

Environmental Concerns (The Vedas)-A Lesson in Ancient Indian History

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Abstract

This article is related to the environmental concerns in the Vedas -the ancient Indian treasure of knowledge which is believed to be source of best possible human ideals. Vedas are said to be revealed to Indian seers. The thoughts presented in the Vedas are also perceived to be wholesome and all time respectable. The man-nature relationship has been very closely reflected in these texts. The modes of behaviour have also been presented. These texts are theoretical and practical reflections of Indian seers. The author has very clearly and precisely presented the environmental concerns reflected in the Vedas in this article.

Key-words: *Environmental Concerns, The Vedas.*

“The men of firm intention bind that, the men who are well-versed in the knowledge of Atharva-veda bind that, which the men of anatomy and medicine being strong **breakthrough the fort of disease-creating things..**” Atharva-veda; Book X. VI.20

What has Man done to the only planet where he must live? In the infinite, ever-changing Cosmos the space where alone life could be sustained is Mother Earth. But look around and find out what we have done to it. In the name of competitive Nationhood, scientific advancement and material progress we have come to a stage where holy or otherwise rivers are reduced to becoming sewer lines, where potable water is scarce, lush green fresh fruits are heavy with pesticides and the air that we inhale carries unsustainable anti-life germs and killing particles. Life as such has become a misery because we have no time either to reflect on the nature and purpose of life we live; or, to thank the Lord for His wonderful creation which is meant to be kept reasonably peaceful, friendly and pollution-free.

Having destroyed the Nature all around and making even the glaciers melt, we are very soon going to clutter up the outer space too because of our unlimited greed for both lucre and power; and a strong desire for killing instantly our potential enemies. When not engaged in killing each other or plotting to conquer the weak, Man is frightfully busy discovering other solar systems that could be populated by the power -hungry. We refuse to accept the reality that the only enemy Man has is Man himself.

There are a few questions that one needs to answer. Do we ever think that the only Reality is change and the only certainty: Death? Time was when there was no Earth and there will again be Time when our solar system itself will have disappeared along with the Earth. But so long as we live, it is our bounden duty to protect it so that Life could be sustained. Still we, the asharful maqhlucat (the best of the Beings), have not learnt enough to live in peace and remain in harmony with the world around us.

There is hardly anything new in what I am saying. Long before the civilizations grew and Man learnt to conquer Nature there were men and women who taught us to live in harmony with the Nature

around us and treat all (both animate and inanimate) with respect and learn to be humble before the Unknown. Long before others came to realize the value of environment the ancient Indians had perhaps intuitively learnt that trouble comes from unknown sources and therefore it is better to take care of the immediate neighborhood first. This neighborhood is environment. By definition 'environment' means "The aggregate of circumstances surrounding organisms or group of organisms including the social and cultural conditions affecting the nature of individuals or community." Hence, the following prayer:

"May the five types of men, born to offer (the butter of) affection, and eager to perform the sacrifice, be pleased with my discharge of the function as an invoker; *may the earth preserve us from the troubles that come from heaven.*

"May you, spinning the thread of divine knowledge, follow the splendid light of the illuminator, and protect the pathways well...

"The great river of life-conflicts flows alone, be alert; rise up, cross over, my friends; here let us leave those who are wretched and hence unhappy; may we cross over (this river) to secure auspicious boons." Rig-Veda X.54.5-7

The present write-up is addressed to those who have a very vague idea of how knowledgeable the ancient Vedic society was. In whatever form the Vedas have survived, they tell us enough about the Nature, Life and the concerns of the ancient Indian. Since I have for my write-up selected the Vedas therefore I have not presented an analysis of the archaeological findings of Indus Valley Civilization to show how the urban populace of those times had evolved amazingly the most sophisticated and scientific urban water supply system and also the sewage system. But the Vedic society is no less careful and knowledgeable about the world around them. The Vedic Seers appear to have foreseen the catastrophe Man was likely to invite for his own destruction, therefore they had forewarned against indulging in such acts.

