

Bhūmisūkta of Atharvaveda; vision of seers on Environment and Sustainable Development

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Introduction:-

Environment and ecology:-

The environmental science and ecology are relatively modern disciplines of scientific study under which environment and its constituents are studied with all microscopic precision. As scientific methodology requires, environmental science and ecology are firmly established in 20th century with experimentation based on cause and effect theory. But ample references as well as germination of environment related original ideas can be seen in the Vedic and ancient Sanskrit literature.

Long before ecology got its due emphasis at the hand of environmentalists, at global and UN level, the ancient thinkers had already provided insightful thought to the generations on environmental ethos. It is said that the word 'ecology' is coined formed from the Greek word "Oikos", meaning 'home' and "logus" conveying knowledge; whereas the word "Oikos" has its root in Vedic word "Okas/okah¹" which means "home" and in all such sense the word had been used in vedic texts.

In Indian subcontinent, for the first time, the British Government enacted the Forest Act, 1865, further revised it in 1878 and once again new Forest Policy of 1884 was formulated and finally the Forest Act of 1927 was enacted which contained all major provisions of the earlier Act, and British could acquire forestland, village forest and other "Common Property" resources through this act. In Independent India, the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 has been very comprehensively drafted and included various salient features of the British Act 1927; but evidently absent even in the preamble to mention the vision of our Seers. The Act of 1986 defines the environment thus: 'Environment includes water, air and land and the inter-relationship which exists among and between water, air and land and human beings, other living creatures, plants, micro organisms and property². From the above legally valid definition, it can be gleaned that that environment consists of two components namely living organisms and non-living factors. The living organisms can be divided into three groups - those living mainly on land, in water and in air. The non-living materials of the environment are land, air, water, property etc.

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Sustainable Development:-

The word 'sustain' comes from Latin, *Sustenere*, meaning to hold or keep elevated. In the context of resources and the environment, *to sustain would literally mean to maintain or prolong the productive use of resources and the integrity of the resource base*. The term was first introduced in a 1987 report commissioned by the United Nations, "*Our Common Future*". This is also known as Brundtland Report, since the organizing committee that produced the report was chaired by the then Prime Minister of Norway Gro Harlem Brundtland. Upon comprehensive discussion and after the publication of "*Our Common Future*", the phrase "sustainable development" entered the widely accepted usage in that sense both by educationists, environmentalists and by Government agencies. It was employed, at the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 and has subsequently appeared in other ecological Summit meetings organized by the UN, such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002.

Earth Summit held at Rio de Janeiro developed 27 principles for sustainable development. The author of the report argued that the use of the earth's resources by the present generation was unsustainable. Sustainable development was defined as the use of renewable resources to promote economic growth, the protection of animal species and biodiversity, and the commitment to maintaining clear air, water and land. Other acceptable definition on sustainable development is to enhance the human's living conditions on earth in a better way while using water resources, air for breathing, landscape for living or industrial purpose as well as impacting minimum on living creatures, plants, microorganism and surrounding properties of the universe.

The essence of sustainable development is centered on finding an appropriate equilibrium between economic growth with optimum momentum during the present times and preservation of natural resources for the requirement of future.

Environment, Sustainable Development and Climate Change:-

In the last few decades modern scientists brought to our attention, the environmental problems such as deforestation, unstable climate, tsunami, El Niño, acid rain, ozone depletion, green house effect, desertification, species loss, fertilization of agriculture etc. which have not only deeply threatened the well being of all creatures including Humans but their survival itself. It is the foremost important to address the global environmental problems by regenerating the consciousness of all stake holders on pollutant industries, drinking water crises, shortage of nutrients, deforestation, chemically oriented agricultural activities, use of pesticides, loss of Ozone molecules termed as depletion of the Ozone layer etc.

