

Perspectives of Nature and Environment in Dharmaśāstra Tradition

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ABSTRACT

The ancient Indian texts have recorded many novel ideas regarding nature and environment as they were much more concerned about its preservation and nourishment. Various authors have described this fact in their composition through the ages. In this paper, an attempt is made to examine views regarding the nature and environment and rules prescribed by the *Dharmaśāstra* (*Dhaśā.*) writers. It is also highlighted here, how the ancient scriptures, particularly the *Dhaśā.* can help us to solve the present environmental crisis.

KEYWORDS: *Dharmaśāstra, śauca, saṁskāra, narka, śrauta, Smārta, prāṇāyāma, pūjā*

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INTRODUCTION

Man has dominated over the environment and started exploiting rather destroying the natural resources in the name of modernization. As the rapid growth in different fields of industrial production is seen to provide better way of living, side by side it is also observed that man has started losing the scriptural values and norms of society. Rather, they are neglecting this aspect of our ethics and trying to follow some new system as a result it harms the society to a great extent. As we know that a healthy body requires a healthy mind and the vice-versa, so also the society will be healthy when the environment is well-balanced. This fact was realized by our ancient thinkers who observed that without nature, human existence is impossible. They also thought how the environment be made free from pollutions and for that they laid down certain principles.

Human beings and continuity

When we look towards the *Dhaśā.* Texts, we come across with certain descriptions regarding man's position among the rest of the creation. As man requires other things for his supposed to protect and preserve them. The importance of creation is that, human being is one such being among other beings which God created in this Universe¹. Hence, Man clearly goes even to the root of the creative process and says-God created first water desiring to create many from his body and placed his seed² and mentions that water is the basis or source of creation.

The *Dhaśā* writers knew very well that if man has to live here, he has to live in harmony with the existence of other

beings, creatures, things, and environment as they also are part and parcel of this vast universe. Manu hence duly acknowledges the major components of environment such as rivers, mountains oceans, plain sand uneven lands.³ With all these, natural forces like air, fire and water etc. became the primary concern of human beings. Accordingly, the *Dharmaśāstrakāras* felt the importance of the nature and environment along with various species of beings and made certain observation.

Cleanliness

The *Dharmaśāstrakāras* mainly pointed out that for any kind of human activity, the sense of cleanliness is very important and unavoidable, Therefore, we see in all *Dhaśā.* texts, *śauca* is the prime concept. In the beginning of any *saṁskāra*, one should be very much cleaned, the place should be cleaned, the articles used should also be cleaned so on and so forth. This cleanliness not only helps to have a healthy body and mind but also a healthy environment. For example, as we clean ourselves by taking bath in pure water, eat and drink etc., the place is cleaned by *gomaya*. Frequently, this is referred in almost every work on *Dhaśā.* Even today, cowdung is used for cleaning purpose in the beginning of religious performances. Not only this, cow dung was used for better fertility of the soil and even now in country sides this is being used.

Let us see some more examples. After the cleaning of hand and mouth etc., one should sit for taking food. It is not the view of the ancients but also of the modern doctors. So also

ācamana sipping of water before and after taking food is equally important. One should take fresh food and they knew that rotten food if taken, due to germs it creates different diseases in the body (cf. *Manusmṛti* MS. 2.53 & 56). The water we take also should be pure to drink otherwise it may create diseases. So, Manu says - the water which satisfies our thirst should not be dirty and muddy and it should not have lost the natural smell and colour it possesses (cf. MS. 5.128).

