the world; water is one of the primordial elements of micro-cosmic organism. They felt that as water is the first need of man in all ages, it is natural to expect a certain degree of awareness regarding water. This again reflects the sensitivity of the ancient people towards *âpah*. Like of *âpah* *Vedic R?is* were also sensitive towards *vâyû* (air or wind). The *Vedic R?i* recognized *vâyû* as a vital cosmic constituent. *Vâyû* is referred to as a deity proceeding over the mid-region. In *Prvargya*-“*vâyû* is referred to as the soul of sacrifice” (TÂ5.7) bringing welfare and happiness. *Vedic R is* also felt that wind or *Vâyû* brings rain which is very necessary for the livelihood of all living organisms on earth. Thus the pure, unpolluted air is a source of sound health, happiness of long life.

Ancient people were very much aware regarding the medicinal aspect of water. Even in *Vedic* text *Rgveda* (1. 23.20), water is considered to be a powerful curing substance, a great healer and remedy. *?gveda* declares water to be the genesis of all medicines. It says:

*apsu me somo abravîd antar viúvni bheajâ/
agni ca viúvaúabhuvam âpaú ca viúvabheajî//*

The water contains all healing herbs. All medicines are also present in it.



Elsewhere, in the same text, it is farther stated that where ever water flows medicines are found there? Thus it leads us to say that water is requital, water is medicine. This again reflects, the ingenuity and sensitivity of ancient man's towards natural properties.

The *Vedic* people had a high religious regard towards river. They did not regard rivers merely as a flowing mass of waters. Rather they regarded the rivers as life bestowing and themselves pulsating with life. It may be pointed out that it is not just a case of anthropomorphism or of humanization of a particular natural phenomenon; rather it is a case of *man's total oneness with nature*, in the present phase the rivers. It is true to say that sacrifice has been the backbone of *Vedic* religion. The rivers play an important role in *Vedic* sacrifices. It is said that the bank of river is a suitable place for a sacrifice. Even in *Rgveda* (1.23.18), it is said that the oblations should be offered to the rivers, and the offering should be made to them. Even in *Purânic* literature, it is stated that all the seven streams of *Sarasvati* have been linked with one or the other sacrifices. Thus the poet of *Rgveda* (1.23.18) exhorts people to offer oblation to the rivers. The *Vedic* man also looked at the rivers as mother par excellence. They were regarded as mothers who mix their waters and suitness. They are regarded as motherly physicians and parents of all that stands and all that moves. Thus the relation of man with the river, in the *Vedic* time, was that of worshiper and a worshiped. Such relations grew out of religious feelings and divine sentiments. The rivers have been associated with divine being. *Indra* and *Varuna* in the *Vedic* literature and *Vishnu* and *Shiva* in the *Purânic* literature are cases in point.

What has been observed from the above is that the *Vedic* people judiciously take care of nature, Understood nature themselves as an integral part of nature. They conceived the earth not merely a natural object; rather they realize the earth, the nature, the environment as a loving mother who sustains all being. Thus a *Vedic* people were habituated to pray to the mother earth every morning because he regards himself guilty of touching his mother with his legs.

The ancient man also believed in cosmic law. They felt that the imbalance in any part of the nature affects the life as a whole and therefore, a trial to maintain harmony among the members of the universe was felt a necessary. According to the ancient man, man is a son of nature. Unlike today, the ancient man felt happy to be an integral part of nature. According to them, the relationship between man and nature is interdependent. At that time man took help from nature without harming nature.



Kautilya's Arthauâstra represents in many ways human's attitudes towards nature. While the human society depends entirely on the nature for its existence and enjoyment, *Kautilya* appears to underline the principle that there must be a judicious and intelligent use of nature. *Kautilya* had a good knowledge of water management. It is known that a rain-gauge was fixed in the royal store house of food grain. He was sensitive regarding the preservation of forest as well. He holds that all types of forest formed by the previous rulers shall be maintained besides forming new ones. *Kautilya* was also concerned to ensure preservation of all species. He firmly believes that human beings have no right to use the animals for their luxury. In other words, no animal shall be killed for any of their parts.

