

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES IN CLASSICAL SANSKRIT TRADITION

Dr.S.Muthu D.Litt.

Abstract

Sanskrit literature presents a profound and holistic vision of environmental ethics rooted in the moral, spiritual, and philosophical worldview of ancient India. This study explores the rich eco-ethical consciousness embedded in Vedic, Epic, Puranic, Dharmashastra, and classical Sanskrit literary texts. This vision revolves on cosmic interdependence, viewing humans, animals, plants, and nature as essential parts of a unified moral system. Concepts such as Vasudhaiva-kutumbakam, ahimsā (non-violence), ānṛśaṃsya (compassion), yajña (sacrifice as mutual sustenance), and self-restraint shape an ethical framework that promotes harmony between humanity and nature. Texts like the Ṛgveda, Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, Bhagavadgītā, Manusmṛti, Arthaśāstra, Pañcatantra, and works of Kālidāsa and Bāṇabhaṭṭa articulate respect for forests, animals, and all forms of life, emphasizing protection, moderation, and gratitude. The study highlights how ancient Sanskrit thought recognized environmental preservation not merely as a practical necessity but as a moral and spiritual duty. In the context of contemporary ecological crises, these timeless insights offer valuable guidance for developing sustainable, compassionate, and ethically grounded environmental practices.

Keywords

Environmental Ethics; Sanskrit Literature; Ecological Consciousness; Ahimsā; Yajña; Compassion for All Beings; Forest Conservation; Animal Protection; Dharma; Sustainable Living.

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Dr.S.Muthu D.Litt.

Associate Professor & Head,
Dept. of Sanskrit,
RKM Vivekananda
College, Chennai-4
Email: sdrmuthu1@gmail.com

Introduction

The central focus of Environmental Science is the natural balance that exists in nature. The five basic elements—Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Space—along with all living beings, form an interconnected system that maintains harmony in the world. However, human activities have disturbed this natural balance. Human interference with nature’s smooth functioning has reached such a level that it now threatens this inherent harmony. The future of human development depends greatly on our attitude toward nature. It is essential to understand that, in the natural order, every living being has the right to exist.

Our ancient sages recognized this truth long ago. They declared that the entire world is one family—“*Vasudhaiva-kutumbakam*”, meaning “the earth is a single family.”

Significance of Forests:

Forests held great importance in ancient times, especially for our sages. Certain forests were declared sacred and protected areas. These sacred forests were to remain untouched—no trees could be cut, no branches broken, no firewood collected, and no grass burned. Animals taking shelter in these forests were not to be harmed.

In *Mahabharata*, Lord Krishna explains that the coexistence of wild animals and forests is essential for their mutual welfare. The presence of wild animals prevents people from destroying forests, and the forests, in turn, provide a safe home for the animals. Vyasa, the great author of the *Mahabharata*, states that every living or non-living being desires to exist. He reminds us to feel gratitude for all forms of life, for each contributes to making the universe a pleasant place for us to live in. According to the *Bhagavadgītā*, a person who has reached the highest level of spiritual realization is one who loves every creature and rejoices in their well-being. The *Ramayana* also contains several examples that highlight Rama’s compassion for all living beings. When Guha invites Rama to rest, Rama first expresses concern for his weary horses. He tells Guha, “I do not need food for myself; please give food and water to these noble horses first.”

अश्वानां खादनेनाहमर्थी नान्येन केनचित् ।

एतावता भवता भविष्यामि सुपूजितः ॥

When the bird Jatayu dies, Rama performs the final rites for him, just as a son would for his father. Rama mourns the bird's death deeply, showing that he valued the bird's noble sacrifice as equal to that of any human being.

This reflects the ancient Indian belief that all living beings, human or otherwise, are interconnected and deserving of respect and compassion.

A Sense of Empathy for Everyone

The *Mahabharata*, being deeply aware of the moral complexity of human actions, presents several supreme moral principles (*parama dharmas*) to guide right conduct. One of these is *ānṛśamsya*, often praised as *parodharma* in the epic.