Experience informs us that mere knowledge is rarely enough to prevent trouble, and it is also true that we rarely listen to reason until the catastrophe takes over and we are left with nothing else but regret. In the modern high-tech world people have little time and even less patience to go deeper into any text even when it might have enormous value for one's guidance. Indeed, it is no longer considered necessary to read scriptures or may be it is even considered un-intellectual, if not *infra dig*, to try discovering any particular sense in reading them. Perhaps it is the job of a priest who is put paid for his services to read the same out in bits and pieces on ceremonial occasions.

Indian historians took considerable time to discover the meaning and the message that the Vedas carry and that too only when the Western scholars had started using the Vedas and their text for purposes other than those of mere scholarship. One must admit that it is the West that initially led the path back to our glorious past and furnished insight to find for us gems that had been lying hidden in the obscure homes of the neglected but venerable scholars.

The Vedas are correctly regarded as repositories of all knowledge and the acme of ancient Indian wisdom. In them lie the seeds (at times the finished products) of our modern knowledge. One should accept the Vedas as ancient historical documents (and not mere liturgies), wherein the ancients have left for us nuggets of their foresight to take guidance from. But it would be foolish to try finding principles of steam engine or airplanes in them. I have no quarrel with a scholar who interprets the Vedas differently. For me they are the foundation of knowledge and are not necessarily the finished products, true for all times to come. Yet there is hardly any branch of knowledge viz. music, astronomy, physics, modern mathematics, yoga, alternate medicine, philosophical systems, literature, grammar and prosody etc. whose foundations cannot be traced back to them. Few know that the binary system, which gave birth to computer sciences,

has its origins in the Vedas. The yoga and the alternate medicine, which is the current rage in the West, and therefore in the East too, have also been the gifts of the Vedas. True, we have outgrown many of the discoveries and findings. But there are numerous areas of knowledge where we are still groping in the dark alongside the ancients. In some ways the contemporary astrophysics has brought us back to the Nasdiya sukta to compare notes. Be that as it may, we share with them the desire to learn and discover.

I propose to cite here relevant hymns on each of the manifested contemporary environmental concerns from the text of the Vedas and show that the ancient Indians had the knowledge of the environmental problems but their future progenies alas did not have the 'Will' to act. The message is clear. If we failed once there is still time to mend our ways. This is the sole purpose of learning History. Historians as interpreters of facts are capable of delivering subtle messages to the posterity.

Although all the four Vedas were supposed to have appeared simultaneously the common belief is that the Rig-Veda came first. It is in this Veda that we see *vayu* or air being regarded as the soul of human beings. They realized the value of the air and talked of its curative powers. "Lord *vayu* is the soul and spirit of Indra and all other gods and living beings and is the seed of the world. Such a divine lord flows according to its own Will. We can only hear it but cannot see it. We bow before this lord *Vayu*." Rig-Veda X.168.4. Additionally they came to realize that air had its own curative powers. Therefore, they prayed, "O *Vayu*! Bring your medicines and do away with all the ailments here because you are the only one who is full of curative powers." In the history of Indian philosophy there is discussion about the evolution of the concept of *Atma* or the source of life, which was at different point in time was variously identified with air, water, food etc. Even now we call soul as *prana vayu*. Since they rated all these elements as divine and identified with soul or life itself, it was unimaginable for them to have even thought of polluting any one of these.

In terms of Western history this concern dates back to 1962 when Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*. This book focused on the enormity of ecological damage brought about by industrial waste being dumped into the rivers. Then came the papers by Barbara Ward and Rene Dubois in 1972 "Only One Earth." Their project had been funded by UNDP. It brought to the fore the conflict between biosphere of Man's inheritance and the techno-sphere of His creation. Since then the voices of concern for the safe upkeep of this creation have not been silenced. The concern clearly is about keeping the environment livable. The express desire is for striking a balance between material prosperity and human sustenance. The 'Club of Rome' —funded by independent scientists, too has shown similar concerns and proposed almost identical schemes to sustain life on this planet

