

Vyasa's Ecological Standpoint in the *Mahabharata*: A Recherche Research

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Abstract

From time immemorial, pristine environment has been one of the major sources of inspiration to the poets, dramatists and writers and our scriptures that give divinity to Nature and ask us to conserve it proclaim that God sleeps in the rocks, dreams in the plants, stirs toward wakefulness in the animals, and spreads in mankind the message of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* – 'The Whole Universe is one Family'. The *Mahabharata* written by the great sage Veda Vyasa gives a very detailed view on environment of the then time. Like other Holy Indian scriptures the *Mahabharata* also contains the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance with the ethical treatment of the human beings with the natural world. The epic gives utmost importance to the relationship between human and nature. Like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* covers rough and mild both the aspects of Nature. The importance of forests in Indian epics can be understood from the fact that the epic devotes a book to the forests called the Aranyaka Parva. Several passages of the *BhagavadGita* remind us of universal panentheism and advise us not to try to change the environment but to improve it or wrestle with it and if it seems hostile at times tolerate it. Ayurveda was present and practised in the days of *Mahabharata*. Thus, the *Mahabharata* inspires us even today as it inquires into human nature, human relationships, man's links with Nature, Universe and God and an individual's place within the defined society and indefinable self.

Key words: *Mahabharata*, *BhagavadGita*, environmental conservation, human, nature.

Objectives

The objectives of the present study are

1. to take a minute look on the environment as described in the *Mahabharata*,
2. to elicit information about ways of conservation of environment in those days,
3. to find ways of preserving healthy environment going to past being in the present.
4. To make our global village fit for us by making all aware about the conservation of environment.

Methodology

Love for literature is an evergreen technology to conserve environment. To build an understanding of various dimensions of environment in the era of *Mahabharata* attempts has been made to collect available data both primary and secondary from various sources both living and non-living, online and offline like texts on ecology, various editions on *Mahabharata*, research papers and journal articles published by the learned scholars on the topic of presentation and various websites. Paper has been prepared after careful analysis of those data accordingly.

Full Paper

Environmental conservation is a very strong and powerful message of all literature from the whole of the world. Reverence for Nature and its creations is the unifying ethical principle in almost all religions of India. They have all kept Nature above man. Our natural environment – comprising mountains and hills, rivers and dales, trees and plants – is considered auspicious enough to provide space for meditation. Harmony with the natural world receives strong emphasis as a pervasive element in Indian spiritual beliefs and rituals. Evergreen trees were regarded as symbols of eternal life and to cut them down was to invite the wrath of the Gods. Groves in forests were looked upon as habitations of the Gods. It was under a banyan tree that the Hindu sages sat in a trance seeking enlightenment and it was here that they held discourses and conducted holy rituals. From time immemorial, pristine environment has been one of the major sources of inspiration to the poets, dramatists and writers and our scriptures give divinity to Nature and ask us to conserve it. Since the then time the Hindu scriptures proclaim that God sleeps in the rocks, dreams in the plants, stirs toward wakefulness in the animals, and spreads in mankind the message of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* – 'The Whole Universe is one Family'.

We are subconsciously integrated to our past which is always on its journey. From centuries to centuries we have been constantly travelling and changing ourselves and causing change to our surroundings without knowing it. In course of our eternal journey we carry our environment with us --- we cross through rivers, mountains, face extreme weathers, enchanting beauty of Nature, destructions sent from the sky and the earth, facing and fighting battles and

wars and what not. We are the products of it and we produce it. Our existence is interdependent. It is a fact that writings are the record of our journey. Being conceived by an adivasi fisherman on a riverbank in sylvan surroundings a tale expanded to an epic that is the *Mahabharata*, one of the greatest literary works belonging to India since ancient times. Poets, versifiers, chroniclers, intellectuals, pedants, scholars, dogmatists, liberals, frauds, rural as well as urban bards went on adding to it. This was already anticipated by the dark adivasi poet dwelling on an island with an accommodating sprit and fondly named Veda Vyasa. In the *Mahabharata* that calls itself *itihasa-m-puratanam* we find the reflection of vast history of Indian culture and life-style of the then time. This epic written by the great sage Maharshi Krishna Dwaipaayana Vyasa gives a very detailed view on environment of the then time too --- variety of memories it passed through in its time; environment they carried, created and passed over to us. Like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* covers rough and mild both the aspects of Nature.

