



Atharvaveda's Environmental Ethos: Ecological Wisdom in the Atharvanic Tradition

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Abstract – The term "Ecology" refers to environmental science, which is a relatively recent field of study in India. The concept of ecology has evolved over time, influenced by the conditions prevailing during different periods. Environmental problems and efforts to address them have existed since ancient times. Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect earlier generations to have the same environmental awareness as we do today. However, environmental consciousness has been present even in ancient times. From the Vedic age, people recognized the importance of a favorable environment for healthy living. Vedic seers revered nature and its elements such as water, air, soil, trees, rivers, oceans, and the sky as divine entities. Concepts like jaladevatā (water deity), vanadevatā (forest deity), varuṇudevatā (water god), and vāyudevatā (wind god) became integral to tradition, and the Earth was regarded as a mother figure. In contrast, modern human activities for personal comfort and enjoyment have led to the destruction of natural resources, causing deforestation, soil degradation, and pollution of water and air, posing serious threats to the world today. Hence, a widespread awakening is necessary to revive and apply the Vedic principles to combat environmental pollution in the current context.

Keywords: Atharvaveda , paryāvaraṇa, veda, pañcabhūta, pollution, seers, Śāntipāṭhas , Ṛgveda.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, environmental pollution appears in many forms, including air pollution, water pollution, noise pollution, vehicular pollution, thermal pollution, radiation pollution, marine pollution, industrial pollution, solid-waste pollution, and wastewater pollution. Pollution, in a broader sense, is not confined solely to modern industrial activities; it can be seen as a phenomenon that accompanies existence itself. For example, even the natural process of respiration changes the composition of air, as living beings inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. Recognizing the importance of environmental purity and cosmic balance, ancient Vedic seers, who were deeply aware of these principles, prescribed various Śāntipāṭhas (peace invocations) aimed at restoring harmony and equilibrium in nature.

*Dyauḥ śāntirantarikṣam śāntiḥ, pṛthivī śāntirāpaḥ śāntirauśadhayaḥ śāntiḥ vanaspatayaḥ
śāntirviśvedevāḥ śāntir brahma śāntiḥ sarvam śāntiḥ śāntireva śāntiḥ sā mā śāntiredhi//*

2. HISTORICAL AND ETYMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PARYĀVARAṆA

The term *paryāvaraṇa* is commonly used in contemporary Sanskrit to denote the concept of the environment. Just as the English word "environment" is composed of two parts- "environ" and "ment"- the Sanskrit word *paryāvaraṇa* is also made up of two components: *pari* and *avaraṇa*. Essentially, the meaning



of *paryāvarama* is equivalent to that of the word “environment”. The science that studies the environment is called Ecology, which in Sanskrit is referred to as *paryāvarama-vijñāna*.

The Sanskrit compound *paryāvarama* is derived from the root *ṽṛ* meaning “to cover”. Along with the prefixes *pari* and *ā* and the suffix *lyuṭ*. Although *paryāvarama* itself is not found in ancient texts, related terms such as *paridhī* were used in the *Atharvaveda* to denote the environment, exemplified by the phrase “*paridhirjīvanāyakam*”.

In classical Sanskrit lexicons (*kośas*) and ritual texts like the *Āpastambaśrautasūtra*, *paridhi* refers to branches of sacrificial trees and also to the sun’s circumference. The *Amarakoṣa* and other lexicons define *paridhi* as a surrounding or encompassing entity, similar to *pariveśa* (environment). Poets like Kālidāsa used *paridhi* in this sense as well.

The term “*paryāvarama*” broadly refers to everything that surrounds the Earth, encompassing both living and non-living entities. This includes the five great elements (*pañca-mahābhūtas*)– earth, water, fire, air, and ether– along with rivers, oceans, mountains, seasons, plants, and animals that impact human life. The ecological balance among these components is essential for sustaining life; any disturbance in this balance can lead to destruction (*pralaya*). Thus, *paryāvarama* signifies the harmonious relationship between natures and living beings. Human beings, especially social animals, cannot live in isolation. Even natural enemies coexist within the environment, which comprises three spheres or *maṇḍalas*: *sthalamaṇḍala* (land and minerals), *jalamaṇḍala* (water bodies), and *vāyumaṇḍala* (air and space).

Vedic seers recognized and revered the subtle harmony between humans and natures, emphasizing that any change in the environment impacts all living beings. The Atharvanic seers held the five elements and all life forms in deep reverence. Ecological awareness is evident throughout Vedic literature– including the *Ṛgveda* and *Yajurveda*– as well as in epics and *Purāṇas*, which highlight the emotional balance between humanity and nature. The sages promoted sympathetic understanding, believing that love between humans and nature cultivates harmony.

