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Website-www.aarf.asia, Email : editor@aarf.asia , editoraarf@gmail.com

Environmental Consciousness in Sanskrit Epics

DrVineeta, Associate Professor

Department of English

CISKMV Dhand-Dadwana, Kaithal

ABSTRACT: Environmental consciousness and conservation is embedded in Indian ethos and it reflects in its literature. The timeless wisdom found in texts like the Vedas and epics emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the need for a harmonious coexistence with nature. Hymns and verses resonate with ecological wisdom, guiding readers towards the need to preserve nature in its primordial form. It is the basic and fundamental necessity for any form of life on the Earth. Myriad number of texts in Sanskrit literature revere various elements of the environment, portraying them as divine entities deserving of respect and protection. By drawing inspiration from Sanskrit literature, modern society can integrate sustainable practices and cultivate a deeper respect for the environment.

KEY WORDS: Sanskrit Literature, Hymns, Vedas, Epics, Agni, Akash, Aap, Vayu, Prithvi, Ecological Balance

Environmental consciousness and conservation is embedded in Indian ethos and it reflects in its literature. Delving into the rich tapestry of Sanskrit literature reveals a profound emphasis on environmental conservation, a theme that transcends time and offers valuable insights for contemporary ecological challenges. While Sanskrit literature offers profound insights into environmental conservation, it is essential to recognize that the cultural and historical context of these texts differs significantly from the present day. The challenge lies in bridging the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary environmental concerns. By drawing inspiration from Sanskrit literature, modern society can integrate sustainable practices and cultivate a deeper respect for the environment. A thorough exploration of Sanskrit literature reveals a nuanced understanding of environmental conservation embedded in the cultural and spiritual fabric of ancient India. The timeless wisdom found in texts like the Vedas and epics

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emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings and the need for a harmonious coexistence with nature. As we navigate the complexities of the modern world, these literary treasures offer a profound source of inspiration for addressing contemporary environmental challenges and fostering a sustainable future. Sanskrit literature not only highlights the philosophical and ethical dimensions of environmental conservation but also provides practical insights into sustainable living. Sanskrit texts articulate guidelines for responsible resource use, emphasizing the equitable distribution of natural wealth. This socio-legal perspective underscores the importance of collective responsibility in maintaining ecological balance.

The Vedas, ancient Indian scriptures dating back thousands of years, serve as foundational sources for understanding the interconnectedness of human existence and the natural world. Within these texts, hymns and verses resonate with ecological wisdom, guiding readers towards a harmonious coexistence with nature. The Rigveda, one of the oldest Vedic texts, reveres various elements of the environment, portraying them as divine entities deserving of respect and protection. For instance, the hymn to Agni, the fire god, not only symbolizes the transformative power of fire but also underscores the importance of maintaining a balanced relationship with this elemental force. Agni as fire is one of the five inert impermanent elements along with the space (akash), water (aap), air (vayu) and earth (prithvi). In Rigveda there are over 200 hymns that praise Agni. It opens with a hymn inviting Agni who is then addressed later in the hymn as the guardian of Dharma. It says, "Agni, I adore, who stands before the Lord, the God who sees Truth, the warrior, strong disposer of delight." Here Agni is praised. It is said that Agni is the mightiest and I adore him who stands before all the lords. Similarly, the Atharvaveda contains hymns that acknowledge the sacredness of the Earth, urging individuals to tread lightly and preserve its sanctity. The Earth that has heights and slopes, and great plains, that supports the plants of manifold virtue, free from the pressure that comes from the midst of men, she shall spread out for us, and fit herself for us.

Moving beyond the Vedas, Sanskrit literature further explores ecological themes in epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. These epic narratives weave intricate tales that incorporate elements of nature, depicting forests, rivers, and mountains as integral aspects of the characters' lives. The Ramayana, for instance, unfolds in the lush wilderness of the Dandaka forest, where Lord Rama and his companions exemplify a deep reverence for the environment. Their commitment to protecting the natural world reflects an understanding that transcends mere utilitarian concerns. The Ramayana, attributed to the sage Valmiki, stands as a monumental work within Sanskrit literature, richly illustrating environmental consciousness through its narrative and characters. The epic unfolds in diverse landscapes, providing insights into the profound relationship between humanity and nature. One notable example is the portrayal of Lord Rama's exile to the Dandaka forest. This episode emphasizes the sanctity of the forest and its inhabitants. Rama, along with his wife Sita and loyal brother Lakshmana, lives in harmony with the forest ecosystem, respecting the flora and fauna. The epic emphasizes the ethical treatment of the

