

# Women and Environment Conservation

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**E**NVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION is the need of the hour. 'Environment Conservation' is a modern term. It is a systematic process of protecting the environment. It includes the whole system of environment comprising trees, human beings, animals, and every other living being on earth. The aim is to maintain a right balance in the environment and to protect certain species of living beings from total extinction. Biodiversity protection is one of the ultimate aims of conservation. This is possible with the help of science and technology. New methods of conservation are being invented and implemented.

## **Nature Conservation**

Conservation is a huge process because it includes all the organisms and it is based on their relationship with one another. To understand this relationship one needs to see it from a different angle. The perspective of science and technology is also important but with that the empathy of traditional knowledge should be combined. According to Paul Taylor's 'biocentric outlook'<sup>1</sup> the natural world is a system of interdependence. The survival and flourishing of each living being not only depends on the physical environment but also on their relationship with other living beings. 'When one accepts the biocentric outlook, the whole realm of life is understood to exemplify a vast complex of relationships of interdependence' (340).

This relationship was the core value of ancient Indian idea of conservation. The main

focus was on the relationship between all the living beings. The humans were not the centre point of the idea. There was no differentiation or categorization between human beings and other species. It was naturally understood that all the lives are interlinked and the great bond of empathy and respect was established. This idea of conservation was not an imposed idea. It came naturally as love for her children comes naturally to a mother. Traditional knowledge is learned by experience, nurtured and passed from one generation to another. Therefore in the present times environment conservation is a process to protect the environment with the help of scientific, technological, social, and agricultural knowledge. But one thing is missing, that is to understand environment in an environment-centric way. Most of the environment related things are seen in a human-centric way. The ancient Indian way of conserving nature was mainly dependent on understanding nature in its own way. It was also dependent on seeing all the elements of environment as one. The teachings of Vedanta enable us to see this oneness in everything and help us to identify ourselves with nature. Swami Vivekananda said: 'Love everyone as your own self, because the whole universe is one. In injuring another, I am injuring myself; in loving another, I am loving myself.'<sup>2</sup> He says, 'In the lowest worm, as well as in the highest human being, the same divine nature is present' (ibid.).

## **Nature, the Feminine**

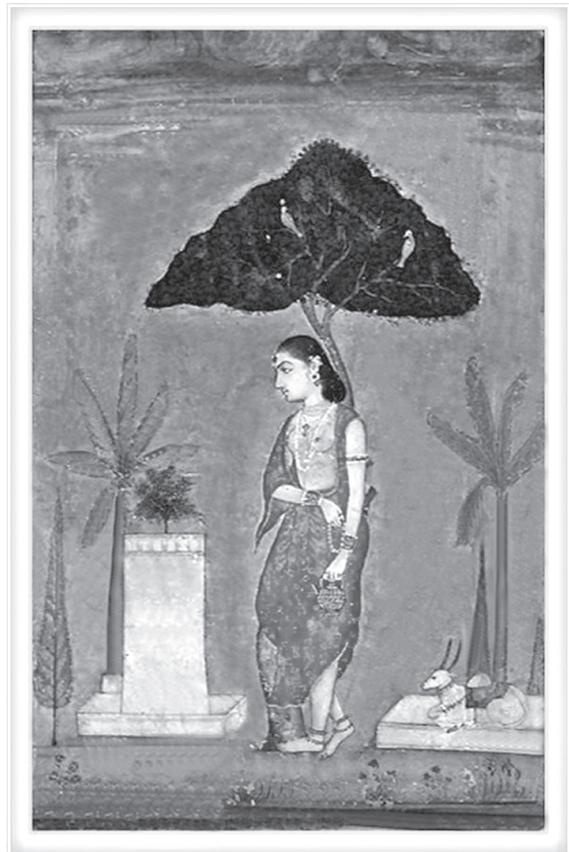
When we think about the ancient Indian

perspective on environment we are compelled to think about the fact that most of the environment related things are expressed in the feminine gender. The rivers, the night, the forest, or the dawn, even the planet in which we are living is described in the feminine gender. The environment itself is called 'Prakriti', which is a feminine term. Natural objects are described as mother, sister, young maiden, and daughter. Thus ancient Indian people tried to make a strong bond with nature.