This paper examines how broad ecological concepts, common in modern literature, were portrayed in India’s oldest texts, with a focus on the *Atharvaveda*. Known as the *lokaveda* (Veda of the Masses), the *Atharvaveda* addresses life’s necessities and people’s prosperity, providing rich ecological insights. Although the term “ecology” does not appear in Vedic texts, words like *okas* (meaning shelter or home) are found in the *Ṛgveda* and *Atharvaveda*, reflecting early awareness of environment. Similarly, the Greek term *Oikologie* (study of home and surroundings) indicates a comparable ancient concern. The eminent ecologist Ernest Haeckel defined ecology as the science of reciprocal relationships between organisms and their environment, later simplified to “ecology.” All living beings exist within environments composed of various materials and forces. Environmental biology studies these surroundings and their effects on organisms, while ecology focuses on the structure and function of nature, examining how organisms depend on and interact with their environment. Ecology includes specialized branches such as Ethnology, Ornithology, Entomology, and Mycology.

A common thread in all ecological definitions is the interrelationship between humans and their surroundings, including plants and animals. Many definitions emphasize societal comfort and well-being as the ultimate goal of ecology. From the *Vedas*– through *Samhitās*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas*, *Upaniṣads*, epics, and *Purāṇas*– to modern times, Indian literature is rich with ecological ideas. Ancient Sanskrit writers highlighted the vital roles of natural elements such as air (*vāyu*), water (*jala*), land (*Bhūmi*), and time (*kāla*)



in regulating life. The concept of pañcatattva (five elements) embodies the material circulation essential for life. Since the Ṛgveda, humans have maintained close ties with nature, never assuming supremacy over it. Despite their intellectual gifts, they understood that their prosperity depended on the natural elements.

Vedic texts personify and revere the forces of nature. In the Ṛgveda, water and rivers are deified, as seen in hymns like *“tā āpo devīriha māmavantu”*²(May the divine water protect me). The Taittiriyaśāhitā states that all deities are centered in water. The Atharvaveda (AV) describes water as holy and purifying, invoking it to bring happiness. Sacred mountain valleys and river confluences are highly praised, with water revered as essential for sustaining and benefiting life. Dharmasūtra authors such as Gautama and Baudhāyana regard holy places- including mountains, rivers, pilgrimage sites, sages’ abodes, cowpens, and temples- as sin-cleansing. Forests (araṇyāni) are also worshipped as deities. Indigenous philosophy holds that the universe consists of five elements: earth (kṣiti), water (āpaḥ), fire (tejaḥ), air (marut), and ether (vyoma). The Atharvaveda reflects intimate relationships between humans and these elements, treating them as family members deserving blessings and protection. Numerous hymns in the Atharvaveda praise deities and natural elements for protection and sustenance. Water is seen as medicinal and purifying; Earth as mother; *“pṛthīṃ mā amṛtām vai dhārayatām”*³(May Mother Earth sustain us with immortality) Air as brother; and Dyaus (sky) as father; *“dyaurme pitā janitā nābhiratra bandhurme mātā pṛthī mahīyam”*⁴ Seasons guard against harm, while Agni (fire) purifies and grants prosperity. Earth is revered as the nourisher of all beings, with prayers seeking safety and abundance. Agni is also deified as a prosperous father figure. Various deities are invoked for protection from both natural and supernatural threats.

Atharvaveda hymns call for unity among winds and birds, sweetness in all water types, and healing powers of water surpassing physicians. Gods are invoked for human welfare, and universal benedictions seek to calm cruelty and make the Earth auspicious.

Earth: It is fascinating to learn that contemporary environmental ideas- such as treating the Earth as a mother- are found in the Atharvaveda dating back at least 4,000 to 5,000 years. A lengthy hymn addressed to Mother Earth in the Atharvaveda expresses the seer’s deep love and tender feelings toward the Earth. In this hymn of sixty-three verses, the Earth is not only regarded as a mother but also revered with the highest heartfelt respect throughout. The Vedic people lived in close proximity to nature and were deeply aware of nature’s impact on human life and humanity’s indebtedness to it. In Atharvaveda it is declared:

Māta bhūmiḥ putro’ham pṛthivyāḥ⁵ (*“The Earth is my mother; I am her son”*).