Factors of Pollution

Regarding pollution, the ancient Hindu writers were very much aware and they observed that man causes harm to the purity of water are air by polluting them. So they said that one should not pass urine, stool, cough in water. Anything what is mixed with this polluting ob-(cf. MS.4.56) as they cause impurity in water. This is observed very much even today that most of the rivers are polluted due to this and industrial waste water. As there was no such arrangements like underground drainage and closed toilets in the houses, pollution was certainly an alarming problem for them. So for the passing of human excreta, urine etc., It should be done far from the living place and water. Hence, Manu has rightly pointed out that no one should pass urine on a road, on ashes, in a cow-herd, on a cultivated land, in water, an altar of bricks, on a mountain, on the ruins (remains) of a temple, nor even on an ant-hill, nor in holes inhabited by living creatures, nor on approaching the bank of a river and nor on the top of the mountain.⁴

Those who passes urine against a fire the sun, the Moon, in water, against a Brahmin, a cow or the wind, his intellect goes away (cf. MS. 4.52). These are definitely the way to prevent pollutions and not to allow for further deterioration. This has been accepted by most of the *Smṛti* writers.

Even the remedy has been given by them. Pollution which arises due to the disposal of human beings and animals, it is removed by Sun, Moon and Air. The water polluted on roads and touched by dogs and crows could be cured by air. Not only this, when human beings are having certain diseases caused by pollution, their body is cleansed and cured by soil and water. And when the water of the well or pond is polluted, by burning of fire it could be cured (cf. *Viṣṇusmṛti* 23. 38-46). To the extent that which directions one should pass explains that in day time one should pass urine facing the north and at night facing the south.⁵

Slaughtering of birds and animals and their solution

Man and environment are interrelated in such a way that it cannot be separated at any point of time. The nature and environment contribute to our healthy living and why should we pollute them and destroy them? Even causing harm to any animal was regarded as a cruel act and one should be punished for that. In *Viṣṇusmṛti* (*viṣm.*) regarding the killing of animals it is said that if one kills an animal for a *śrauta* or *Smārta* sacrifice, there is no sin since this is not regarded as a slaughter.⁶ Because Brahman created them and we sacrificing them for him as it will bring prosperity and merit to the whole Universe. But, in another case, it is described that if someone kills animals other than the above cause, he shall suffer in this world and in the world hereafter.⁷ Manu says- he who gives permission to kill animals or kills the animals, he who sells the slaughtered animal, he who cooks the animal and he who distributes and eats cooked animal food are regarded as murderers. All those who engage them

in such activities are liable to be punished (cf. MS.5.51). Those who cause harm to innoxious beings with an intention to get pleasure, never finds happiness neither living nor dead. And those who want to have meat or flesh by killing other beings, living creatures and animals never get heavenly bliss, so let them leave the eating habit and there by killing (cf. MS.5.45,48). The eating of animal flesh is a sin and does not allow to attain bliss and peace in life. *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* further tells that such a wicked person who kills animals has to live in the *narka* 'hell' for the days equal to the number of hairs on the body of that animal (cf. *Acāra*.v.180).

Punishment

The ancient social-thinkers and law-makers did not forget to record the punishments to those who violate the social norms towards animals and birds at that time. Either it came as the punishment by a king or through different expiations considering the degree of the killing. The *Vism* (cf. 51.63) prescribes that the king should punish those who kill animals other than that of the sacrificial purpose. Many more texts agree to this punishment. The killing of an ass, of a horse, of a camel, of a deer, of an elephant, of a goat, of a sheep, of a snake, and of a buffalo should be regarded as degrading the man to the level of a mixed caste (*saṅkara*)⁸. Even killing of insects, worms and birds were treated as sins and expiations were prescribed. The MS. Prescribes different expiations for people who kill either domestic or non-domestic animal.⁹ He has not even left out those who kill birds of both the type. He gives the following. Those who kill a cat, a mongoose, a frog, a dog, an iguana, a blue jay, an owl and crow he is supposed to perform the expiation of the type of a *śūdra*-killer. If one kills a boar, he has to give a jarful of clarified butter, for *tittri* bird (partridge), a *droṇa* of sesamum, for a parrot, a two-year old calf, and for killing a horse, a three-year-old calf. After killing a swan, a *balākā*, a crane, a peacock, a monkey, a falcon or a vulture one should give a cow to a Brahmin. If one kills a horse, one has to give a garment, for one elephant, five black bulls, on killing a goat and sheep, an ox and for a hare one year old calf.