The 'Limits to Growth,' brought out in 1972, reported research findings based on a data collected at global scale on a mathematical model. The model predicted Doom and stated that continued resource shortages, crowding, pollution, famines etc will soon control current trends in population growth, natural resource exploitation and capital investment in agriculture. As expected the model was heavily criticized. Since then the problem remains where it was seen for the first time. As of today the problem is whether or not based on non-renewable resources is it possible to maintain a certain rate of sustained growth forever? We should remember that when academic concerns cross over the bounds of polite drawing room discussions, it is no longer possible to remain ideologically neutral. Today's dialogue about global warming has entered precisely the same stage as I mentioned above. We are no longer ideologically neutral.

The Indian concern for the environment is as old as our civilization's origins. But did the ancients understand the meaning of the term 'environment'? Perhaps they did. But then what exactly do we mean by this term. "The environment (after all) is sum total of water, air and land, inter-relationships among themselves

and also with the human beings, other living organisms and property.” This definition appears in the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.

In modern terminology if one wanted to have a comprehensive knowledge of the subject the minimum requirement is to go through several stages of a variety of subject areas; such as Botany, Zoology, Microbiology, Genetics, Geology, Bio-chemistry, Bio-technology, Oceanography, Atmospheric science, Statistics etc. It would appear as though we hold the view that if the ancients spoke on all these subjects with equal command like us then alone they would be considered knowledgeable enough for our good failing which, let us keep them under covers for a few recluses and the lonely.

Let us examine the Vedas on all these counts all the same.

For instance, see in this quote a desire that we have in common with the ancients, i.e. work so that one could meet one's physical needs and an airy house to live in. “I resort to agriculture and craft for removing poverty and ministering happiness to all. May I feel joy in domestic life! May our houses be sufficiently commodious, airy, fully comfortable, and built in the middle of an open space” Yajurveda, chapter 1.11

For an obvious reason an individual engaged in agriculture knows the value of timely and plentiful rain. In this sense we have not outgrown this basic requirement.

“Let us see with respect that earth, which loves the rains and is looked after by the clouds, in which is grown food grains like rice and barley, and where live all the four castes, and the other five types of people. Atharvaveda/12/1/42

As one reads the Vedas one is made to realize that the ancients suffered from the same weaknesses as we do, but they prayed to get rid of them through sustained efforts called the yagnas. For them,” the yagna keeps away the thieves, refines and sweetens the speech, is productive of foodstuffs and is the bestower of knowledge and vigor.” Yajurveda, ch.1.16

We see in the following few pages the type of knowledge they had of the Nature and its capacities. They desired that we do not transgress boundaries and remain within acceptable limits to avoid catastrophe. See here their knowledge about fire / heat.

“I describe the special features of Fire. It takes every type of matter forward. It softens iron ore etc. it burns everything. It emits light. It beautifies. It is set up before everything else. It performs many functions and is used during many activities. It is an instrument for attracting attention, give and take and for food preparation. Fire creates inside earth all varieties of gems and ores like gold, silver, iron, and diamonds.” Rig-veda1/1

In the following quote the reader could see that they had knowledge of Vaastu and were fully acquainted with the powers of the Nature's Elements.

“O husband and wife! We want to construct a house for you; that is fully lighted by the strong rays of the Sun. For Sun is strong and capable of giving happiness yielding light”. Rig-veda/1/155/6

About the Solar energy they say:

“Learn carefully about the presence of Vaishwanar Fire in us all. The same Agni/ Fire is located in all worlds and the same is working through Vaishwanar *Sun doing all kinds of work such as producing light, growth of plants etc.* Rig-Veda/ 1/98/1

Here is a hymn from Yajurveda (XXXIII.92), which talks of the functions of Sun: “Just as the Sun, set in Heaven, the benefactor of humanity, increasing in power on Earth, ripens medicines and grows food, removes darkness of night with his lustre, shines forth, so should ye dispel ignorance...”.