In recent times, recognizing the importance of controlling the temperature to arrest the climatic change, UN organized 21st session of “Conference of the Parties” (CoP-21) in Paris, France during 30 November to 11 December 2015 wherein various resolutions were adopted by signatory parties. The session called “deep reductions in global emissions will be required in order to achieve the ultimate objective of the Convention and emphasizing the need for urgency in addressing climate change, acknowledging that climate change is a **common concern of humankind**”³. The article 7 of “Conference of the Parties” acknowledges that adaptation action should follow a country-driven.... and should be based on and guided by the best available science and, as appropriate, **traditional knowledge, knowledge of indigenous peoples and local knowledge systems**”.

In this context, Bhūmisūkta of the Atharvaveda and vision of seers therein are very important and timely as such being traditional knowledge, knowledge of indigenous seers to view the globe as one family and Earth as Mother, *Parjanya* as Father; ourselves as off springs of the Earth⁴. This traditional knowledge will surely help to reduce the climate change as ultimately the human behavior in all activities is the prime cause for climate change.

Vision of Seers on Environment and Sustainable Development:-

The vedic prayers of seers contain the vision on the Environment and Sustainable Development with resonance of scientific ideas endowed with insightful thoughts. The Bhūmisūkta of the Atharvaveda in the mantra “Pṛthivīṃ Viśvadhāyaṣaṃ Dhṛtamācchāvādāmasi” made direct reference to the notion of sustainable development⁵. Vedic seers urge the people to pursue the path of dedication and submission⁶ resulting in to sustainable activity, which may fructify in to sustainable development for the welfare of society. It said that with utmost care one has to grow from the earth as per its capacity to grow agricultural products not by over production⁷. The seer visualizes thus - Nikāmē Nikāmē Naḥ Parjanyaō Varṣatu Phalinyō Na Ōṣadhayaḥ Pacyantāṃ Yōgākṣēmō Naḥ Kalpatām⁸. Vedic seers laid importance on universal well-being and sustainable development for the progress of all. Later times, in the Mahabharata, the concept of sustainable development has been explained by Sage Vyasa with an example of a honey bee in its characteristic style of collecting honey without harming to the soft petals of flowers⁹ Another verse of the Mahabharata says, “resource generation should be done with great care like a florist who picks and chooses from blossom to blossom with utmost care in a garden; not like a charcoal maker who uproots the plant, mindlessly fells and burns down young trees for the production of wood charcoal¹⁰.

The seers have pointed out the role of Prakṛti, generation of food from Prakṛti and contentment through such food. The food itself is described as Brahman¹¹ by vedic seers. For seers, sun and moon are gods; air, water and sky are also gods. Earth, river and fire are visible gods in the physical form. According to Vedic ideology, Pañcabhūtās are the basic elements of the universe upon which the climate change is depending and clear understanding would reduce the causes for climate change. The universe is composed of five basic elements such as 1. Earth or land, 2. Water, 3. Fire or Tejas, 4. Air, and 5. Ether, which are building blocks of environment and further climate change.

Bhūmisūkta of Atharvaveda:-

The first sūkta of twelfth Kāṇḍa in the Atharvaveda is known as Bhūmisūkta or also as Pṛthvisūkta as it has Bhūmi or Pṛthvi as its Goddess and Atharva as its Ṛṣi. The sūkta has 63 *mantras*, starting from “Satyaṃ Bṛhad Ṛtaṃ Ugram” ending with “Śriyā Mā Dhēhi Bhūtyām”. The mantras in the sūkta narrate, explain, philosophize, personify and splendorize the earth as Goddess personified and note reverence of the Ṛṣi to the earth by understanding her exquisite qualities. In doing so, mantras contain highly relevant prayers to enkindle the passion for the earth in the hearts of common man in this scientific era of universal exploitation of earth without any feeling.