Not only that even if one kills a carnivorous animal, one should give a milk cow and a heifer for killing those are non-carnivorous and a *kṛṣṇala* of gold (of definite weight) for killing a camel. There is also a general type of rules of expiation for killing animals. One does not know the distinction when one kills animals having boneless, one is purified by the (*prāṇāyāma*) control of breath. So, the killing of boneless animal is not taken seriously here as one can easily do *prāṇāyāma*. The present verse (cf. 11.142) seems to refer to the killing of small insects and worms which are boneless. As a matter of fact, there is no explanation for the killing of boneless animals as it is reflected here. This shows that Manu and others wanted to warn the society not to cause harm or injury or violence to other beings and even to smaller ones.

Plants and trees

We get a clear picture of the attitudes and feelings of the *Dhāśa* writers towards the plants and trees from different texts. They knew the plants and trees also are very close to them in this cosmos. Their importance cannot be neglected at any cost. So, the need to preserve the nature and environment, as they contribute so much to a healthy life. They knew that plants and trees have life and they give us

pure oxygen. The respiration of plants and trees is certainly a new, rather modern concept and the science tells us not to sleep under a tree at night. This was known to the ancient thinkers as Manu says- one should not sleep during night under a tree.¹⁰

Another point is to be noted here that the ancient law-writers also possessed some knowledge of botany as they classify the trees and plants both and creepers on the ground that those bearing fruits and flowers and those without that.¹¹ So, they wanted to know about them as they contribute much for a balanced environment. The various descriptions regarding *gulma*, *guccha*, *vrkṣa*, *kāṇḍa*, *puṣpa* and *phala* can very well be examined by interested scholars.

Causing harm and punishment

Regarding the preservation of the environment, the *Dhāśā* texts prescribed punishments for those who cut trees. The *Va Dhasu*.¹² prescribed that the king should punish those who cut the trees having fruits and flowers. However, only for agricultural purpose there is no such restriction.

It is much clear that when the leaves of various trees are being taken and offered to different deities, one naturally causes harm to the tree or plant since they have life. So, at the beginning, one is supposed to bow down before a plant and then take the leaves. These cases are not treated as causing any harm to plants or trees as it involves the holy offering in a *pūjā*.

The *Viṣm*. prescribes that those who cut trees and destroy plants they are liable for punishments. The king should punish them.¹³ Manu in his text prescribes various measures to curb the destruction of plants, herbs and trees around us. One has to be punished if any one cuts the plants and trees unnecessarily. Those who cut down trees that are not dry for the purpose of fuel are to undergo expiation.¹⁴ He who cuts fruit-bearing trees, shrubs, creepers, branches of trees or flowering plants he should recite one hundred *Ṛkmantras*.¹⁵ To this, the commentator Medhatithi rightly points out that, the above may be prescribed for *Brahmins* (twice-borns), but what about others those who commit that? The answer he gives is that, for a *Śūdra*, the expiation shall be fasting for two or three days.

Another instance of the same is given that if one unnecessarily cuts plants grown by cultivation, or those that itself grow in the forest he shall attend on the cow for one day remaining on milk only.¹⁶ By following that, one removes the sin arising cutting the trees and plants either intentionally or unintentionally.

In the *MS*. And other *Dhāśā*. text also, the importance is given to dig wells and lakes in order to have sufficient water for the agricultural purpose.¹⁷ when there is shortage of water. The knowledge of nature and its use, using better seeds reflect their concern for a better pattern of agriculture. In the *dāna* contexts, we get various references to tree plantation, developing gardens and groves etc. This helped them to encourage others those cannot give in terms of wealth. One may look to the later digest texts like *caturvargacintāmaṇi* and *Vīramitrodāya* for the present context. This clearly shows their concern for nature and environment and not to allow damage to our society.