“Just as lightning destroys insects that disturb sleep and spread disease, let us enjoy all the fruits and favors granted to us by the Sun and the wind and thereby let us feel safe against Nature gods.” Rig-Veda/ 10/36/4

Or read their knowledge about the relationship of Sun with the formation of clouds and feeding rivers with plentiful water:

“O Gurudev! Just as strong, light-emitting Sun attracts the waters of these rivers toward itself and having done so distributes them through clouds all over again on the land, so do you attract students and instruct them with éclat”. Rig 7/34/10

The Seers therefore enjoin us to learn to “Respect that special Guru who is powered by education, who is familiar with the work of Agni, Vaayu, Sun and other deities and knows all about the names, places and the births. You should respect those Gurus too who understand the speed of air and the lightening and who can tell you the exceptional ways to Salvation. “Rig-veda/7/ 58/ 1

They offer a lesson or two in human psychology for compassion toward one and all.

“May that intellect which is inside me let that be full of feelings of welfare for others! It is because of that the industrious, reflective and patient men work to gain both knowledge and the riches, and undertake to give charity, worship gods and work for mutual benefit, and that which is located in all living beings.” Yajurveda/ 34/2

“Even as all spokes in a wheel are joined together in the center may my intellect also carry feelings of welfare for others because of the coming in of knowledge from the Rigveda, the proper methods of actions from the Yajurveda and of worship from the Samveda “ Yajurveda 34/ 5

We could see their concern for the education of all, more particularly of girls. At least in this sense they were far ahead of us. While discussing methods of instruction, the Seers also talk of how to practice writing. Incidentally, the following lines throw light on a historically disputed domain. Few historians dispute the fact that the Vedic people had no script and therefore writing was unknown to them. I suppose it is possible to resolve that contentious issue whether or not the ancients knew how to write, what to write and the lack or otherwise of a script. The fact that they knew about the written word can be established even otherwise. For instance, on the demerits of gambling the Rigveda (10/ 34 / 2) says that the faces of the dice carried written symbols. At another place, viz. Rig-veda10/62/7 there is a mention that the ears of the cows have the number 8 written on them.

Additionally, these lines also show that education of girls was common and prevalent. In their opinion female teachers are better teachers than their male counterparts.

“O girl students! Just as intelligent teachers introduce writing and reading of letters with the help of fingers, you should know lady teachers who know innumerable subjects and possess immeasurable learning. For your balanced development such an intelligent teacher will herself make all arrangements” Rig-veda/ 7/15/9

In case this is not enough to establish their knowledge about language / linguistics then see elsewhere they mention that mere reading is never enough because people learn at a pace which differs from individual to individual:

“A few do not understand the secret of the language even after reading it, a few others do not realize the reality even after listening to it but there are others for whom the language presents her true form as does a beautiful bedecked bride reveals herself before her husband.” Rigveda 10/ 71/4

"Language through its own symbols explains the wide expanse of knowledge and is able to illumine all intelligence fully. Therefore, one should put language to good use." Rig-veda 1/3/13/

We see here the functions of language per se and its symbolic nature. It perhaps holds a lesson or two for the modern day linguists.

What did the Rigveda say about the nature of the universe (cosmology) / astrophysics that we live in? We may have advanced in varied ways but about the origin of the galaxies, stars and planets we are still nowhere being close to certainty. Even today we have not gone beyond the realm of conjectures in numerous academic areas such as astrophysics for instance; then how could we expect the ancients to be definitive about their knowledge, who definitely had no access to the present day scientific instruments, which make a Hawking so knowledgeable and relatively certain? According to the ancients the universe consisted of three regions— the earth (prithvi), heaven (dyauh), and the intermediate world or the antariksha. We are familiar with the term earth, but not with dyauh because this is one term which was employed to denote the vault of the sky, which is the place where the sun and the stars shine. They had an idea that there was an invisible world too where these stars and the sun retired after their daily ritual/ duty was over.