Bhūmisūkta of Atharvaveda and “Conference of the Parties-21” in Paris:-

The United Nations 21st session of “Conference of the Parties” has emphasized the “traditional knowledge, knowledge of indigenous people and local knowledge systems”, hence the Bhūmisūkta qualifies to be traditional knowledge transmitted in Gurukulas through the line of Gurus to Shishyas in many parts of India. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India has brought out an e-book “Parampara India’s Culture of Climate Friendly Sustainable Practices¹²” containing various practices in India so far to stop the climate change and the Indian messages resonant with ideas of various Vedic and Sanskrit texts. During the session, Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India while launching at the India Pavilion, has spoken elaborately on the vision of the Bhūmisūkta of Atharvaveda and Indian knowledge heritage therein and its importance in view of global concerns on climate change.

Discussion on the general contents of The Bhūmisūkta:-

The Bhūmisūkta in Atharvaveda is the oldest yet the most suggestive invocation on the environmental aspects discussed in an elaborate manner in any literary work of the world. In it, Atharvā, the seer declares the enduring filial love to

the Mother Earth: “Mātā Bhūmiḥ Putrōhaṃ Prthivyāḥ Parjanyaḥ Pitā Sa Naḥ Pipartu”. ‘Earth is my mother, I am her son, parjanya my father’ Mother Earth is renowned for all her natural bounties and particularly for her gifts of food, herbs and rich vegetation¹³. Blessings of mother earth are sought for prosperity in all endeavors and fulfillment of aspirations of humankind¹⁴. The vast and inexhaustible physical resources are also illustrated to acknowledge the superiority and dependence of all beings on earth¹⁵. A thanks- giving is unto earth for all varieties of food we grow and secure from her¹⁶ for our sustenance. All four directions are requested to be pleasant for the happiness of beings so that the relation not only with other beings but with whole universe will be harmonious¹⁷. A laudable pledge is made that humankind shall secure the earth against all environmental trespass and shall never let her be oppressed by any¹⁸. The seasonal variations and its climatic dynamics severely impact the earth and people as well. Therefore a prayer is made to the earth to protect us from those impacts by absorbing such he effect¹⁹. A prayer is made to the earth to secure vital breath of life, long span of life and happy life till we become old and grown in ripened age²⁰. A soul-stirring emotional prayer is sung in one of the mantras for the preservation and conservation of hills, snow-clad mountains, and all brown, black and red earth, unhurt, un-smitten, unwounded, unbroken and well defended by Indra²¹.

The Vedic seers regarded the Earth as ‘sacred space’ to fulfill the holy endeavors, aspirations of humankind and for the practice of self-control and accountability. The earth is sustained by truth, formidable right, consecration, penance, Brahman and sacrifice²². The Vedic vision of the earth is filled with the prayer for the purity of environment, enhancing the spiritual side of the environment and sustaining the highest moral order on the earth.

Select Mantras of Bhūmisūkta of Atharvaveda and insight therein on sustainable development:-

Now, we consider a few *mantras* for insightful thought of Atharva Ṛṣi in the Bhūmisūkta of Atharvaveda.

In the first mantra, 6 factors which hold the earth in its proper order and also the capacity of the earth to hold whole mass of population in ever expanding space of 14 Slokas have been eulogized.

सत्यं बृहदृतमुग्रं दीक्षा तपो ब्रह्मयज्ञः पृथिवीं धारयन्ति।

सा नो भूतस्य भव्यस्य पत्न्युरुं लोकं पृथिवी नः कृणोतु।²³

The third mantra narrates about the water bodies like ocean (samudra) river (sindhu) etc, to be pleasant to sustain the life and breath on earth; and also due to them earth is the place for the production of food and drinks for beings.

