

# Vedic Teachings on Environment and Its Visible Impact on Rabindranath

*Anjana Chaliha*

## Abstract

Richer ideas of environment protection have been expressed by the Vedic seers long before the advent of today's environmental studies. *Paryavarana*, the environment consists of the relation between the living and the non-living, as the same five gross elements (*Pancabhutani*) constituting the physical universe constitute the human bodies too. The seers deified these elements and protected these in the outer world with divine respect for the benefit of the human beings. They named the cosmic law as *Rta* which maintained not only the changes of *ritus* (seasons) in *Prakriti*, but also the *ritu* periods of the woman folk. Three regions of the physical environment of the sky, air and earth are under control of the three main deities *Dyous or surya*, *Anila or Vayu*, *Anala or Agni respectively*. The five gross elements are deified and conceived with much respect. Earth or *Bhumidevi* is *Hiranyabaksha* who contains wealth on her bosom. To them, one who pollutes water, where in the deity of *Parjanya* is inherent, goes to hell. They conceived Vayu (air) in physical world to be akin with the five *bhutas* that reside within the organism. *Vayu* is source of medicinal qualities. *Akasha* is to be kept unpolluted as it should be kept clear for free emissions of sunshine the source of one's health. These three spheres of *bhurloka*, *bhubarloka* and *svarloka* are conceived as related with our mental and intellectual growth also. Birds and beasts too form man's environment, so they should be protected. The plants and herbs are gifts to mankind from the goddess *Aranyani* so "*Bananina nah Prajahatani*" — forests should not be destroyed. Ayurveda is based on the medicinal values of the *osadhis* (the herbs). Rabindranath, the twentieth century poet shows his respect for the Vedic seers as it is revealed in his works in Santiniketan. Apart from taking the model of the *Tapovana vidyalayas* of the past in making his institute in Santiniketan, his performance of many of the Vedic rituals for protection of environment too says to the same.

**Keywords:** environment protection, man–nature relationship, pañcabhūta (five gross elements), role of vāyu

As the vision of the beauty of life and nature in the Vedas are very rich so we find richer ideas on the study of environment in the Vedas. Environmental Science and Ecology are modern concepts; these are established as science in the 20th century. Yet in the Vedas we see that the seers were quite aware of such scientific

knowledge (Max Müller, 2000; Dasgupta, 1975). Environment consists of the relation between the living and the nonliving. The Sanskrit term for environment is “Paryavarana”, meaning that which surrounds us. The Vedic view of nature is expressed in their concept of Pancabhutani (Five gross elements of Kshiti, apa, teja, marut and vyom- earth, water, fire, air and ether.) The relation of human beings with these five gross elements of natural environment was conceived by the Vedic seers as of close interdependence (Radhakrishnan, 1962). Human beings should not do anything to disturb the natural balance. When they experienced flood or heavy rains, scorching heat of the sun, intense lightnings etc. they conceived as forces beyond human power and they worshipped and prayed these with awe and fear. They attributed divinity to nature. Vedic seers worship these natural aspects praying for plenty and abundance of natural resources (Macdonell et al., 2016).

The Vedic Rishis coined the word Rta to mean the symmetry and harmony prevailing in the natural environment which reduces chaos and makes nature a cosmos. Again, it is this “Rta” which is the root of splendor and beauty in nature. This “cosmic order” or “Rta” later on elevated to a moral principle that even the gods cannot ignore it (Dasgupta, 1975). It is this “Rta” which causes changes in “Rtu’s” in Prakriti. The word “Rtus” is used to name the rhythmic menstrual cycle of a young woman in Hinduism where the root of the word is the same “Ritu”. It speaks also of the close harmony between laws of nature and of human survival as the same five gross elements or pancabhutani constitute both the living and the non-living organisms. The principle regulating the periodical recurrence is the same in both the prakritis -woman and nature.