Ānṛśamsya is different from *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), though both are important ethical ideas. While *ahiṃsā* means abstaining from harm, *ānṛśamsya* refers to goodwill, compassion, and a deep sensitivity toward others. A closely related word is *anukrośa*, which literally means “to cry with another” — to share in another's pain and suffering.

In the *Śāntiparvan*, *Tulādhāra* criticizes social customs that cause *hiṃsā* (harm). He teaches withdrawal from such harmful activities. One should live like the blind or the deaf — detached, peaceful, self-contained, viewing all beings with equanimity, desiring nothing and hating none.

In the *Viśvarūpa* vision of Lord *Kṛṣṇa*, Arjuna witnesses the entire universe unified within the divine form. The cosmic life manifests as humans, animals, birds, plants, and other species. The central message of the *Bhagavadgītā* is a moral distinction between two types of people — the noble and the ignoble.

The noble is guided by high ethical values and divine qualities (*daivī sampat*), showing compassion toward all beings. The ignoble, by contrast, are governed by egoism and possess demonic qualities (*āsurī sampat*). They are selfish, cruel, and destroy the world through ignorance and arrogance.

According to the *Gītā*, these people act wickedly because of their lack of understanding. Arjuna argues that moral conduct is superior to material gain, and that killing for economic profit is sinful.

Significance of Yajña (Sacrifice)

The *Bhagavadgītā* describes the universe as a “wheel of sacrifice,” operating on the ethical principle of mutual interdependence among all beings:

अन्नाद्भवन्ति भूतानि पर्जन्यादन्नसंभवः ।
 यज्ञाद्भवति पर्जन्यो यज्ञः कर्मसमुद्भवः ॥
 कर्म ब्रह्मोद्भवं विद्धि ब्रह्माक्षरसमुद्भवम् ।
 तस्मात्सर्वगतं ब्रह्म नित्यं यज्ञे प्रतिष्ठितम् ॥ (BG.III.14–15)

All beings arise from food, food comes from rain, rain from *yajña* (sacrifice), and *yajña* arises from action. Action originates from Brahman, which itself springs from the Imperishable (akṣara). Thus, Brahman, which pervades all, is ever established in sacrifice.

This teaching presents human beings as integral parts of the cosmic order — one of the many forms of the Supreme manifested in the universe. The *Bhagavadgītā*’s cosmic vision inspires respect for all life and all creation, leading to harmony and preventing the destruction of the world.

Self-Restraint

Self-restraint in conduct is a key element of true culture. The *Bhagavadgītā* speaks of *ātmaupamya*, or the ability to judge right and wrong by placing oneself in another’s position. This is described as the highest form of yoga:

आत्मौपम्येन सर्वत्र समं पश्यति योऽर्जुन ।
 सुखं वा यदि वा दुःखं स योगी परमो मतः ॥ (BG.VI.32)

“One who sees everywhere the same standard of comparison — who regards another’s happiness and sorrow as his own — O Arjuna, is considered the highest yogī.”

Thus, consideration for others’ feelings and rights is the highest sign of a cultured person. A person lacking such sensitivity cannot truly be called civilized.

Non-Killing of Animals (Being Vegetarian)

The *Manusmṛti* discusses the moral issue of killing and eating animals. Manu declares that the common duties (*sādhāraṇa dharmas*) for all four varṇas are

non-killing of animals (ahimsā), truthfulness, honesty, purity, and control of the senses:

अहिंसा सत्यमस्तेयं शौचमिन्द्रियनिग्रहः ।

एवं सामासिकं धर्मं चातुर्वर्ण्येऽब्रवीन्मनुः ॥(X.63)

Manu further states that a person who kills innocent animals for his own benefit attains no happiness, either in this life or the next:

फलमूलाशनैर्मेध्यैर्मुन्यत्राणां च भोजनैः ।

न तत्फलमवाप्नोति यत्मासपरिवर्जनात् ॥(V.54)

No flesh can ever be obtained without killing a living being, and such killing does not lead to heaven (*svarga*); therefore, one should abstain from eating meat:

न कृत्वा प्राणिनां हिंसां मांसमुत्पद्यते क्वचित् ।

न च प्राणिवधः स्वर्ग्यस्तस्मान्मांसं विवर्जयेत् ॥(V.48)