The Rigvedic hymns sporadically mention the abodes of padam of Agni, (1.72.2), Indra Pusan (1.162,2), Vishnu (1, 154,6) etc. In reality they appear to think that the universe consisted of four regions. The name of the fourth region is Satya Lok. Read Rg. (1.35.2), which says "Causing immortal and mortal to rest, God Savitr returned (to his abode) by way of the Satya Lok (i.e. invisible) world; he comes on the golden chariot observing the worlds." The Satya Lok was considered the abode of Brahma, the Creator. The later day developments have only added certain more Loks to the list. Only as a passing reference I mention here the seven loks that the Puranas talk about. From Bhu-lok upwards are Bhuvan Lok, Svar-Lok, Mahar Lok, Jan Lok, Tapo-Lok and the Satya Lok. Similarly, by that time the idea of seven 'nether' worlds had also grown and developed. They were called atal, sutal, vital, and patal etc. according to the depths at which different unwanted creatures supposedly lived.

Numerous references are made daily to the unusually wonderful understanding these Rishis had of the origin of the Creation, especially to the scientificity of their observations. For instance, the subject of Creation interested these Rishis immensely. The Rigveda talks of it in the Hymn 10/ 129/7 and Yajurveda in 10/ 129/ 3 etc. It does amaze one to imagine that even without the benefit of any of the modern equipments and gadgets they could be, at times, so precise in their observations. For instance, the Vedas hold the view that in the beginning there was nothing but darkness. It was the state of Nature, which could drown all without a trace. That extensive Nature, which is hidden in the Cause form, the same with the shining glory of the divine God appears in the physical form as its effect. Compare this piece with the findings of modern astrophysics and take your own decision.

Read the Nasdiya Sukta and feel surprised at the latent modernity of reasoning and logic:

"What was the state during the Pralaya or total annihilation? Who is the Creator? What was the principal cause of Creation and what its principal instrument? During Pralaya there was no evil or good nor did the atoms fill the horizons? What was shrouded and by what? Who was the Protector? Did only the deep seas exist?

There was no death nor was there any life. Even the day and night had not taken birth. The lone Creator breathed without any life breath by his own will. Nothing superior existed beyond him.

In that dark existed, the un-manifested Nature like seamless water. Everything looked small before Him. Nature gradually manifested itself because of the austerities of the Supreme Being." Rig-Veda 10/ 129 i-v

A Desire was superimposed on what existed in the form of inner self during Pralaya. The seers could thus realize that the Good was latent in the Evil even as the light is in the dark. The creation could arise out of the un-manifested Nature. Slanted bright rays spread out of these three – God, Soul and the Nature. What was below was as amazing as the one who could serve as receptacles for that amazing semen above. If one went deep into the description of the origins of the Creation itself, we start dealing with the eternal questions of Philosophy whose definitive answers continue to elude us. Our understanding of the Reality is as remote today as it was when the ancients were trying to grapple with it.

In a hymn the seer says, "One thing that is beyond this world is matter, the material cause of this world, another thing even beyond this is the soul which is remote in rareness and not within reach of ordinary man." (Atharvaveda, Book V, XI. VI)

Interestingly, the Atharvaveda carries a section on the Vaastusastra—the art and science of architecture. Here are a number of hymns that talk of God being present in a three-room school or the eight-room school. One cannot imagine of a three rooms or eight rooms building without proper measurements and even building materials.

"Like the animal heat in the body and foetus in the womb I, the master of the house live in the houses, which are built with two wings, four wings, six wings, eight wings, and are constructed in appropriate measurement" Atharvaveda / 9/3/21

In fact, so great is the insistence on the proper measurement of the size of the rooms and the accurate mixture of mortar that one could seriously start thinking about the presence of the ubiquitous modern day contractor in that society too. One would be amazed to read about their express desire to make lighting arrangements that are necessary for a large room. The mention is of electricity and also of teaching aids. I must say I have failed to be specific because I do not know whether this light is not lightning and teaching aids something very elementary and highly primitive in character. These hymns in question are: Atharvaveda 9/ 3/1 and 9/3/11 and many more. The fact that God is present in all these classes of the school does suggest that schooling was carried on in built enclosures and not under the shade of the trees or in the hermitages only.