Nature or Environment has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. In fact, man is forbidden from exploiting Nature. He is taught to live in harmony with Nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. The rishis (seers) of the past have always had a great respect for Nature. Theirs was not a superstitious primitive theology. They perceived that all material manifestations are a shadow of the spiritual. The *BhagavadGita* advises us not to try to change the environment but to improve it, or wrestle with it and if it seems hostile at times tolerate it. Ecology, the scientific study of interactions of organisms among themselves is an inherent part of a spiritual world view in Hinduism. Indeed from the ecological stand point the *Mahabharata* is a story of how Dharma came to be established as a result of a conflict over social policies in response to on-going environmental/ecological crises. The crises and the social policies implicitly advocated by the two contestants in the Great war of the *Mahabharata*, Pandavas (the miraculously born sons of Pandu) and Kauravas (the natural sons of Dhritarashtra, Pandu's brother named after their common ancestor Kuru) have been identified in some of the episodes of the *Mahabharata*. The Great war of the *Mahabharata* which is traditionally considered as a war to establish the rule of law, a *dharma-yuddha* in which Krishna, revered by modern Hindus as the God Vishnu, befriends and helps the Pandavas; goes through the motions of negotiating a peace deal; ultimately, acts to defeat the Kauravas and both the victors, the Pandavas and the villains, the Kauravas are shown acting in their own self-interest. Pandava's proposals helped their culture survive the crises and became the Dharma for the new age that followed the war and operate to the present day.

Like the *Ramayana* the world of the *Mahabharata* is also blessed with the richness of greenery of Nature. Its sky is clean, weathers perform their journey with their all qualities and remain uninterrupted. Its rivers are full of neat and clean water, the breeze is pure and nourishing and the flow of life around is healthy. In a kingdom where someone dies immature, is criticized. Growing trees, making ponds are considered pious. There is no scarcity of natural fountains, but rich people have artificial fountains near their houses. People love Nature and worship it like God. Elements of Nature have also been attached with the festivals.

But it is not easy to understand the concept of environment in the *Mahabharata* exactly from our today's point of view. In this great epic the Nature is viewed as the extension of the same consciousness. As per Hindu view of life, they all pass through eighty four lac yonis in their different births. Like another great epic of the then time, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* also maintains the concept of the birth from one *yoni* to the other. River Ganga was the wife of Shantanu and mother of Bhishma. All the sons of Pandu were the products of the main elements of Nature. Karna was the son of Surya (the Sun) Yudhisthir of Dharma (Truth) Bhima of Vaayu (Air) Arjun of Indra and from Maadri the second wife of Pandu, conceived her two sons Nakul and Sahdeva from Ashinikumars. Draupadi as well as her brother Dhrishtadyumna were born from the sacrificial fire. There are many such examples where the distinction between the human beings and others looks to be abolished. Not only human beings, but almost all the metals are the products of the discharged semen of Lord Shankar. They are his sons and daughters. Lord Shankar was so much charged by the charming vision of Agni that he could not control his semen and discharged it in the sacrificial alter resulting into birth of Skanda.

Our ancestors learnt to live with five elements of Nature, the earth, water, air, light and cosmos and actually worshipped them in reality and symbolically. We get lots of information about the relationships between man and Nature and the human behaviours and indebtedness towards Nature from the writing in the ancient Indian treaties and literatures like the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. The messages of environmental conservation contained in these literatures are all based on Hindu religious philosophy, the core of which is Non-violence that is, non-injury to both the living as well as non-living creations of Nature such as plants, animals, air, water, land (earth), hill and forest. Undoubtedly, Hinduism has always been an environmentally sensitive philosophy. No religion, perhaps, lays as much emphasis on environmental ethics as Hinduism. It is a universally acknowledged fact that protection and

development of environment is very important for the human race. Like other holy Indian scriptures the *Mahabharata* also contains the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance with the ethical treatment of the human beings with the natural world as it gives utmost importance for the relationship between the human and nature. If we draw our attention to the *Mahabharata* from the point of view of environmental consciousness with regard to the physical five physical elements (Prthvi, Ap, Teja, Vayu and Akasa), there can be found a lot of material regarding it. The epic has given paramount importance to the five great elements and almost reached to the point of conclusion that these elements create environmental consciousness *i.e.* a kind of “Be Aware Of” situation.