As women have many roles to play in a family, the environment also has many different roles to act in. When the earth is described as mother, she is the originator of living beings. As the mother protects the baby in her womb, similarly the earth also nurtures the seeds of crops in her soil. The Vedas praise the earth: 'On whom [are] the ocean and the river, the waters; on whom food, ploughings, came into being; on whom quickens this that breathes, that stirs—let that earth set us in first drinking.'<sup>3</sup> 'On whom the circulating waters flow the same, night and day, without failure—let that earth, of many streams yield us milk; then let her sprinkle [us] with splendour' (12.1.9). It is the scripture's way of conveying the message that the soil and the water are sacred. We should never pollute them. We should show the earth the same respect we have for our mother.

In the Atharva Veda the earth is praised in sixty-three mantras: 'Mistress of what is and what is to be' (12.1.1). 'Unoppressedness in the midst of human beings. Whose are the ascents, the advances, the much plain; who bears the herbs of various virtue—let the earth be spread out for us, be prosperous for us' (12.1.2). 'All-bearing, good-holding, firm-standing, gold-breasted, reposer of moving things, bearing the universal fire' (12.1.6). 'What of you, O earth, I dig out, let that quickly grow over, let me not hit your vitals nor your heart, O cleansing one' (12.1.35).

The earth is imagined as the mother and all of us are her children. She never discriminates while giving her precious offerings. Therefore we should not consider the environment as 'the other'. Here a universal bond is established between all parts of the environment and respect for all of them is invoked. The earth is described as mother because of her feminine qualities of patience, kindness, and nourishment. She gives us food, shelter, and everything we need to live, in their purest form. Therefore, we must protect our mother and we must respect her. This thought is found in the 'Prithivi Sukta'. The concept of the motherhood of earth unites us. It contains the message of universal peace and brotherhood. 'Prithivi Sukta' does not belong to any particular country, people, or culture,



and has a universal appeal. The earth belongs to everyone and everyone has the responsibility to protect it. Nature has been portrayed as feminine to show us that all of us, irrespective of gender, should nurture certain qualities in ourselves to understand the environment and protect it from any hazard.

Environment has certain attributes that are similar to women. This connection between environment and femininity is now called 'Eco-feminism'. Eco-feminism connects feminism with ecology and relates the exploitation of women with that of the environment. The connection of nature and women in ancient India is often described as 'spiritual eco-feminism' where the environment is presented in the feminine gender and termed as sacred and divine.

### **Women and Conservation**

Ancient Indian literature was the reflection of the bond between humans and nature, especially between women and nature. Classical literature depicts this bond skilfully. For instance in *Abhijnana-shakuntalam*, the great poet Kalidasa showed how Shakuntala nurtured an intense relationship with the environment—trees, animals, and forest:

She who was not willing to drink first  
if you had not been watered,  
she who, though fond of ornaments,  
would not pick buds out of affection for you,



for whom the occasion of the first awakening  
of your flowers was a festival,  
that Shakuntala leaves for her husband's house,  
given permission by all of you.<sup>4</sup>

The 'Tapovan' was a place where a great bond was established between human beings and nature. Trees were looked upon as brothers, sisters, or relatives: 'Father, I will bid farewell to my tendril-sister, the madhavi-vine' (4.120; 201). In the fourth act is a melancholic scene, where Shakuntala is going to her husband's house after her marriage, leaving her father. Not only her friends and relatives are sad, but also the forest, the trees, and the animals are reflecting their deepest sorrow and pain. Trees are shedding tears in the form of leaves. Moreover, Shakuntala is also feeling the same way for her fellow beings:

The doe lets go its mouthful of darbha grass,  
the peacock is weary of dancing,  
the vines, dropping yellow leaves,  
seem to have trembling limbs (4.120; 201).

Shakuntala also expresses her concern for the pregnant deer: 'Father! When this doe, roaming at the edge of the hut, slow with child, is about to give birth, please send me someone to announce the happy news' (4.129; 203).