In *Mahâbhârya* of *Patanjali* we also observe the intimate relationship between man and nature. Here plant is described as the source of food, energy, cloth, shelter, medicine etc. Plant is represented as nature or environment further supports that the growth of plant is the growth of environment. Even the *Vedic Mantra* indicates that the sky, the earth, and the life are nothing but the by-products of plant. That is why Sanskrit Grammarians use the term '*Prak^oti*' in the sense of 'root' or 'original source' or 'the material cause of a product' for the development of language. Plant is not only the creator of environment but also serves as the best component of it through manifold activities. This relationship of plant to the environment is illustrated by several examples in Sanskrit grammar for example; plant is the food for biotic factors which comes in the forms of food, seed, grain, plant parts and as whole plant. Thus all living organisms directly or indirectly depend for their shelter on plant. To maintain the harmony, plants were probably created by the creator. Accordingly destruction of plant will lead the destruction of environment. Thus ancient men were aware to protect the plants and the environment. The role of plant was undoubtedly the major one for the development of environment and maintenance of ecosystem was also in filtered in their mind.

In *Mahâbhârata*, we also observe man's intimate relationship towards nature. It is said that man, animals, plants, the forces of nature, gods, stars, earth and other planets all together constitute one vibrant system every part of which is alive and responsive. Man is called upon to develop the *daivî sampat* which respect all existent beings alike and which advocates the utilizations of resources of Nature with a sense of gratitude and humility. According to *Vyâsa*, self contentment and internal harmony



among the members of a community is at the root of healthy environment. One who is disorganized within cannot promote balance and harmony around. Discontentment is the heart of man, caused by jealousy and hatred is the fundamental reason for man's disruptive tendencies that disrupt the balance in nature. *Vyâsa* advises us to look at the birds and admiring their selfless and instinctive love towards their children and fellow beings.

Vyâsa is very sensitive to nature. He advised men to keep our environment pure and clean. All forms of existence are sailing in the same boat. No one is superior to other. It is our variety and annoyance that propound superiority of the human's species. Accordingly, we should co-exist peacefully with all other beings and let us not seen against any one of these beings. This should be our motto and daily prayer of worthy human's life on earth, according to *Vyâsa*. Like humans, plants do possess sensibilities of hearing, saying, smelling, testing and touching. They have their faculties of sensing, sorrow and joy, declares the Sage. The same thing has also been discovered by Jagadish Ch. Bose the greatest scientist in the later development of science.

The ancient Indian thinkers had a definite idea regarding the relationship between man and nature. They had develop the concept of 'cosmic' nature and also believed that there is a particular order in the universe and the nature has its own system of manifestation. The worldly things do not indicate any arbitrary nature. They are bound by certain rules. Thus the nature and natural powers move in a definite way and there is regularity in all natural phenomena. This is something 'unchangeable' on the background of the changeable. This unchangeable regularity of nature was termed as '*rta*' by Vedic thinkers. Thus the concept of *rta* was a regulating principle which governs the universe. *rta* was also identified with water, the most important ingredient of nature.

Even Manu, in (1.8) pays, due attention on water. He says that water is the source of creation. The origin of life is safe to have taken place first in the water. In *Manusmriti* (1.16), He tells, "Sarva bhutâni nirmame". Manu gives the human race, a particular place within a scheme of things. Different types of elements and states of beings are involved in it. Man is responsible to the other being and things which share the universe with him. In this regard, man is not supreme among God's creature. Neither does he assert that man commands mastery over all other beings. Manu expects, the human being to live with due recognition that man commands mastery



over all other beings. Manu expects, the human being to live with due recognition of the existence of other beings without disturbing them. Thus Manu is fully conscious of life and thinks in the environment and that man has to lead a life of harmonious co-existence with them.

Even in *Manusmriti*, it was said that water is the source of creation. Manu gives the human race a particular place within a scheme of things. Man is responsible to the other being and thinks which share the universe with him. It does not seem, therefore, that Manu holds man to be supreme among God's creatures "the roof and crown" of things. It seems that he expects the human being to live with due recognition of the existence of other beings without disturbing them. That is to say that Manu is fully conscious of life and things in the environment and he also thinks that man has to lead a life of harmonious co-existence with them. Manu also suggests that no human being has right to interfere with other constituents of nature. Even what Manu has said about trees would be a lesson to the modern ecologist and botanist. Manu asserts that trees do not only live but also have consciousness. Therefore he warns not to hurt plants because they feel the pain. This means that some two thousand years ago Manu was very keenly aware of this fact.