It is not quite correct that all gurus had equal competence. But in terms of their insistence on respect there is near unanimity. The impression that we have is that the Guru did not charge fees. May be he did not do so in the beginning. But no student could leave the residence of the teacher without paying the appropriate amount in terms of tuition fees/ guru-dakshina.

On pupil's return home the following hymn specifically desires that the teacher should make some relaxation in the strict rules that one followed.

"O the best Guru! The restrictions that you had imposed on us regarding food, sensuality and travel, please relax them now. O luminous with knowledge, Gurudev! We shall continue to observe all the pure vratas, and shall continue studying with unbroken regimen, the Vedas. Yajur. / 12/12

In fact, there is a mention that at the time of leaving the Ashram the student does say that he would like to know about the time one could leave the school and when does he invite the teacher home. Atharvaveda (11/5/26) describes how glorious the student looks on the completion of his education.

But here is one mantra wherein the teacher refuses to be admired by a student whom he regards to be a fool.

"O you, my pupil! Who shuns practice in learning, even if you are ready for employment immediately, I do not like your praise because you cannot repeat properly even those lessons that have already been

taught. You, who are famous amongst fools, I do not like any praise from you. I would much prefer you becoming properly educated and earn reputation than what you are Right now. That would enhance my reputation." Rig-Veda/ 7/22/5

"The teachers who teach at the lower levels and offer expertise may they improve and grow. Those that teach at the middle and higher stages let them too progress and develop. The teachers of Som-knowledge let them too progress. Let all these teachers teach us the techniques and methods of prayer and the yagnas. Besides these teachers, those who know the techniques of the yagnas and are aware of the way the Universe was created and are free from crookedness and have long lives may they too impart us instruction." Rig-Veda/ 10/15/1.

Let us now take an example of their concern for keeping rivers free from pollution:

"O God! Cast aside the vile man who pollutes rivers..." says the Yajurveda XXX, 8 and the hymn goes on to command," Nishad's son, hankering after libidinous women; a degraded arrogant, friend of person harmful like a tiger; an uneducated person attached to low dancing and singing women; the demented, given to the application of magical rites; an untrustworthy person who befriends the serpents and fools, a non-gambler, who creates unnecessary excitement; a woman who creates split among the Pishachas, the thorny woman who favors the freebooters."

Look at the way they desire the trees to be protected," He, who rears the trees by erecting barriers round them...conduces to our happiness." Yajurveda XX.45

Read Yajurveda and see how in chapter XXII, hymns after hymns are talking of protecting oneself against the physical ailments and blesses those that help preserve environment. Hymn 5 in the chapter admires one who "protects beautiful objects like the Earth." The next hymn is even more explicit "Make the best use of fire. Take medicines. Derive joy from drinking water. Enjoy well the warmth and light of the Sun. Have knowledge of air and vital breaths. Perform yagna in fire."

They knew that "The Sun moves singly and alone. The moon is brought to life again. Fire is the remedy of cold. Earth is the vast field for production." Yajurveda Ch.XXIII. 46

To the questions:" What luster is like the Sun's light? What lake is equal to the Sea? What is more spacious than the Earth? What things beyond measure?" The reply is given in the next hymn. Yajurveda Ch.XXIII. 48 / "God is luster like the sun. Heaven is a flood to match the sea. Sun is vaster than the Earth. Beyond all measure is speech." It is difficult to find an answer better than this one from a Seer.