यस्यां समुद्र उत सिन्धुरापो यस्यामन्नं कृष्टयः सम्बभूवुः।

यस्यामिदं जिन्वति प्राणदेजत्सा नो भूमिः पूर्वपेये दधातु॥²⁴

In the sixth mantra, the words “Viśvambharā” “Vasudhānī” “Pratiṣṭhā” “Hiraṇyavakṣā” “Jagato Nivēśanī” are pregnant with very deep layers of meaning. “Viśvambharā” signifies the capacity of the earth to hold and sustain the universe; “Vasudhānī” denotes the non-exhaustiveness of resources to be used for human welfare; “Pratiṣṭhā” and “Jagato Nivēśanī” convey as well as confirm the earth as a safest place for dwelling in this universe for generations.; “Hiraṇyavakṣā” is endowed with suggestive power, therefore the knowledge of Ṛṣis about the earth on its unlimited resources such as gems, minerals etc are also brought out.

विश्वम्भरा वसुधानी प्रतिष्ठा हिरण्यवक्षा जगतो निवेशनी।

वैश्वानरं बिभ्रती भूमिरग्निमिन्द्र ऋषभा द्रविणे नो दधातु॥²⁵

The similar idea is also resonant in twenty-sixth mantra; it is said -

शिला भूमिरश्मा पांसुः सा भूमिः संधृता धृता।

तस्यै हिरण्यवक्षसे पृथिव्या अकरं नमः॥²⁶

Rock, earth (Bhūmi), stone and dust, these all together are held to the earth (Bhūmi); the earth is endowed with Gold-chest (suvarṇa-vakṣas) and I pay my homage to her.

The forty-fourth mantra notes about the treasures of jewels (maṇai) hidden in the earth's womb and it is prayed for such abundant wealth to be bestowed by earth on us.

निधिं बिभ्रती बहुधा गुहा वसु मणिं हिरण्यं पृथिवी ददातु मे।

वसूनि नो वसुधा रासमाना देवी दधातु सुमनस्यमाना॥²⁷

The earth is personified as a milking cow, that itself projects the idea of sustainable development to draw wealth; that is said thus -

जनं बिभ्रती बहुधा विवाचसं नानाधर्माणं पृथिवी यथौकसम्।

सहस्रं धारा द्रविणस्य मे दुहां ध्रुवेव धेनुरनपस्फुरन्ती॥²⁸

Let the earth, as a place to endure the people of different faiths, customs and speeches living in many homes yield us thousand streams of wealth like a steady (dhruva) unresisting milking-cow.

Those who are born of earth, the mortals grow on the earth itself; the earth is a place of sustained place of living for bipeds, quadrupeds and for races of men; the rising sun spreads his immortal rays of light to fill all with energy and life force.

त्वज्जातास्त्वयि चरन्ति मर्त्यास्त्वं बिभर्षि द्विपदस्त्वं चतुष्पदः।

तवेमे पृथिवि पञ्चमानवा येभ्यो ज्योतिरमृतं मर्त्येभ्य उद्यन्तसूर्यो रश्मिभिरातनोति।²⁹

The regenerative capacity of the earth due to the impact of rain on the natural food production was a prime concern for Atharva - Ṛṣi. Hence such fundamental nature of the earth is noted in the mantra. The sentence “Bhūmyai Parjanyaapatnyai Namōstu Varṣamēdasē ” is notable for the depth of meaning; as food, rice and barley are the stuff for the five races on the earth. The makes it categorically known thus-

यस्यामन्नं त्रीहियवौ यस्याम् इमाः पञ्चकृष्टयः।

भूम्यै पर्जन्यपत्न्यै नमोस्तु वर्षमेदसे।³⁰

यस्यां कृष्णमारुणं च संहिते अहोरात्रे विहिते भूम्यामधि।

वर्षेण भूमिः पृथिवी वृतावृता सा नो दधातु भद्रया प्रिये धामनि धामनि।³¹

The phrase “Viśvasvaṃ Mātaramōṣadhīnām”³² ‘all-producing mother of herbs’ conveys the rare inherent curative qualities in the medicinal plants grown on the earth.

Atharva-Ṛṣi knew about the adverse impact of climate due to imbalance of seasons like rainy season, autumn, winter, cool season, spring and space and time factors like years, let day-and-night. On them, an emotional prayer is made to earth to keep all in perfect order so that these would be pleasant and harmonious.