The *Mahabharata* can be described as “spiritual Scientist”. Eco-spirituality expresses the spiritual connection that binds human beings with the environment. Environmental consciousness led to purification of mind. The *Mahabharata* has shown that ecology through literature is a strong catalyst for survival of human race and sustenance of dharmic practices. Various trees, fruits and plants have special significance in Hindu ritual. The coconut tree and the fruits are sacred and are offered to God during worship. Mango leaves are used as festoons during pujas and auspicious events. All flowers and leaves of plants are used during worship for pushpa puja and patra puja. The lotus is a sacred flower and plant for Hindus. The banana plant and leaves are used for ornamentation and worship. Hindu religious scripts, stories, and rituals have attempted to drive home the importance of preserving nature through the centuries. Lord Krishna says in the *BhagavadGita* :

patraṁ puṣpaṁ phalaṁ toyāṁ yo me bhaktyā prayachchhati
tadahaṁ bhaktyupahṛitam aśnāmi prayatātmanah | |^(9/26)

“I accept a leaf, flower, fruit or water or whatever is offered with devotion.”

As a depository of Indian ethos the *Mahabharata* embodies the Indian values and code of conduct. The epic is an enormous drama that populates the story drama, pathos and thrills abound. The text teaches important lessons on environment and ethics. Anthropological evidences show that the cow is a long term requirement for a farmer and at best it should not be consumed. Cow is sacred to Humanism due to many reasons chief of which is teachings of Lord Krishna who was raised as a cow-harder. In the *Mahabharata* it is seen that in spite of being born to a royal family he chose himself to be raised in a low-caste cow-herder family. Lord Krishna is also called as Balagopala, the child who protects the cows and Govinda, one who brings satisfaction to the cows. Like Krishna Balarama too stands as counsellor, planner, initiator and finisher with his role developing the plans of cow protection and ploughing. Several passages of the *BhagavadGita* remind us of universal panentheism. The overlord identifies himself with elements of nature like the sun, moon, ocean, mountain, wind and river. In the *BhagavadGita* Lord Krishna says, “I am the Self seated in the heart of all creatures. I am the beginning, the middle and the very end of all beings. All beings have, therefore to be treated alike.”^(10/20) The importance of forests in Indian epics can be understood from the fact that the epic devotes a book to the forests called the Aranyaka Parva (also Vana Parva, Aranya Parva) (The Book of the Forest) which mentions the period of twelve years spent by Pandavas in exile in the forest (aranya).

Last but not the least, the *Mahabharata* is a religious ‘big epic’ of Indian soil and Ayurveda is the ‘mother of all medical science and pride of our soil’. Subject materials related to Ayurveda and various types of medicinal and surgical methods explained in Ayurveda can be seen referred to in the *Mahabharata*. In fact, Ayurveda was present and practised in the *Mahabharata* days. All plants and flowers have medicinal value in the Hindu system of medicine (Ayurveda) brought by the divine medicine man Dhanvantari during Samudramantha Dhanvantari during Samudramantha (churning of oceans). While describing gandhamadhana Vyasa has mentioned multitudes of trees which created a healthy environment.

Thus, it is needless to say that though advancement in Science and Technology has given man power fit for “God”, he can’t be “God” unless he has understanding of environment which consists of the social, historical, political, religious and physical surroundings and conditions. The *Mahabharata*, a melodrama of human event reflects the changing times of socio-politico-cultural-moral upheavals. We may unhesitatingly say that the influences of the *Mahabharata* upon the Indians are tremendous and this great epic of India has been molding the sentiments of the Indian people from time immemorial. Undeniably, the *Mahabharata* inspires us even today as it inquires into human nature, human relationships, man’s links with Nature, Universe and God and an individual’s place within the defined society and indefinable self.

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