

Biodiversity Conservation in Ancient India with Special Reference to Faunal Diversity

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Abstract

The environment had a significant influence on people's lives and activities during the earliest eras of human history. According to historical records, they were really close to forests and other natural resources. Indian mythology is rich with references and examples of human affection and admiration for wild creatures. Because of religious beliefs and values, wildlife has been preserved and granted special protection for all of recorded time. In all industrialized nations, there has been a noticeable and robust effort to protect animals. India has a long history of managing its wildlife. There are animal-loving hymns in the Vedas. The best method to conserve wildlife is to associate certain animals with particular Gods or Goddesses, according to Hinduism. An essential component of the Hindu way of life has always been environmental conservation. Through this review paper we have tried to focus on the various Indian Literatures that talk about the faunal conservation.

Keywords: Sacred Groves, Faunal Conservation, Vedas, Ashoka's Edicts, Mythology

1. Introduction

Early in human history, a person's environment had a significant influence on their daily activities and way of life. They lived in close proximity to forests and other natural resources, as historical records attest. Many plant and animal species have been associated with specific Hindu deities for ages, and as a result, they are revered throughout India. Many wild animals, including tigers, lions, and elephants, as well as birds, including swans, owls, and peacocks, have been worshipped and adored as the vehicles of deities. Many trees—including the madhuca, wood apple, mango, coconut, khejri, emblica, tamarind, ashoka, and wood apple—as well as herbs—like basil—are revered and held in high regard. Certain segments of Indian culture, especially the rural people and the indigenous tribes who live in the forests, nevertheless hold onto this belief and these customs in one way or another today. (R. K. Sinha, 1995). The earliest teachings for protecting the environment and maintaining ecological balance are found in the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas, and Smriti. Earth, or nature, has never been viewed as a hostile force that needs to be subdued or subjugated. In reality man is not allowed to take advantage of nature. He learns to coexist peacefully with the natural world and to acknowledge the divinity inherent in all living things, including plants and animals.

The Atharva Veda's Vedic Hymn to the Earth, "*Mata Bhumi Putroham Prithivyah*," corresponds to "Earth is my mother, and I am her son." Mother Earth is honored for all of her natural blessings, but

especially for the plants and herbs she bestows. We ask for her blessings for success in all of our endeavors and the accomplishment of all moral goals. Space, air, fire, water, and earth are the five main elements, or Pancha Mahabhutas, which form the basis of an intricate web of existence. Hinduism links each of the five elements to a particular sense and acknowledges that the human body is made up of and related to these five components.

An essential component of ancient Indian societies was the interplay between culture and ecology. The ancient Indian civilizations were shaped in large part by their interactions with a variety of biological species and their concern for their preservation. Since ancient times, humans have had the ability to change the planet's surface. Over the course of the human race's evolution, civilization has drastically and countless times changed the environment. Using fire, domesticating animals, and implementing early agricultural techniques are the main ways to alter the current environment. Early in human history, a person's environment had a significant impact on their daily activities and way of life. **(B.K. Sharma et.al., 2013)**

2. Accounts from Vedic Literatures

The holy Sanskrit books of Hinduism are called Vedas. Certain academics assert that around the start of the Kali Yuga (3102 BC), the great sage Ved Vyasa compiled and composed the Vedas into written form. The Atharva Veda (Wisdom of the Atharvan Priests), Sama Veda (Wisdom of the Chants), Yajur Veda (Wisdom of the Sacrificial Formulas), and Rig Veda (Wisdom of the Verses) are the Shruti Vedas. The Shruti Vedas were originally composed of four sets of mantras, or Samhitas, each of which was connected to a specific priest or ritualistic element. Over the course of centuries, three distinct types of supplementary literature were appended to every Samhita: the Brahmanas, which contain discussions of rituals, the Aranyakas, which are texts studied in forests, and the Upanishads, which are philosophical writings. **(M.U. Babu et.al. 2015)**

The Vedas exhort humans to maintain, safeguard, nurture, and nourish the environment and natural world, describing the diverse spectrum of flora and wildlife. They recommended a pleasant atmosphere with a sweet breeze, sweet flowing rivers, beneficial plants, sweet day and night, sweetness of earth particles, sweet fruit-bearing trees, beneficial sun, and healthy cows for the benefit of humans and other living things. The need of protecting habitats was highlighted. The idea of afforestation was created to safeguard and enhance forests. **(Sayan B, 2014).**

The prehistoric Hindu scriptures commanded people to preserve the natural world. Hindus have long worshipped domestic and wild animals, and several scriptures, including the Yajur Veda, the Bridha Samiti, the Yajnavalkya Smriti, and the Vishnu Samhita, emphasize the significance of living in harmony with and providing for animals. Many more stories and fables, including those from the Buddhist Jataka and Panchatantra, have focused on India's animals. Many stories from the Panchatantra feature animals as main characters. **(Rabindra K.S. et. al., 2016)**

India has a long history of managing its wildlife. There are animal-loving hymns in the Vedas. In order to best conserve nature, Hinduism has related certain animals with particular Gods or Goddesses. For instance, the python is linked to the god Vishnu, the snake to the god Shiva, the swan to the goddess Saraswati, and the lion to the goddess Durga. This association makes the creatures sacred and protected. Ancient Indians loved, cared for, and even worshipped animals because they understood that they had the right to coexist with humans. In our Pantheon, nearly every God and Goddess is connected to an animal, and the animal is worshipped in a manner akin to that of a deity. Our love and respect for the

animal kingdom is reflected in our crafts, artwork, and folklore. India has a long history of protecting its flora and fauna. A large number of kings and other leaders also took action to save the species. (M. Velmurugan, 2017).