The Rigveda speaks of a deity viz. god Varuna as the keeper of this harmonious order-the order that works in the physical realm, works also in the moral realm. None should obstruct the course of natural law (Max Müller, 2000).

The physical environment is classified into three regions by the Vedic seers, viz the lower region of prithivimandala, the middle region of air or antarikshamandala and the upper region of sky or heaven-the dyau. There are three presiding deities in the regions-Agni in earth, Vayu in atmosphere (antariksha) and Surjya (Sun) in the sky (Akash-dyauh) (Macdonell et al., 2016).

Each of these three presiding devas work with the help of ten others and so there is the concept of thirty-three deities which later on increased in quantity upto the concept of thirty-three crores in the Puranas. The three gods are the main sources of energy-fire on earth, air in atmosphere and light in the upper region i.e. sky. Heaven and earth (dyavaparthivi) are conceived as our parents (pitara and matara). They nourish all creatures. Earth is described as a goddess in the Rigveda. One sukta of the Atharvaveda, viz the Bhumisukta calls the earth Basudha, which contains all wealth, Hiranya Aksha for having gold bosom (Max Müller, 2000).

The earth is the support of our food and prosperity. The earth supports varieties of herbs, so many resources in the hills and mountains and the reservoirs of life-saving water like rivers, lakes and oceans. Earth also holds agni (fire) and vayu (air). The Vedic seer prays, “O Prithivi! thy centre, Thy novel, all forces that have issued from thy body, set us amid those forces, breath upon us” (Atharva Veda 12.1.12; Max Müller, 2000).

Vedas in speak of water as a part of human environment. It is seen five forms of rain, natural springs, lakes, rivers, wells/canals. The seers say that water is the source of joy for living a healthy life. The rain cloud depicted as god Parjanya. The sages advice to keep water pure and free from any kind of pollution (Macdonell et al., 2016) and condemns water pollution saying, “the person who pollutes waters of the ponds, wells and lakes goes to the hell.”

The Vedic seer knew all about air in the atmosphere and also about air inside the body. They speak of five types of Vayu inside the body viz. prana, apana, samana, udana and vyana. They knew that unpolluted pure air would be the source of good health, happiness and long life (Dasgupta, 1975).

They conceived Vayu to be the source of medicinal qualities. Ether or Akasha- the fifth of the bhuta is also to be kept free from pollution. A saying in the Yajurveda is there with the advice, “Do not destroy anything of the sky and never pollute the sky. Sun shines in Dyuloka and we get light from the sky” (Macdonell et al., 2016).

Sunrays are essential for strengthening our inner power. The Gayatri Mantra states, “*Oum! Bhur Bhuvar sva, tat savitur varenya Bhargodevasya dhimahi dhiyo yo nah prasodayat.*” By daily recitation of this Gayatri Mantra the dvijas tried to realize the essential unity of the world with the conscious soul of man (Radhakrishnan, 1962).

The self-same eternal spirit whose power creates the earth, the sky, the stars and at the same time it also radiates our minds with the light of consciousness that moves and exists into unbroken continuity with the outer world. Importance and care for earth, air and sky is openly expressed in this Gayatri Mantra. The Vedic seers were much careful in keeping the three worlds of Bhurloka, Bhubarloka, and svarloka- the realms of earth, air and sky pollution free which are again related with our mind and intellect-our consciousness. So, they were eager to keep pollution free also the cultural environmental consciousness with the teachings of sense control and mind control. The animals too, the birds and beasts all, when looked from man’s view point form man’s environment. The Vedic seers teach that the animals should live in peace, be safe and protected. Regarding the plants and the herbs, the Aranyanisukta in the RigVeda addresses the goddess of forest for her gifts to man and also for her charm and beauty and wishes that forest should be always green with trees and plants. RigVeda states, “*Banani nah prajahitani*”-forests should not be destroyed (Macdonell et al., 2016). Ayurveda is based on the medicinal values of the osadhis (herbs). It refers to the ‘Osadhi sukta’ of the RigVeda. Plants are conceived as life forces and the earth is called the keeper of creation, container of forests, trees and herbs. Later development of the Vedic traditions is seen in the epic and the Puranas. The Padmapurana states, “Dasaputra sama druma-one tree is equal to ten sons” (Radhakrishnan, 1962).