I now cite from Yajurveda ChapterXXIV wherein the Seers talk of birds and animals and their attributes and characteristics and where to locate them. The loving manner in which they talk of these birds and animals merely underlines the fact that they knew their beans about environment and wished to protect it. These hymns begin from number 11 and continue up to 40. There is not a single animal known to a veterinarian practitioner that is not described along with its typical characteristics. Read for instance, hymn 18 "The animals of peace-loving parents are smoke-colored and of brownish hue. The animals of parents who sit in assembly for propitiating yagnas are brown and smoky-looking." The next hymn commands" O men, bring into use the pre-mentioned agricultural animals" then comes the knowledge of the experts. "An expert in the knowledge of animals finds Kapinjalas in spring, Sparrows in summer; Partridges in the Rains; Quails in Autumn, Kakras in Winter and Vikaras in the Dewy season." The rishis describe also the uses of each animal according to the class of people for whom they are intended. It is not possible to reproduce all the hymns to show the knowledge of the Seers or their desire to preserve all these species but it is perhaps enough if we appreciate their knowledge and perception from the following hymn (40):

“Rhinceros serves all warriors in preparing their shield; the Black Dog, the long-eared Ass. The Hyenas are used for protection against the demons; the Boar is for the king who wants to tear asunder his enemies; the Lion is swift like air; the Chameleon, the Pippaka, the Vultures are used for making arrows; the spotted Antelope is used for preparing mrigshalas for the learned people.”

The next chapter (XXV) opens with a hymn for protecting all objects worthy of desire. Read this hymn in totality, “Learn for the teeth the act of biting; from the gums the method of protection; from tooth-sockets the way of pounding; sharpness from the fangs. Use the tongue tip for a learned utterance; learn the act of uprooting from the tongue; the use of palate by crying slowly; chew with both the jaws; drink water with the mouth. Acquire the knowledge of oozing semen from testicles. Recognize the Aadityas from the beard; know the path from the eyebrows; know the sun and earth from their motion; lightening from the pupils of the eyes. Observe celibacy for the protection of the semen; acquire knowledge through high character. Objects worth acceptance are worthy of preservation. Objects after one’s desire should not be resisted. Don’t show disrespect to your own men. Friends and relation should be fostered.”

Whatever else may have been the motive of these Seers in commanding Man to worship God and perform yagnas, one thing is certain. They knew well their environment and wished to protect it.

What better could one offer in terms their understanding of the Nature’s cycle around them than the following quote:

“When the clouds cultivate the earth with its waters; then winds are blown (for the rain to fall), lightening is struck, vegetation comes to life and grows, sky pours the raindrops and the earth then gets ready for the welfare of the world.” Rig-Veda 5/83/4

We should remember that they wrote an entire Veda on the science of medicine called the Atharva-veda. They went into details how a herb has to be identified and then they describe its properties for different ailments. They achieved and left behind knowledge of an almost fully developed medical science, which is currently proving to be helpful to the entire Mankind. Therefore they had prayed, “O God, create a man of iron determination for the implementation of a vow.....a forest guard for the protection of a forest.. and drive away a forest burner contemplating the destruction of jungles.” Yajurveda, Ch. XXX. 19 one might as well put a question: “What else does a forest officer do other than protecting a forest and preserving wild animals and their habitat under his charge?” In the same chapter of the Yajur-Veda in hymn 10 the seer prays “O God create a physician for purifying our body with the eradication of disease; an astronomer for the advancement of knowledge; an inquisitive man full of cravings for knowledge; an extra-inquisitive man for desire of extra-knowledge; and a question-solver for establishing moral law.” If read closely one can see the hymn telling us that all knowledge is located in curiosity and for extra knowledge one has to put in extra effort.

“O Spiritual juice (of wisdom and devotion) thou hast been prepared carefully for the soul. Let diseases stay afar together with the fiends of lust, anger, greed, pride and jealousy.” Samaveda Hymn. 561 This hymn clearly states that “those who are double-tongued or crooked, cannot take delight of drinking thee.” It would be clear to the reader that disease or physical ailment is as good as being crooked or a doublespeak. It is much better to avoid them both. It is only then that “those who are of calm nature like the rays of the moon, (will) be full of strength and wealth of wisdom.”