3. Records from post- Vedic period- Manusmriti

It is evident from the post-Vedic Manusmriti that religion has a variety of roles to play in preserving the integrity of the natural world.

Animal domestication and conservation, biodiversity preservation, and vegetarian diets were all deemed important. Manu claimed that animals were harmed by agriculture, particularly by insects and soil-dwelling microorganisms.

He stated that in order to protect biodiversity, fish of all kinds, one-footed animals, village pigs, solitary moving animals, and unknown beasts should all be protected. Carnivorous birds, birds of village habitat, web-footed birds, diving birds that feed on fish, and birds with striking beaks should also all be protected from being killed for food. Maharshi Manu stated that killing of Khara (ass), asva (horse), ustra (camel), mriga (deer), ibha (elephant), aja (goat), ahi (snake), ahisa (buffalo) is a sin. (Priyadarsan S., 2000)

4. Records from Kautilya's Arthashastra

Kautilya's understandings of and concern for all living things, including domestic and wild animals, plants, and flora, is demonstrated in Arthashastra. Injuries against living things had specific penalties and punishments. Directors of forests, supervisors of animal slaughter, superintendents of cattle, horses, elephants, and pastures held special posts. These officials used to control grazing, prevent poaching of wild animals, oversee proper care for domestic animals, protect wildlife, and ensure pet diets were adequate. People were expected to behave appropriately when handling domestic animals. There have occasionally been animal parks on non-agricultural territories, where animals are fully protected. It was forbidden to catch or kill any animals in these sanctuaries. There is a list of protected fish, birds, and animals that exemplifies scientific biodiversity understanding. The village headman was tasked with stopping animal abuse within the village. It had been mentioned in detail how horses, elephants, and cows are trained, cared for, and treated. (Madan M.L., 2021)

In today's world, the environmental concerns outlined in Arthashastra are still highly important. A few concepts that were discussed at the 1972 Stockholm conference on the human environment had a striking resemblance to the precepts of Arthashastra. Even in India, there are striking parallels between the forms and content of Arthashastra and various environmental legislation, such as the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1974, the Forest Conservation Act 1980, and the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972. (L. N. Rangarajan, 1992)

5. Edicts from Emperor Ashoka

When Mauryan emperor Ashoka came to power, the safeguarding of elephants became a vital matter. Asoka made major adjustments to his manner of government in the latter portion of his reign. He adopted Buddhism, gave up the royal hunt, and safeguarded 86 creatures, including numerous birds. In 242 B.C., Ashoka enacted rules to safeguard trees, birds, and animals, which appears to be when India's wildlife protection efforts began. The earliest known codified rule dates back to the third century BC, when King Ashoka passed a regulation prohibiting the killing of specific animal species, including

parrots, ruddy geese, rhinoceroses, and others, in order to preserve the environment and fauna. The greatest and most honourable emperor of India, Ashoka, offered total protection to all living things, including birds and animals. Ashoka cautioned the forest tribes that his patience was finite and that he was aware of his limitations. Enforcing a ban on hunting, fishing, and forest fires was not insurmountable. It's likely that not only did the inhabitants of the woodlands regularly slaughter animals, but also the cultivators. (Niraj K.S., 2022)

The fact that poaching deer in the forest carried a fee of 100 panas, or coins, reserved for the king, indicates that there were indeed rule breakers. According to the fifth pillar decree, "our king killed very few animals." Ashoka's Edicts- "I have enforced the law against killing certain animals and many others, but the greatest righteousness among men come from the exhortation in favour of non-injury to life and abstention from killing living beings". Ashoka exhibited amazing empathy towards nature. Significantly, he restricted the royal palace's use of non-vegetarian meals.

The thing that set him apart from others was that he treated animals outside the borders of his own dominion. Later on in his rule, he outright forbade the killing of some species.

Game laws were introduced by Emperor Ashoka under the heading of Dharmaniyama, often known as the "Law of Piety." Throughout his empire, he forbade the killing of specific bird, fish, and wild animal species as well as all other classes of living things on particular days. The royal proscriptions against slaughter were carefully enforced for all hunters, trappers, bird catchers, and fishers. Perhaps the first official order to preserve animal protection was issued by Emperor Ashoka, who established sanctuaries for wild animals. (M. Velmurugan, 2017).

6. Conclusion

In other parts of the world, sacred groves suffered significant harm as a result of intense industrialization and the ensuing urbanization. However, because Hindu ceremonial practice is open and flexible, customs, the majority of the sacred groves were preserved and can still be found in great numbers all around the nation. We can adhere to the straightforward laws established by our ancestors, who most likely had far superior environmental knowledge than we have. In order for us to have a more stable, pristine, wealthy, and healthy environment in the near future, it is imperative that thorough research be done in order to extract, evaluate, and use the traditional Indian ecological and environmental conservation strategies in today's society.

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