Rabindranath the world poet was a lover both of man and nature. Of course, he did not belong to the western movement of “environmentalism” as it was introduced nearly two decades after his demise. He was a lover of the Vedas and the Vedic seers and in many aspects, he resembled the epic poets-Vyasa and Valmiki

who preached the Vedic or the Upanishadic message in their own unique way (Radhakrishnan, 1962). Rabindranath was a “poet” and the Sanskrit word equivalent of poet, viz. “Kabi” is of much richer connotation. Kabi means “a Seer” i.e. “Drasta” whose vision is related also with the future events. When the Gita says, “Kabya api atra mohitah” even poets are here bewildered (verse iv, 16) then the word “Kabi” is used in such a sense (Radhakrishnan, 1948). Rabindranath’s vision in his attitude to environment gets comparison only with those of the epic poets who reflect a rich culture based on forest-based institutions. To Rabindranath, the family environment, the economic environment, the educative or academic environment, all must be harmonious elements of the whole where man and nature both are constituent parts of the one identical eco-system (Tagore, 1917/2009). His respect for nature goes in the same line with the Vedic seers who composed hymns to pay homage to the gods and the goddesses inherent in the natural elements (Dasgupta, 1975). We meet pancabhutani repeatedly in poet’s writings. In the series of articles published in the monthly journal Sadhana in the caption of pancabhuta or pancabhuter diary, these gross elements of nature appeared as the living personalities-characters made by the poet with the names like Kshiti, Srotasvini, Dipti, Samir and Vyom (earth, water, fire, air and ether) (Tagore, 1921/2001). His establishment of Visva Bharati institution in Santiniketan started in reminiscences of the forest institutions- Tapobana Vidyalayas of the ancient Indian sages. Those sages lived and imparted teachings to their disciples in close kinship with nature (Tagore, 1921/2001). As a forerunner of Indian renaissance Rabindranath fought against much of prevailing superstitions and blind faith and worked for growth of scientific spirit. But he was against scientism. He said, “Our scientific world is our world of reasoning, it has its greatness and uses and attractions. We are ready to pay the homage due to it. But when it claims to have discovered the real world for us and laughs at the worlds of all simple-minded men, then we must say it is like a general grown intoxicated with his power, usurping the throne of his king. For the reality of the world belongs to the personality of man and not to reasoning which useful and great though it be is not the man himself” (Tagore, as cited in Ray, 1992, p. 1392). To the poet direct and immediate relationship between man and nature alone can bring to him the living awareness of reality. In the Atharvaveda in a hymn to the earth the sages observed satya, Rta, and Tapah. To the seer nature is the resort and protector not only of man’s present and past, but also of future. Further nature not only fulfills one’s physical needs; it is also considered to be the fulfilment of one’s spiritual aspirations. The Vedic seer was eager to leave the earth behind him well preserved and prosperous for the future generations too. Rabindranath too expressed that a need was felt for maintaining adequate balance between human activities and environment, between economic perspective and environmental health. His play Muktaadhara (water fall) centres around a mountain stream and a dam constructed by an engineer employed by the king. Free flow of the stream was obstructed and then a third character, the prince, revolting against the king and the engineer could finally succeed in shattering the dam and letting the current of the stream flow with usual course. The play gives Tagore’s message of strong objection against human effort of resisting nature. The poet always opposed the suicidal human activities performed in the name of material progress or the urbanization