We also find considerable literature regarding the relationship between man and nature in *Kâlidâsa's* writings. *Kâlidâsa* seems to discover a close affinity between man and nature. Since nature is a source of all life, it seems to dominate in both the animate as well as the inanimate world. In *Kâlidâsa's Raghvamœa*, it is said that whatever is familiar is made to look familiar. Thus *Kâlidâsa* seems to aim at restoring balance between nature and man. Man is a part of nature. Nature and man act, re-act and inter-act with each other. So that one cannot think of nature independent of man and man independent of nature. However it should be kept in mind that *Kâlidâsa's* environmental awareness need not be a matter for scientific inquiry; it is rather a poetic approach to the subject or relationship between man and nature. Even Sri *Râma's* devotion towards *Sarayû*, is a limpid sample of nature. Sri *Râma* looked upon *Sarayû* as the common matron of all the Kings of his dynasty. He also looked upon her as his mother, who like his mother *Kauçalyâ*, was separated from *Dacæaratha*, seemed to embrace him, even at a distance, with her hands in the form of waves by way of sending cool breezes towards him. This again reflects *Râma's* devotion towards nature.



What has been noted above is that the ancient men were fully devoted towards nature. Their attitude towards nature was cordial, loving and caring. They felt nature as their source of destiny. Accordingly they take care of nature from their own heart. The relationship between man and nature was inseparable. In a nutshell it can be said that the attitude of ancient man towards nature is non-anthropocentric. They devoted nature through prayers, through worships and various customary manners.

Modern period:

It has been witnessing that in the course of time and with the gradual development of science and technology human attitude towards nature has radically been changed. The cordial relationship as witnessing in the ancient period has been shattered. The non-anthropocentric attitude of man towards nature has been replaced in favour of anthropocentrism which runs with the slogan: "Man is the measures of all things". Even in ethics and normative science we witness a dramatic change. If we carefully look back at the historical development of ethics, it would seem to us that the so-called virtue ethics has been dominated by Kantian and consequentialist approach. There is no question of doubt that the Kantianism and consequentialism were influenced by scientific development. The consequentialist approach is very much a corporal approach. Even in religion we also witness a considerable departure of human attitude towards nature. Christianity is a case in point. In Christianity man is said to be the messenger of God. It is also said that God has given empower to man to act according to his will. This also reflects that religious theories also maintain at par with science as far as the relationship between man and nature is concerned.

In the modern times, mankind totally gets embedded in materialistic ambitions, selfish motives and becomes insensitive towards ecological surroundings. Western thought process has not only evaporated boundaries and sanctity between relations but has also deformed them. Due to this approach animal, birds, trees, vegetation etc., have become only consumables and means to attain selfish motives presented by nature. These feelings are leading into cruel destruction of natural environmental elements and unending race for physical possessions. Due to this vision of extreme materialism, man loses all emotional relations with animals and birds, which now became only objects to demolish or decorate. This vision also leads to negation of family relations, wife, friend, servant, son, etc. and are considered only to fulfill selfish ambition or to satisfy physical and animal instincts. Due to this narrow vision and



insensitivity towards relations families, societies and nations are facing problems and everywhere violence and anarchy are prevailing.

We can say that modern period is the period of science. All of us know that today science is developing so much. Man has shown himself as a master of environment. For human beings other non-human being are create to fulfill their needs. In this time men are totally detached from nature. They do not give the intrinsic value of nature. For them nature has instrumental value. The danger to man in the future comes not from nature, but from man himself. John Passmore, in his “Man’s Responsibility for Nature”, argues that the old testament not only confers on man, dominion over nature, but also leaves open the possibility for an attitude of absolute despotism towards nature on the part of mankind. Man must let go his technological and material narcissism because there cannot be real, responsible and effective environmental ethics in a world “dominated by technological mentality and crass materialism”.