Manu equates the spiritual merit of refraining from meat with that of performing the Aśvamedha sacrifice every year for a hundred years:

वर्षे वर्षेऽश्वमेधेन यो यजेत शतं समाः ।

मांसानि च न खादेद्यस्तयोः पुण्यफले समम् ॥(V.53)

The merit earned by giving up meat cannot be obtained even by living only on fruits and roots. He explains the word *māṃsa* (“flesh”) in moral terms — the being whose flesh one eats in this life will, in the next life, eat the flesh of that person:

मां स भक्षयिताऽमुत्र यस्य मांसमिहाद्यते ।

एतन्मांसस्य मांसत्वं प्रवदन्ति मनीषिणः ॥(V.55)

Although Manu supports Vedic sacrifices, which involve animal killing, he limits it strictly to ritual contexts such as *yajñas*, *śrāddhas*, and offerings to Gods — and forbids killing in ordinary life.

Thus, in everyday conduct, a person should avoid killing animals or eating meat. Manu adds that one who does not wish to cause pain, bondage, or death to other beings, and who seeks the welfare of all creatures, attains eternal happiness:

यो बन्धनवधक्लेशान् प्राणिनां न चिकीर्षति ।

सर्वस्य हितमिच्छुः स सुखमत्यन्तमश्नुते ॥(V.46)

He also prescribes penances for both intentional and unintentional killing, with stricter penance for deliberate acts:

संवत्सरैकमपि चरेत्कृच्छ्रं द्विजोत्तमः ।

अज्ञातयुक्तशुद्धार्थं ज्ञातस्म तु विशेषतः ॥ (V.21)

Here's a simplified, academic paraphrase of your text while keeping all the Sanskrit verses intact:

Preservation of Animal Species

Kautilya, the author of the Arthaśāstra, strongly asserts that humans do not have the right to use animals for luxury. He emphasizes that only materials like skin, hair, bones, etc., should be collected from animals that are already dead. (Arthaśāstra III.19)

मृतस्य-चर्म-गो महिषस्य-शृङ्ग अस्थिनि चाहरेयुः।

According to Kautilya, causing pain to or killing animals is a punishable offense:

क्षुद्र पशूनां काष्ठादिभिर्दुःखोत्पादने पणो द्विपणो वा दण्डः शोणितोत्पादने द्विगुणः।

It is likely that Kautilya understood that every living being has a role in maintaining the balance of nature. He instructs that carnivorous and herbivorous animals, birds, aquatic creatures, and animals in protected areas must not be captured, killed, or harmed. Young animals, males, and females that have recently given birth must also be protected. This reflects his concern for preserving all species.

The celebrated Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa demonstrated a balanced and ethical outlook in his works. He consistently advocated discipline (*samyama*) in both personal and public life and emphasized compassion, tolerance, and respect for all life forms. Kālidāsa's works strongly encourage caring for plants and animals. In the hermitages of Kanva, Cyavana, and Marica, harming creatures was strictly prohibited.

Importance of Āśramas (Hermitages)

In Sanskrit literature, Āśramas are not simply locations in the forest; they represent harmonious cohabitation of humans and nature. Even naturally ferocious animals coexist peacefully there. These are places of balance and harmony. Even kings were expected to follow the rules of an Āśrama. In Kālidāsa's famous drama

Abhijñānaśakuntala, King Duṣyanta is warned by hermits not to kill the deer of the Āśrama and reminded that weapons are meant to protect the helpless, not harm the innocent:

आर्तत्राणाय वः शस्त्रं न प्रहर्तुमनागसि ॥ (*Abhijñānaśakuntala*, Act I)

Love for All Beings

Kālidāsa believed that it was the king's duty to prevent the killing of animals. In *Abhijñānaśakuntala*, when Duṣyanta learns of the arrival of sages from Kanva's hermitage, he reflects on their purpose:

धर्मारण्यचरेषु केनचिदुत प्राणिष्वसच्चेष्टितम्। (*Act V.9*)

At times, Kālidāsa suggests that the actions of sentient beings influence whether the world is pleasant or unpleasant. Duṣyanta asks whether his sins are preventing the plants from flowering:

आहोस्वित्प्रसवो ममापचरितैर्विष्टम्भितो वीरुधाम्। (*Act V.9*)

The *Pañcatantra* emphasizes virtues such as love for all sentient beings, humility, and self-sacrifice. It suggests that moral behavior is essential for both individual and societal well-being.

