ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN INDIAN CULTURE AND THE DHARMA OF CONSERVATION

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पिबन्ति नद्यः स्वयमेव नाम्भः स्वयं न खादन्ति फलानि वृक्षाः ।
नादन्ति सस्यं खलु वारिवाहाः परोपकाराय सतां विभूतयः ॥

"Rivers do not drink their own water, trees do not eat their own fruits, clouds do not consume the grains (they help grow). The wealth/existence of noble beings is meant for the welfare of others." The consciousness embedded in Indian culture teaches us that the entire environment exists for human welfare, and therefore humans should be grateful towards the environment. Hence, environmental conservation is our dharma (religious duty/moral obligation). Because all biotic and abiotic components in the environment exist to fulfill human needs, not for selfish exploitation. If we continue the ruthless exploitation of the environment for selfish purposes, there will be an imbalance in the fixed structures contained in the environment- such as the predetermined quantities of gases in the atmosphere and the ecological system cycles. The result of this will be an invitation to numerous disasters upon all living beings.

Therefore, our scriptures have established a familial relationship between humans and nature. For example, in the Atharvaveda: "माता भूमिः पुत्रोऽहं पृथिव्या" - "Earth is my mother and I am her son" - meaning it is a son's responsibility to protect his mother Earth.

Traditional Environmental Practices: Divine status given to various elements of nature, such as the worship of the Panch Mahabhutas (five great elements), Worship of trees like Banyan, Peepal, Ashoka, etc. Two of the four varnas and ashrams - Brahmacharya and Vanaprastha - being completely devoted to nature

Contemporary Challenge: In the current global scenario, environmental conservation appears as a separate subject from human life, whereas human life and environment are complementary to each other. In such a situation, we should again embrace Dayananda Saraswati's statement - "Return to the Vedas" - because our scriptures have considered the environment as an integral part of human life.

Legal Framework in Ancient Texts: The scripture authors have also determined punishments for cutting trees and plants and causing any kind of physical harm to wildlife for environmental protection. This certainly reveals the farsightedness of our dharmashastra authors.

The verse from Yajnavalkya Smriti (2/227) prescribes double penalties for: Cutting branches of sprouting trees, Complete destruction of tree trunks, Destroying trees that provide livelihood, Harming sacred/renowned trees. This demonstrates how ancient Indian legal texts incorporated strict environmental protection laws, recognizing the intrinsic value and utility of natural resources long before modern environmental legislation.

प्ररोहिशाखिनां शाखास्कन्दसर्वविदारणे । उपजीव्यद्रुमाणांद्विगुणो दमो वृक्षे च विश्रुते ॥ याज्ञ.स्मृति 2/227

"For cutting branches of sprouting trees, for breaking trunks completely, for destroying trees that provide livelihood - double penalty should be imposed, and for renowned/sacred trees as well."