What is needed today is to remind ourselves that nature cannot be destroyed without ultimately mankind being destroyed itself. The problem of environmental degradation and ecological imbalance has put forth the danger in which our human existence is at stake. The scientific and technological advancement and western religious beliefs and philosophical ideas are to a great extent responsible for putting us in such a perplexed situation.

The attempt of man to win over nature will be nothing else except Sisyphean failure. In *Atharvaveda*, it is clearly stated that earth is not for human beings alone, but for other creatures as well. Hence, Hindus (including other religions of India) traditional attitudes towards the ecosystem (e.g. Animals and birds, plants and trees) have been kind and respectful. In *Padma Purâna* (56. 40-41) it is stated that cutting of trees is a punishable offence and the person who indulged in cutting of trees and destroying the grass field had to go to hell. Hinduism does not subscribe to the western world-view that man’s role on the earth was to exploit nature for his selfish purpose.

We look nature to the view-point of Rabindranath Tagore that- The morning sea of silence broke into ripples of bird songs; and the flowers were all merry by the roadside; and the wealth of gold was scattered through the gap of the clouds while we busily went on our way and paid no notice. We sang no glad songs nor played; we



went not to the village for barter; we spoke not a word nor smiled; we lingered not on the way. We quickened our pace more and more as the time sped by.¹

Our outlook towards nature in modern period is known as anthropocentrism. The word “anthropocentrism” consists of two words- ‘Anthropos’ and ‘Centric’. ‘Anthropos’ means ‘Man’ and ‘Centric’ means ‘Centering around’. So this theory speaks of centrality of man. In environmental ethics the term describes the attitudes, values and practices, which focus only on human interests or positions rather than the position and interests of other non-human species in the natural world. It places human being at the centre of the Universe, and looks upon him as the measurer of all things because only human beings have a soul, rationality and capacity for analyzing and expressing Language. According to this view, man stands apart from nature and is viewed as something to be dominated. Human beings have right to use and control nature according to their own needs and deeds. It holds an independent value exclusively and predominantly for human interests. Only human are the source of all values. All other non-human species exist to sub serves the purpose of humans. So anthropocentrism is concerned only with human interests, excluding the desires, goals and values of non-human species and interprets everything in the world in terms of human values.

The modern outlook of man towards nature is completely different from the ancient outlook of man towards nature. With the advancement of science and technology man’s fear towards nature has gone away. Unlike the ancient men, the modern men come to know that nature is there only for their own use. They can use nature, order or reorder nature according to their own will. Nature is nothing other than matter. Nature has no values other than use value or instrumental value. Here man is said to be the centre of the universe; i.e. the measures of all things. Thus, unlike the ancient men, modern men fail to see the cordiality between man and nature. Modern outlook admits materialism, dualism, hierarchism, individualism. Accordingly, it is said that humans are the greater order of being.

It has been claimed that due to the development of science and technology, men has been empowered in different ways. In this regard, anthropocentrism would be regarded as the outcome of science. However, there is section of environmental philosophers according to them the anthropocentrism can be overcome or to some extent moderated with the help of scientific knowledge. Ancient outlook of man towards



nature has mostly been based on prejudices. Primitive man fear nature and hence they were compelled to worship nature on many accounts. The advancement of science has changed this attitude. This is the positive aspect of science. Science also helps us to know how to tackle environmental degradation scientifically. What is wrong with man is also lessened from science. That means to say that humans can overcome anthropocentrism in the sense of becoming more enlightened about their place in the world. This enlightenment can be arrived at by either science or a mystical route. Thus, it would be wrong to suggest that science or scientific development is the root cause of anthropocentrism and humans' attitude towards nature is the outcome of science. However, scientific development indirectly helps men to be more materialistic, more individualistic. Science helps to increase population in many ways. The average humans' life span is increased. Is it wrong? Certainly it would not be the case. But the world population has been increasing day by day in a rapid manner. Science and technology opens up many avenues for resource generation. All these things indirectly hamper the balance of environment. Humans are being alienated from nature gradually. Nature or environment has been used as a substitution of industries all over the globe. Consequently, innumerable environmental problems have taken place.

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¹ Tagore, R. *Gitanjali*. Deep Prakashan, Kolkata, 2002, P 102.