I cite here a hymn (Samaveda, 1837) that has been interpreted differently by two scholars of eminence viz. Satvalekar and Griffiths, whose two versions are given below. Meanwhile the reader should also realize that it is quite common for the hymns being interpreted differently by different scholars. This is precisely

what I wrote in the beginning about the difficulty of agreeing on the common meaning of a hymn or even of a single word. The Vedas can be read for different purposes, as they are capable of giving more messages than one can imagine. In fact, it is impossible to understand everything they say and why do they say what they actually say. Majority of the Indians regard them as revealed books because no human being could have been so wise as to cover all themes and subjects, besides all aspects of human life as they do. Probably for this reason alone that F. Max Muller wrote the following:

“What can be more tedious than the Veda, and yet, what can be more interesting, if once we know that it is the first word spoken by the Aryan man?”

The Veda has a two-fold interest: it belongs to the history of world and to the history of India. As long as man continues to take interest in the history of his race, and as long as we collect in libraries and museums the relics of the former ages, the first place in that long row of books which contain the records of the Aryan branch of mankind, will belong forever to the Rigveda.”

So much for the glory of the Vedas! This praise comes from a man who learned Sanskrit and translated the Vedas only to make Hindus Christians.

Be that as it may, the first interpretation is of Satvalekar:

1. “O Omnipresent Divine Mother! Thou art source of happiness. So endow us with strength and pleasure of great vision (realization) of truth.”
2. Griffith’s translation:- “Yea waters, ye bring health and bliss; so help ye bring health and bliss ye us to energy that we may look on great delight.”

It is interesting to note that this hymn has something to do with water. In the next hymn the reason why water is mentioned here is made clear. Because water is known to be the source of life as it is one of the five elements or tatva that constitute life and at the same time water is also a cure for numerous diseases even if used singly.

The hymn number 1638 from Samaveda has two meanings. One is an external meaning and the other internal. The external meaning is as follows: “O water! Let your most prosperous juice be ministered to us in this world with the readiness that affectionate mothers apply to their infants.”

The other interpretation is spiritual in character.” O Divine Mother! May thy most auspicious juice of bliss be ministered to us in this world with the readiness that affectionate mothers supply to their infants.”

The next hymn talks of water being used for removing diseases. It is significant that the use of water as a medicine was known to them and therefore it becomes even more meaningful that this water has to be clean or pollution free. Look at it from an ordinary person’s point of view by the time the Seers came to writing the Atharvaveda they had learnt through experimentations as well as through empirical evidence the curative value of the usages of both herbs and lotions including water. This Veda is a living testimony to the fact that science grows only empirically. And the seeds of modern laboratories were first grown in the Vedas. This is one History lesson that one should learn from reading the Vedas.

To end the write-up I cite the Rig-Veda X.1/ 46

“Lady of the Forest! Lady of the Forest!

Who seems to vanish from sight in the distance?

Why do you never come to the Village?

Surely you are not afraid of us.

When the grasshopper replies
To the lowing of the cattle,
As though to the sound of tinkling bells,
The lady of the Forest makes merry.
Sometime you catch a glimpse of her, and think it is cattle grazing
Or a house, far away
And at the evening you hear the Lady of the Forest
Like the distant sound of moving wagons.
Her voice is as the sound of man calling his cattle.
Or as the crash of a felled tree,
If you stay in the forest in the evening
You will hear her like a far voice of crying.
But the Lady of the Forest will not slay
Unless an enemy draws near
She eats the sweet wild fruits
And then she rests wherever she will
Now I have praised the Lady of the Forest
Who is perfumed with balm and fragrant
Who is well-fed although she tills not
The mother of all things of the wild.

And what greater respect could Man show towards all the elements of Mother Nature than the prayer from Yajurveda, 36/17 for peace or recite the Shanti mantra, which desires that 'let there be peace in the heaven, horizons—where the Earth and sky meet, peace in the vegetation, peace on earth, peace in everything' etc., and this prayer is always sung at the end of any holy anushthan or ceremony and this Shanti mantra may be accepted as the ultimate for any environmentalist.

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