caring little about nature, paying no heed for a balance between man and nature (Tagore, 1922/2008). He said “By destructing forests greedy peoples have uprooted trees which give us clean air, help us making our land fertile. Completely forgetting their own welfare man has destroyed all that is the gift of God” (Tagore, 1986, pp. 372–373). Of the root of the present crisis of man-nature dichotomy Tagore points to the western civilization which originated from their cradle of brick and mortar starting with the anthropocentric teachings of the Bible. Tagore rethinks of Indian ideology that our civilization was born and nurtured within the expansive natural surroundings of the forests. The separative attitude of the west lead them to treat all non-human species and inanimate things as lower and make them blind to the essential kinship between man and environment. Tagore says that to them unlike the Indian perspective nature is alien, inert and incommunicative. Science following the time-honored western tradition is treating nature simply as instrumental to fulfil human needs, remains busy in exploring the materialistic universe. In the Personality Tagore says, “Science is at the beginning of the invasion of the material world and this goes on a furious scramble for plunder” (Tagore, 1917/2008, p. 25). Contrary to the western view point Tagore paid due honour to our Indian Heritage. Man is in close kinship with nature, the message is preached by the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas and the epics. The poet’s love for nature was experienced not only in his writings; we feel his love and respect for nature in many of the colorful festivals held in Santiniketan. He Introduces on the 7th August, 1922 (Baishe Sraavan) the function of Barsamangal (invocation of rainy season) in Visva Bharati to welcome the advent of rain without which agriculture suffers. On 14th July 1927 started Briksharopan festival (the tree planting ceremony) at Santiniketan and on the next day Halakarshan festival (the blessing of the plough ceremony) at Sriniketan. Colourful festivals are held in the advent of the seasons like Saratotsab, Basanotsab (Holi), Nababarsha, etc. Students’ involvements with these functions could definitely evoke in their minds and hearts the feelings of deep kinship with nature. The different natural spots at Santiniketan like Tinpahar, Salbithika, Palashbani, Amrakunja, and the river Kopai etc. are not mere spots of natural scenery, to the students and the teachers of Visva Bharati institutions they are much more, as if some living legends. Message of Rabindranath on the man-nature relationship become acceptable to all due to his activities at Santiniketan. The poet refused to see any uncompromising antagonism between man and nature and said, “When a man does not realize his kinship with the world, he lives in a prison house whose walls are alien to him” (Tagore, 1913/2008, p. 27).

Rabindranath Tagore cannot be placed in any of the two divisions of the Contemporary environmentalists like that of anthropocentric and biocentric. His environmentalism might be named as theo-centric. As Radhakrishnan says, “he [Rabindranath] does not love nature for its own sake, but because he views it as attribute of the divine (Radhakrishnan, 1961, p. 89), not for the abundance of joy that it brings into life, but for the information it gives of a higher spiritual life. To him even a blade of grass or an atom of dust brings a message from the unknown. To him every flower is a symbol of worship, every garland is a Gitanjali, every forest a

temple and every hill top god's dwelling place. The sound of the running water, the rustle of the leaves and the song of the birds are so many hymns of praises to the great God" (Radhakrishnan, 1961, p. 89).

### References :

Dasgupta, S. N. (1975). *A history of Indian philosophy* (Vol. 1). Motilal Banarsidass.

Macdonell, A. A., Oldenberg, H., & Müller, F. M. (Trans.). (2016). *The golden book of the holy Vedas*. Vijay Goel.

Max Müller, F. (Ed.). (2000). *Sacred books of the East* (Vols. 32, 42, & 46). Motilal Banarsidass.

Radhakrishnan, S. (1962). *Indian philosophy* (Vol. 1). George Allen & Unwin.

Ray, S. (Ed.). (1392). *Rabindranathercintajagat: Darśancintā* [In Bengali]. Granthalay Private Ltd.

Tagore, R. (1398). *Santiniketan* (Vols. 1–2) [In Bengali]. Visva-Bharati Granthan Vibhag.