ग्रीष्मस्ते भूमे वर्षाणि शरद्धेमन्तः शिशिरे वसन्तः।

ऋतवस्ते विहिता हायनीरहोरात्रे पृथिवि नो दुहाताम्।³³

We consider the earth a great place for dwelling for humans; ‘Bhūmē Mātarni Dhēhi Bhadrāyā Supraṭiṣṭhitām’³⁴ ‘the seers had also proclaimed the earth as the pleasant place of dwelling;

ये ग्रामा यदरण्यं याः सभाः अधि भूम्याम्।

ये संग्रामाः समितयस्तेषु चारु वदेम ते।³⁵

What villages, what forests, what assemblies of learned people and all places upon the earth, what hosts, what gatherings-in all of them we speak about the pleasant nature of the earth.

Conclusion:-

By going through the above quotations it is very clear that great seer Atharvā has dealt with the multi-dimensional aspects of ecology and sustainable aspects of earth in the Bhūmisūkta of Atharvaveda. According to the sūkta, earth is the individual, multi-dimensional, collective, ethical and spiritual entity having the dimensions of environment in its fold. Earth is not mere physical entity, she is more than that; spirituality is galore in her as mother earth. Therefore, Vedic view of earth, ecology and environment transcend all dimensions such as visible, non-visible and spiritual power of nature. The Vedic view as manifested in texts, particularly the conception of earth in the Bhūmisūkta of Atharvaveda perceived this aspect and prescribed a built-in spiritual, intellectual and cultural thesis for an environment-friendly value system to adhere to and follow a balanced lifestyle to sustain the growth pattern required even in this complex time of omnipresent-economics.

The Bhūmisūkta of Atharvaveda declares that all aspects and phenomena of nature are united in a perfect co-ordination and are bound in a physical as well as metaphysical form knit together. The charters of 21st Conference of Parties adopted are to be implemented with the sense of spirituality, ethics and spiritual consideration, if the UN effort on climate change is to be sustained. Under the umbrella of spirituality, global people are to play a noteworthy role in creating and sustaining a passion for ecological balance, equilibrium, sustenance of earth qualities as thought of by Atharva-Rṣi in the Bhūmisūkta.

References:-

1. Janaṃ Bibhratī Bahudhā Vivācasam Nānādharmāṇaṃ Pṛthivī Yathaukasam | Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-45
2. Section 2(a) of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
3. Preamble to the Resolutions of “Conference of the Parties”.
4. Mātā Bhūmiḥ Putrōhaṃ Pṛthivyāḥ Parjanyaḥ Pitā Sa Naḥ Pipartu | Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-12

5. Yasyāṃ Vṛkṣā Vānaspatyā Dhruvāstiṣṭhanti Viśvahā|

PrṥhvīmViśvadhāyasam dhṛutāmacchāvadāmasi|| Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-27

On whom stand always fixed the trees, the forest trees (vanaspatya), the all supporting earth that is held (together) do we address.

6. Tēna Tyaktēna Bhuñjīta Īśāvāsyam| - 1-1

7. Kālaprāptamupādadyānnārthaṃ Rājā Prasūcayēt|

Ahanyāhani Sanduhyanmahīm Gāmiva Buddhimān|| Mahābhāratam, Śānti - 32

8. Yajurveda 22.22; “let the clouds shower upon us rain waters in plenty and at the right times; may our plants grow in great abundance, laden with ripening fruits; may we win enough treasures not acquired so far, and conserve the resources properly for the well being of all of us”.