Maintaining balance

There are many more scriptural evidences to show that they were very much aware of the environmental crisis caused by different agents and made certain principles so that there will be proper balance between man and environment. They also prescribed prohibitory expiations are seen prescribed by the *Dhāśā*. writers, it is well-known that in order to protect the plants, trees, birds, animals both domestic and wild type from the mouth of destruction and killing. It was a method of preservation of various species of trees, birds and animals which we need for ourselves. They realized that to protect the plants and trees from destruction means to protect the environment. The main intention was that the people will have a sense of fear, so that they will not destroy the nature and environment around us.

The present crisis in the environment by polluting air, caused by vehicles is a serious matter for everybody. There are very less trees rather no trees in some part of our planet and how we will get fresh air? The cutting of trees are more in number than that of plantation. The water is polluted by the industrial waste. There is a huge erosion of soil from different landslides as there are no trees. As the modern society uses very modern articles, their waste are dumped which cause hazards to our health because that cause air pollution. The waste materials are neither burnt regularly nor destroyed. This is a serious threat to our present environmental crisis. The main cause is that one does not think of other beings and the killing has increased rapidly as a result we have lost so many rare species of birds and animals.

What can be best done in this regard? Hence, the need of rules and regulations come into picture, we have to make strict rules and punishments for those who cause harm to others by polluting the environment. In that way, we have not achieved much. But our ancient *Dharmaśāstrakāras* are very much aware of polluting agents and accordingly made provisions for that. Hence, the punishments and expiations. The expiations were not simply mentioned as one may feel today that it was a different type altogether from punishment and practiced. Though the expiatory process was a type of prescriptions, the point was very clear to the people. By doing so, the *Dhāśā*. Writers emphasized on a kind of discipline which the human being has to follow in order to reach his goal and his life free from imbalances that cause disappointment and disturbances. This has certainly a positive approach towards the present environmental crisis.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, we may conclude the following that first, as man is related to the vast creation among other beings, he has no right to interfere with the other components and constituents of nature. He has no right to destroy them. This was realised by the ancient- thinkers and law-givers and made provisions to build an eco-friendly environment. Second, the attitude towards nature and environment in *Dhāśā*. has no parallel in any other ancient religion or philosophy of other countries. We have certainly a rich tradition which gives a solid background of the value based society. If those values are followed and the norms applied to the environmental problems now, we can very well solve the problem in a better manner.

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- [2] *Ibid.*,1.8.
- [3] *saritaḥ sāgarān saian samani viṣamāni ca, ibid.*, 1.24.
- [4] *Ibid.*, 4.45-47.
- [5] *mūtroccāra samutsargam divā kuryādudaṅmukhaḥ dakṣiṇābhimukho rātrau sandhyayośca tathā divā. Ibid.*, 4.50.
- [6] *yajñārtham paśavo sṛṣṭāḥ svayameva svayambhuva, yajño/hibūtyai sarvasya tasmadyajñe vadho vadhaḥ. Vism*, 5.61.
- [7] *vṛthā paśughnaḥ prāpnoti pretya ceha ca niskritim. Ibid.*,
- [8] *saṅkarikaraṇam jñeyam mīnāhi-mahiṣasya ca, MS.11.68*
- [9] *Ibid.*, 11.137-141
- [10] *rātrau ca vṛksamūlāni durataḥ parivarjayet, Ibid.*, 4.73
- [11] In this regard, one may see MS 1.46-48
- [12] *vaśiṣṭha Dharma- Sūtra*,19.11-12.
- [13] *vism*.51.63
- [14] *indhanārtham aśuṣkāṇām drūmāṇām avapātananam ātmārtham cakriyārambho ninditānnādanam tathā S.11.64*
- [15] *Cf. MS.* 11.142.
- [16] *kṛṣṭajānām ausadhīnām jātānām ca svayaṁ vane/vrthāmbhe nugacched gām dinam ekaṁ payovrataḥ//*
- [17] *Cf. Ibid.*, 8.248, 269, 9.281.

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