In the Rig Veda, the forest goddess Aranyani is presented as the protector of forest. She is the protector of flora and fauna. This concept of representation of forest by a female deity can be seen in most of India's forest region. Indian women, the 'Aranyani Sukta', and forest conservation—these three are interrelated. Since Vedic civilization, women are integral to forest conservation. Aranyani is the representation of that relationship. The village people, particularly older women, always know much more about the forest. Every day, every year, every generation, they would go among the trees, apologize to the goddess of the forest, and say: 'I'm sorry for hurting you, but I know you

understand that I need to take this much fire-wood and this much fodder to look after my family. I promise I will never take more than I absolutely need.’<sup>5</sup>

### **Conservation in the Indian Tradition**

The ‘Aranyani Sukta’ has a universal appeal. It is a depiction of our compassion and care towards the forest and the wild. Though the form of the goddess Aranyani is not seen, her voice is often heard through the voice of the wild: ‘Aranyani, Aranyani, who are, as it were, perishing there, why do you not inquire of the village, does not fear assail you? When the Chichchika [a small bird] replies to the crying Vrisharava [a small animal], Aranyani is exalted, resonant, as with cymbals.’<sup>6</sup> This voice can only be felt if we listen with the much needed compassion and love.

‘Indian forests are a treasure house of food and medicine. Rural people knew how to use the abundantly available nutrients of the forest plants, and the knowledge was handed down to them from generation to generation.’<sup>7</sup> So the involvement of local people is an integral part of forest management. The main threat to forest conservation is our materialistic approach towards the environment. In ancient times women and the forest were both highly respected and deified by people. The position of both women and the forest degraded when society began treating them as mere objects with some utility. The divinity of forest is now confined to mere romanticism. Policies for forest conservation do not reflect this divinity.

The position of both forest and women has gradually degraded. Legal protection of the plants was stipulated by the authors of moral codes. It was the moral responsibility of a ruler to manage forest resources in pursuit of the economic and social welfare of the kingdom.<sup>8</sup> A substantial income is supposed to come to the

state from its forest wealth. In *Manusmriti* it is described that in order to protect forests, gardens, natural, and artificial groves from thieves the king should appoint soldiers, ‘both stationary and patrolling, and spies.’<sup>9</sup>

*Arthashastra* calls for the appointment of a superintendent of forest produce who ‘shall collect timber and other products of forests by employing those who guard productive forests. He shall not only start productive works in forests, but also fix adequate fines and compensations to be levied from those who cause any damage to productive forests except in calamities.’<sup>10</sup> The *Matsya Purana* has a famous saying: ‘One tree is equal to ten sons.’<sup>11</sup>

There is a strong correlation between violation of dharma and destruction of the earth. Presently we can see this violation of dharma everywhere. Women and the environment are suffering because people have become increasingly impatient and cruel. Ancient women were caring towards forest. They could more easily identify themselves with trees. But, sometimes modern women and men are more materialistic and detached from environment. They are attracted to just the products of the environment. Industrialists are using this situation in their favour. We need to change our consumption habits besides strengthening our conservation policies.

All of us are consumers of wildlife in one way or another. We eat wildlife produce and also wear it as clothing and accessories. We consume it as medicine and buy ornaments and souvenirs made from it. We might eat fish and caviar, and wear shoes made from crocodile and snake skin. Hence our consumption habits definitely affect wildlife because the goods we demand come from wildlife rich areas. We wear diamond and sapphire jewellery made from stones mined in areas where gorillas and lemurs



eat diamonds or sapphires. To live we need simple things. This is where we need to lead simple lives and understand the difference between comfort and luxury. Great personalities have taught us how to lead a simple life in harmony with nature. Women have a deeper connection with nature. It is urgent that we realize this bond and act accordingly. More women should participate in environmental conservation and decision making. Only then can we do better environmental conservation. 

live. We carry mobile phones which use coltan, eighty per cent of which comes from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an area that has the Kahuzi Biega National Park, where the Mountain Gorilla lives. Mining of coltan is hazardous to this species of gorilla. Through global consumer culture our everyday lives are bound up with the fate of wildlife that is far from us.

Usually people are not aware of what they are using, what components such equipment may consist, and from where they are procured. Lemurs and other rare species are threatened by sapphire mining in Madagascar. The international market for high quality sapphire is responsible for this. In the words of an environmentalist: 'Conservation organizations need to educate consumers, and those customers need to demand that the sapphires they buy are produced under the highest ethical and environmental standards.'<sup>12</sup>

We can see that our lifestyle, habits of buying things, and unlimited craving for more is the main problem. Before blaming others we should control our behaviour. If there is no wildlife, no biodiversity, no food, how can we survive? We cannot

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