9. Yathā Madhu Samādattē Rakṣan Puṣpāṇi Ṣaṭpadaḥ|

Tadvadarthān Manuṣyēbhya Adadyādavihiṃsayā||

Mahābhāratam, Udyōga parva - 34-17

10. Puṣpaṃ Puṣpaṃ Vicinīta Mūlacchedaṃ Na Kārayet|

Mālākāra Ivārāme na yathāṅgarakarakḥ|| Mahābhāratam, Udyōga parva - 34-18

11. Annaṃ Brahmēti Vyajānāt| Tāttirīyē

12. www.moef.gov.in/sites/default/files/ebook_parampara_2016_EBOOK.html

13. Nānāvīryā Ōṣadhīryā Babharti Prṥhvī Naḥ Prathatāṃ Rādhyatāṃ Naḥ|

Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-2

14. Sā Nō Bhūmirvadhayādvardhamānā| Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-13

15. Śilā Bhūmiraśmā Pāṃśuḥ Sā Bhūmiḥ Sandhṛtā Dhṛtā|

Tasyai Hiranyavakṣase Prṥhivyā Akaram Namaḥ|| Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-26

Yasyāṃ Vṛkṣā Vānaspatyā Dhruvāstiṣṭhanti Viśvahā|

PrṥhvīmViśvadhāyasam dhṛutāmacchāvadāmasi|| Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-27

Nidhiṃ Bibharti Bahudhā Guhā Vasu Maṇiṃ Hiranyaṃ Prṥhivī Dadātu Mē|

Vasūni Nō Vasudā Rāsamānā Dēvī Dadhātu Sumanasyamānā||

Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-44

Janam Bibhrati Bahudhā Vivācasam Nānādharmāṇam Pṛthivī Yathaukasam |
Sahasram Dhārā Draviṇasya Mē Duhām Dhruvēva Dhēnuranapasphurantī ||

Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-45

16. Yasyāmanam Vrīhiyavau Yasyām Imām Pañcakṛṣṭayah |

Bhūmyai Parjanyaapatnyai Namōstu Varṣamēdasē ||

Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-42

17. Yasyām Catasraḥ Pṛthivyā Yasyāmanam Kṛṣṭayassambabhūvuḥ |

Yā Bibharti Bahudhā Prāṇadējatsānō Bhūmirgōṣvapyannē Dadhātu ||

Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-4

18. Yē Grāmā Yadaranyām Yāḥ Sabhāḥ Adhi Bhūmyām |

Yē Saṅgrāmāḥ Samitayastēṣu Cāru Vadēma Tē || Bhūmisūkta, Atharva - 12-1-56

Yadvadāmi Madhuvattadvadāmi Yadiḥkṣē Tadvadanti Mā |

Tviṣīmānasmi Jūtimānavānyāhanmi Dōdhataḥ || Bhūmisūkta, Atharva-12-1-56

19. Grīṣmastē Bhūmē Varṣāni Śaraddhēmantaḥ Śísirē Vasantaḥ |

Rtavastē Vihitā Hāyanīrahōrātrē Pṛthivi Nō Duhātām ||

Bhūmisūkta, Atharva-12-1-36

20. Sānō Bhūmiḥ Prāṇamāyurdadhātu Jaradaṣṭim Mā Pṛthivī Kṛṇōtu |

Bhūmisūkta, Atharva-12-1-36

21. Girayastē Parvatāḥ Himavatō'raṇyam Tē Pṛthivī Syōnamastu |

Babhrum Kṛṣṇām Rōhiṇīm Viśvarūpām Dhruvām Bhūmiḥ Pṛthivīmindraguptām |

Ajītō'hatō Akṣatō'dhyaṣṭām Pṛthivīmaham || Bhūmisūkta, Atharva-12-1-11

22. Satyam Bṛhadrathamugram Dīkṣā Tapō Brahmajāṇaḥ Pṛthivīm Dhārayanti |

Sānō Bhūtasya Bhavasya Patnyurum Lōkam Pṛthivī Naḥ Kṛṇōtu ||

Bhūmisūkta, Atharva-12-1-1

Great (brhat) truth formidable right, consecration, penance, brahman, sacrifice sustain the earth; let her for us, mistress of what is and what is to be-let the earth make for us wide room (loka).

23. Bhūmisūkta, Atharva-12-1-1