Importance of Ahimsa (Non-Violence)

The *Pañcatantra* also underscores the importance of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and protection of all living beings:

अहिसापूर्वको धर्मो यस्मात्सद्भिरुदाहृतः।

यूकमत्कुण्डंशादींस्तस्मात् तानपि रक्षयेत् ॥ (*Pañcatantra*, III.104)

It warns that those who kill even carnivorous animals are cruel and destined for severe punishment, and killing harmless animals is even worse:

हिसकान्यपि भूतानि यो हिसति स निर्घृणः।

स याति नरकं घोरं किं पुनर्यः शुभानि च ॥

The text questions the practice of killing animals for religious rituals, asking whether cutting trees and shedding animal blood ensures a place in heaven:

वृक्षांश्छित्वा पशून्हत्वा कृत्वा रुधिरकर्मम्।

यद्येवं गम्यते स्वर्गं नरकं केन गम्यते ॥

In one *Pañcatantra* story, a lion unnecessarily kills many animals. The other

animals confront him and ask why he kills so many when one is sufficient for his hunger. The moral of the story highlights the principle:

एवं कृते तव तावत् प्राणयात्रा क्लेशं विनाऽपि।
भविष्यति अस्माकं च पुनः सर्वोच्छेदनं न स्यात् ॥

This teaches that humans should minimize harm to other living beings by living sustainably and avoiding luxurious habits that endanger nature. Human survival depends entirely on nature, and both Viṣṇuśarma (*Pañcatantra*) and Kautilya stress the importance of using natural resources wisely and responsibly.

Protection of Life as the Highest Dharma

In the celebrated prose work *Kadambari* by Banabhaṭa, the parrot Vaiśampayana observes that even in the most difficult and distressing situations, the actions of all creatures are never carried out without regard for their own life.

अतिकष्टास्वय्यवस्थासु जीवतनिरपेक्षा न भवन्ति खलु जगति
सर्वप्राणिनां प्रवृत्तयः। (Kadambari, ed. M.R. Kale, p. 63)

This emphasizes that there is nothing in this world that is more valuable to all beings than life itself:

नास्ति जीवितादन्यदभिमततरमिह जगति सर्वजन्तूनाम् ।

Hārīta, the son of sage Jābāli, expresses that it is the duty of people like him to protect those who are defenceless:

अनाथपरिपालनं हि धर्मोऽस्मद्विधानाम्। (p. 80)

In line with this principle, Hārīta took pity on a parrot and brought it to the hermitage, as it was not possible to place it back in its nest because the tree was too difficult for the ascetics to climb.

He decided that the parrot should stay in the hollow of a hermitage tree, where it would be nourished with fruit juices and collections of *nīvāra* grain provided by the sons of the ascetics and by himself, until it became strong enough to fly. Hārīta further explains that when the parrot's wings develop, it will be free to fly wherever it wishes or may continue to stay in the hermitage if it becomes attached to the place.

This story reflects the broader principle that humans and the environment are mutually dependent. Human beings' constant efforts to satisfy their desires through

excessive material consumption and exploitation of natural resources have caused serious harm to the Earth, creating a situation that demands urgent attention. The rapid progress of science and technology, which has often plundered nature's resources, has even threatened the survival of humanity.

Conclusion

In this context, the wisdom of our ancestors, preserved over thousands of years in sacred texts and literary works, is increasingly relevant today. These works advocate for a compassionate understanding and love between humans and nature, emphasizing the importance of living in harmony with the environment. In times of ecological crisis, we must learn from this heritage to cultivate a sense of responsibility, empathy, and sustainable interaction with nature, recognizing the protection of life as the highest duty and a fundamental principle of dharma.

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