This phrase represents the highest form of reverence for Mother Earth. For a devout Hindu, the Earth is not merely a natural object but a loving mother who sustains all beings. Humans living on this Earth often feel guilty for harming their mother through careless actions. Therefore, every morning they pray to Mother Earth to seek pardon for their innocent transgressions.

One such prayer is:

Samudravasane devī parvatastanamaṇḍale

Viṣṇupatni namastubhyam pādasparśam kṣamasvame //

(“O Goddess who wears the ocean, who has mountains as breasts, consort of Viṣṇu, I bow to you; please forgive the touch of my feet.”)



Water: Water occupies a vital cosmic role in all living organisms and is regarded as the essential principle of creation. Ancient wisdom holds that, in the beginning, everything existed as formless water, underscoring its primacy in the genesis of life. In Atharvaveda–

śam no devīrabhīṣṭaya āpo bhavantu pītaye / śam yorabhi sravantu nah//⁶

Over time, water has been recognized not only as a life-giving liquid but also as one of the fundamental elements constituting the microcosmic organism. This intrinsic connection between water and life is reflected in the term *jīvana*, which denotes both “life” and is intimately associated with water itself. The quality of water consumed directly influences human health; impure water results in disease and suffering in Atharvaveda–

Apsu me somo abravīdantarviśvāni bheśajā /⁷

The Atharvaveda provides a profound metaphysical framework that echoes this understanding of water as both a primordial element and the essence of life. In Atharvaveda water is invoked as a source of cosmic vitality (*pītaye*), described as the divine force that permeates all living beings, sustaining their fundamental existence. Furthermore, the text emphasizes water’s medicinal qualities, stating that “within the Waters are all healing balms” (*antar viśvāni bheśajā*), thereby presenting water as the original pharmacopoeia of the microcosm in AV–

āpah pṛṇīta bheśajam varūtham tanve mama / jyokca sūryam dṛṣe///⁸

The consumption of pure water is viewed as essential for longevity, functioning as a protective shield (*varūtham*) for the physical body. By purifying oneself through the “Mother Waters,” an individual secures the health needed to “long behold the sun,” underscoring that without the purity of this essential element, vitality inevitably gives way to illness.

Fire: Fire occupies a significant role in the Atharvaveda, where it is often invoked as a powerful force capable of destroying enemies and protecting the devotee. For instance, Atharvaveda contains a martial invocation to Agni, the divine fire, requesting him to recognize and burn the enemies:

***agnirnah śatṛnpratyetu vidvānpratidahannabhiśastimaratim/
sa senām mohayatu pareṣām nirhastāmśca kṛṇavajjātavedāh//⁹***

(“Let wise Agni recognize our enemies and burn them. Let him bewilder the army of foes and render them powerless”). This verse reflects the perception of Agni as a divine warrior, whose fiery power is harnessed to protect the community from external threats. Fire is described as the giver of long life: In Yajurveda–

***āyurdā agne haviṣā juṣaṇo ghṛtapratīko ghṛtayoniredhi/
ghṛtam pītvā madhu cārū gavyam piteva putramabhirakṣatādīmam//¹⁰***

(“O Agni, giver of long life, is pleased with our sacred offerings. You, whose face is of Ghee and whose origin is in Ghee, reside here. Having consumed this sweet, pure, and holy Ghee of the cow, protect this seeker just as a father protects his son”).

Air: Air is the next element which was most taken care by the Vedic people. The importance of pure air and ventilation cannot be denied and the Vedic seers also recognized its importance. *Vāyu*, the deity of air, is invoked to become such pure that no impure things will dare to enter the atmosphere. Atharvaveda states that wind is the support of all beings. In another mantra it is said that we praise the *Vāyu* and *Sāvitrī* who surround the whole world and protect us. May they free us from sin?



**vāyoḥsavitrīvidathāni manmahe yāvātmanvadviśatho yau ca rakṣthah/
yau viśvasya paribhū babhūvathustau no muñcatamhasah//¹¹**

Sky: In the Atharvaveda, heaven is poetically described as a cow and the sun as her calf. Through this metaphorical calf, heaven is believed to bestow essential blessings such as food, strength, desire, a prosperous life, progeny, nourishment, and wealth. In another context, the quarters are also stated as cows and the moon as her calf.

**rudrasya mūtramasi amṛtasya nābhiḥ/
viśāṅakā nāma vai asi pitṛṇām mūlāt uthitā vātīkṛtanāśanī//¹²**

Mitra, Varuṇa, Vivasvān and the planets on earth, air and heaven may favor us. Powers that seize the moon, with Rāhu and Ādityas are prayed to be kind. Death and Rudras are also prayed for favor. The far-seeing sunrise is prayed to bless, the four quarters of the heaven are prayed to be auspicious. The firmly seated mountains, the Rivers and the waters are also prayed to be auspicious.