environment, showcasing Rama's understanding of the interconnectedness of all life forms. The character of Hanuman further exemplifies environmental stewardship. As he searches for Sita in the Ashoka Vatika, Hanuman takes great care not to harm the garden despite his extraordinary strength. This episode highlights the respect for nature ingrained in the characters, emphasizing the idea that even in dire circumstances, one must uphold principles of environmental conservation. The epic subtly conveys the idea that maintaining harmony with nature is essential for overall well-being. Moreover, the Ramayana's depiction of the monkey army constructing a bridge to Lanka presents an intriguing engineering aspect with environmental implications. While the focus is on the heroic endeavor, the narrative indirectly highlights the need for sustainable construction practices. The bridge construction, though miraculous, aligns with the broader theme of responsible resource utilization.

The Ramayana weaves environmental consciousness into its narrative fabric. Through the characters' interactions with nature, the epic promotes principles of respect, coexistence, and sustainability. These examples from the Ramayana not only enrich our understanding of environmental values in Sanskrit literature but also offer timeless lessons applicable to contemporary ecological challenges.

The Mahabharata, another monumental Sanskrit epic attributed to Vyasa, intricately weaves environmental consciousness into its narrative, providing a multifaceted perspective on humanity's relationship with nature. The Bhagavad Gita, a philosophical dialogue within the Mahabharata, is a profound source of environmental ethics. Lord Krishna imparts timeless wisdom to Arjuna, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings. In Chapter 15, Krishna describes the cosmic ashvattha tree, highlighting its roots extending upwards and branches downwards—a metaphor for the interdependence of the material and spiritual realms. This imagery encourages a holistic perspective that transcends anthropocentrism, fostering a deeper understanding of our connection with the environment.

The episode of Arjuna's exile to the forest during the Agyatavasa (period of incognito) is another instance where the Mahabharata addresses the importance of environmental conservation. Arjuna, living in disguise, learns to coexist with the diverse flora and fauna of the forest. This experience serves as a transformative journey, instilling in him a sense of reverence for nature and an awareness of the delicate balance of ecosystems.

The concept of "Dharma," a central theme in the Mahabharata, extends to environmental ethics. Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava, is known for his commitment to righteousness. The Rajasuya Yajna, a grand ritual performed by Yudhishtira, includes homage to various natural elements. This ceremony reflects a cultural acknowledgment of the environment's intrinsic value and the need to express gratitude for the resources that sustain life. Examining the concept of "Dharma" in Sanskrit literature reveals a moral and ethical framework that extends to environmental ethics. The Mahabharata, particularly the Bhagavad Gita, expounds on the duty of

humans to act in harmony with nature. Lord Krishna's teachings emphasize the interconnectedness of all living beings, urging individuals to fulfill their responsibilities while considering the broader impact on the environment.

Furthermore, the Mahabharata highlights the devastating consequences of environmental exploitation through the narrative of the KhandavaVanaDaha. The burning of the Khandava forest to clear the land for Indra's city results in the destruction of its inhabitants, prompting divine intervention. This episode serves as a cautionary tale, warning against reckless manipulation of ecosystems and emphasizing the importance of preserving natural habitats.

The Mahabharata offers profound insights into environmental consciousness through its philosophical discourses and narrative episodes. The emphasis on interconnectedness, the transformative power of nature, and the consequences of environmental imbalance contribute to a holistic understanding of humanity's role in preserving the intricate web of life. These examples from the Mahabharata resonate with contemporary environmental challenges, highlighting the enduring relevance of Sanskrit literature's ecological wisdom.

In the realm of Ayurveda, the classical system of Indian medicine, Sanskrit texts emphasize the use of plant-based remedies and sustainable harvesting practices. The Charaka Samhita, a foundational Ayurvedic text, not only outlines medicinal properties but also underscores the importance of preserving plant biodiversity. This ecological awareness within traditional healthcare systems reflects an understanding of the intimate connection between human well-being and a healthy environment.

In conclusion, Sanskrit literature's exploration of environmental conservation goes beyond theoretical principles, offering practical guidance for sustainable living, responsible resource management, and ethical considerations. The integration of ecological wisdom into various facets of ancient Indian society, including agriculture, healthcare, and governance, showcases a holistic approach that resonates with contemporary sustainability efforts. As we navigate the challenges of the 21st century, Sanskrit literature serves as a timeless repository of knowledge, inspiring a harmonious relationship between humanity and the environment. Nature serves as a backdrop for the unfolding human drama, and poetic descriptions of landscapes evoke a sense of the sublime. These literary works contribute to an ecological consciousness that extends beyond practical considerations to an appreciation of the intrinsic value of the natural world.

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