



An Indian Approach to Sustainable Ecological Balance

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Jagdish Batra

That the world is experiencing a harrowing scenario of catastrophic climate conditions is no news. The spate of wildfires, cyclones, floods, famines, and other natural disasters, on an unprecedented scale sweeping most parts of the globe is all too visible. This despite the numerous summits and conferences of world leaders and the action plans that continue to make headlines. According to scientists, a rise in temperature beyond 1.5°C is catastrophic for human life and if the present trend continues, then by 2050, most of the earth will become a vast tropical desert inhospitable for human survival. Against this backdrop, the only way out seems to be to learn from the past.

Starting 15th century, the period of colonization of much of the world by European powers resulted in large-scale destruction of eco-friendly native cultures not merely in former colonies including India, but even in Europe, where the native Celtic, Slavic and Germanic cultures became the victims of violent conquest. The colonizing instinct has mutated in our times into economic colonization resulting in action replay with regard to native cultures. Contemporary industries and businesses driven by an insatiable greed for money have resorted to widespread destruction of forests, sucked the environment of its life-giving oxygen, hollowed out earth through miles-deep mines to extract minerals and oils, among other activities, all of which have disturbed the fragile ecosystem. Consumers of automobiles, air conditioning gadgets, and other such products are also complicit in this suicidal venture.

The leaders of the world must accept that modern lifestyle is related to industrialization and modernization that are intimately linked to urbanization, which has meant disturbing the village culture which sustained the world for

millennia. Surely, we cannot think of returning to villages, but we can learn a thing or two from ancient societies as well as from communities that have been cut off from the modern glitz and glamour-prone world. Their lifestyle, practices and sacred texts venerate and communicate with nature. Take, for example, the ancient Indian text *Rig Veda*, which venerates deities like Indra, Varuna, Surya, Agni, and others that control various elements in nature. The Vedic seers wish for a proper balance among these elements in the interest of human welfare. In the *Prithvi Sukta* section (verse 12), the seer states: *Mata Bhumi Putroham Prithivyah* (Earth is my mother and I am her son). Again, in the same section, he states: “Whatever I dig from thee, O Earth, may that have quick recovery again. O purifier, may we not injure thy vitals or thy heart” (verse 34). This regard for nature is at odds with the deep-rooted conviction in modern civilization that the world was created for man only and he has unbridled right to exploit nature and its resources.

The famous maxim from *Chhandogya Upanishad – Sarva Khalvidam Bramha* or the entire universe including living and non-living matter is the manifestation of God only (3.14.1) is also the central message of the Vedanta philosophy, which has the greatest following in India. It debunks the distinction between the animate and the inanimate world and believes that all creation is imbued with a cosmic consciousness. This respectful approach to nature is needed today.

Coming to the practical application of these valuable tenets, one marks several daily practices in the life of ordinary Indians which din into his mind the reverential status of natural elements, thereby motivating one to conserve and sustain them. The first morning Puranic mantra to be chanted after rising from the bed is: *Samudra Vasane Devi Parvata Stana Manndale, Vishnu Patni Namastubhyam Paadsparsam Kshamasvame* (O goddess earth, spouse of Lord Vishnu, the oceans are thy garments and the mountains thy bosom. Pardon me, I am touching you with my feet). This may remind one of terms like ‘Gaia’ and ‘Terra Mater’– the Greek and Roman names meaning earth goddess and earth mother respectively. The majority Hindu community in India worships different trees like Peepal, Banyan, Amla, etc., on specific days apart from worshipping animals like cow and snake or rivers like Sindhu, Ganga, Yamuna, and Godavari in general.

These practices are a daily reminder of the significance of nature in our lives. Sustainability then becomes imperative, and there are numerous examples that

show how sacred practices integrate this aspect. Yajna, or the sacrificial fire, is performed daily by many to purify the mind as well as the environment. There are what are called 'emergency provisions' for periods of war, natural calamity, etc., when the proper material for conducting it may not be available. The Brihadaranyak Upanishad contains an interesting conversation between King Janak and Rishi Yagyavalkya, where the seer mentions replacements of items in the following declining order: milk, rice/barley, a medicinal herb, any wild herb, vegetation, water, and finally one's perceived truth into the devotional fire! The last one has the potent intent of ridding man of ego.

It may be argued that putting the modernization clock back is next to impossible and that sentiments and emotions that appeal to the heart are not valued in this technological age, but are these entirely absent? After all, love and hate continue to rule the human heart. Rousseau's "Back to Nature" call needs to be repeated now, loud and clear. For a non-believer, arousing emotions that take one to the next level of deification rather than reification may be difficult but not impossible, and in this art and literature can help.

Author Biography

Jagdish Batra is a Senior Fellow at the Jindal India Institute. He is Professor of English and Executive Dean, Office of English and Foreign Languages (OEFL) at the O.P. Jindal Global University.