**śam no bhūmirvepyamana śamulkāśam no bhūmirvepyamānā śamulkā nirhatā ca yā /
śam gāvo maṅgalāya bhavantu śam no nakṣatrāṇi śamastu kṛtyā //¹³**

Due to the favorable environment people expected to live for hundred years. In AV it is said that a hundred autumns may we see, a hundred autumns may we live, a hundred autumns may we thrive, hundred autumns may we be, a hundred autumns may we bide :

**Paśyema śaradaḥ śatam /
jīvema śaradaḥ śatam /
budhyema śaradaḥ śatam/
rohema śaradaḥ śatam/
pūṣema śaradaḥ śatam/
bhavema śaradaḥ śatam/
bhūyema śaradaḥ śatam /
bhuyasīḥ śaradaḥ śatāt //¹⁴**

(“May we see a hundred autumns, may we live a hundred autumns, may we thrive for a hundred autumns, may we exist a hundred autumns, and may we endure for a hundred autumns”). This reflects a profound aspiration for sustained health, prosperity, and continuity of life within the cosmic order.

3. FLORA & FAUNA

Environmental consciousness has emerged as a significant global concern since the second half of the twentieth century. Modern ecological studies emphasize the conservation of biodiversity and the planting of trees as essential measures for maintaining ecological balance. Long before the rise of contemporary environmental movements, the Purāṇas and other Sanskrit texts highlighted the importance of preserving flora and fauna and advocated tree plantation as a sacred and socially beneficial activity.

The Purāṇic tradition contains detailed discussions regarding the selection of trees, methods of plantation, irrigation, fertilization, and the treatment of plant diseases. Trees are viewed not merely as natural resources but as living entities that sustain life on earth. They provide food, medicine, shade, fuel, shelter,



and environmental protection. Consequently, the planting and protection of trees are regarded as duties of every responsible individual.

The religious significance of tree plantation is reflected in several Sanskrit texts. The Matsya Purāṇa extols the merit of planting trees by stating:

Daśakūpasama vāpī daśa vāpī samo hradaḥ

Daśahradasamo putraḥ daśaputrasamo druma¹⁵

(A reservoir is equal to ten wells, a lake is equal to ten reservoirs, a son is equal to ten lakes, and a tree is equal to ten sons. This verse emphasizes the immense value of a tree for society and the environment).

From a secular perspective, trees fulfill the basic necessities of human life by providing food, clothing materials, shelter, medicine, and ecological stability. From a spiritual perspective, planting and nurturing trees constitute an act of dharma (righteous conduct) that contributes to both individual merit and collective welfare. Thus, Purāṇic ecological wisdom integrates environmental conservation with ethical and religious values.

4. CONCLUSION

Cosmic Ecology in the Atharvaveda represents one of humanity's earliest articulated ecological philosophies. It integrates: Metaphysics (ṛta), Elemental ontology (pañcabhūta), Ethical reciprocity, Environmental humility etc. Cosmic harmony The Atharvaveda does not treat nature as resource but as relative- Earth as mother, water as healer, air as life-breath, fire as purifier, sky as regulator.

This Atharvanic vision offers a civilizational ecological paradigm deeply relevant to the contemporary environmental crisis. It calls not merely for conservation but for transformation of consciousness- from domination to participation, from exploitation to reverence, from fragmentation to cosmic harmony. Thus, Cosmic Ecology in the Atharvaveda stands as a foundational contribution of Indian Knowledge Systems to global environmental thought.

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²Ṛgveda, 7.49.2

³Taittiriya Aranyaka, 10.1.8.

⁴Ṛgveda 1.164.33

⁵Atharvaveda 12.1. 12

⁶ Atharvaveda, 1.6.1, Ṛgveda,10.9.4

⁷Atharvaveda,1.6.2, Ṛgveda,10.9.6

⁸Atharvaveda, 1.6.3, Ṛgveda,10.9.7

⁹Atharvaveda, 3.1.1

¹⁰Taittiriya Samhita, 4.7.13.5; Ṛgveda, 2.6.4

¹¹Atharvaveda, 4.25.1

¹²Atharvaveda,6.44.3

¹³Atharvaveda 19.9.8



^{14,14}Atharvaveda 19.67

¹⁵Matsyapurāṇa,ch-154,verse-512

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