

## Ancient Indian Environmental Consciousness and the Path to Forest Revival

Bharat is not only a modern nation-state. It is a civilizational nation, with a continuum of ethos that entails all aspects of life and existence, including the environment. The Vedas, as our oldest literature; the Epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata; the Dharmashastras, as the compendia on social and individual conduct, and texts of distinct authorship, like Kautilya's Arthashastra, have shaped our civilisation's profoundly interconnected and sacred worldview of forests. The Vedic tradition depicts nature in divine terms, portraying trees as guardians-like protectors, forests as living entities deserving of respect and Prithvi as our nurturing mother.



**R K PACHNANDA**  
DIRECTOR, BHARAT KI SOCH; FORMER CHAIRMAN, HARYANA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION, DG-ITBP, DG-NDRF AND COMMISSIONER OF POLICE, KOLKATA



**DR. ABHISHEK ANAND**  
SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW, BHARAT KI SOCH

### Vedic Genesis

The Aranyani Sukta (10.146) of the Rigveda, composed more than three millennia ago, praises the forest goddess Aranyani for her abundance and beauty while warning against the careless felling of trees, as they are essential to life. In its Prithvi Sukta, the Atharva Veda expresses a desire for fertile lands and peaceful surroundings by invoking the Earth's forests, mountains and waters as sources of wellbeing. In a similar vein, the Yajurveda acknowledges the Earth as a kind protector of life and sees her as a nurturing force, enhanced by pure air, water and vegetation.

The Taittiriya Upanishad (2.1.1) highlights a fundamental interdependence between life and nourishment, which comes from plants and forests. These ideas celebrated the worship of trees and the preservation of sacred groves (Devavanas), where cutting of trees as well as hunting were forbidden. By protecting the biodiversity and water systems, the Devavanas set the template of early Indian conservation circuits, centuries prior to the emergence of the contemporary ecological theory.

### Ancient Indian Textual Milieu

Interestingly, the Arthashastra, primarily a treatise on statecraft and political economy, offers a practical paradigm for environmental governance by dividing the land into specific categories: elephant forests (strictly protected for royal use, with severe penalties for killing elephants), timber forests, game reserves and grazing lands. It also prescribes the appointment of forest superintendents, supported by guards, responsible for main-

tenance, mapping routes and preventing illegal logging.

Wild zones were kept separate from timber-producing areas, with boundaries often defined by natural features. The state did harness forest resources, but it also stressed sustainability through measures such as planting appropriate species and developing water reservoirs. To discourage and curtail poaching, strict penalties are stated to be imposed. At the same time, Kautilya advises incentives for reporting the deaths of elephants that died naturally and for bringing their tusks. This foregrounds a balance between use and conservation.

Forests are depicted in the Epics with a variety of meanings, like Dandakaranyas, which combine elements of challenge and learning; Vrindavanas, which are rich in fruit-bearing trees and water bodies, and Tapovanans, which are places for ascetic practice. The Bhagavad Gita portrays Lord Krishna (7.7-8) as the quintessence of nature, including the heat of fire and the fragrance of the Earth. It also underlines the profound interconnectedness of all the facets of nature, which is disrupted when the forests are destroyed.

The Manusmriti, also known as Manava Dharmashastra, frowns upon environmental damage as Adharma and assigns rulers the responsibility to protect both animate and inanimate beings. It treats Devavanas as protected ecological spaces, considers plants to be living beings and imposes fines for harming wildlife and vegetation. Consider these examples: "Cutting fruit trees, shrubs, creepers or flowering plants requires muttering 100 Rik verses (i.e. Vedic recitation)", "General tree injury follows: high fine for fruit trees, moderate for flowers, low for shade providers; offenders also compensate owners."

### The Present Forest Crisis

With roughly 1.5 million hectares of forest area lost between 2001 and 2020 due to the pressing forces of urban expansion, agriculture, mining etc., our country today confronts haunting deforestation! This significant loss has led to increased wildfires and rising human-animal conflicts, further aggravated by the climate change. Globally, nearly 420 million hectares of forest have vanished since 1990, putting biodiversity, water systems and livelihoods at risk. This scary picture has emerged from linear economic models, shaped by



capitalism and consumerism that view forests primarily as commodities.

### The Way Forward

As a specialised judicial body tasked with enforcing environmental laws and delivering prompt and effective environmental justice, we have the National Green Tribunal. Its numerous functions include ordering restoration of degraded ecosystems, imposing fines, penalties and compensation on violators. Yet, there is a lot that needs to be done and can be done, drawing from the Indian civilizational wisdom. The following are certain suggested action plans:

- Vedic-inspired ecological revival must now move beyond symbolic plantation drives to become a living, community-driven movement. Authorities, semi-government bodies and the masses have to come together. A nationwide network of "Devavana Sanctuaries" may be developed as micro-forests zones managed by local communities and guided by Vedic ecological principles of Rita (cosmic order), Dana (charity) and Karuna (compassion).
- Eco-Gurukulas/Eco-Ashramas could function as training hubs where scientists, students and forest communities co-develop regenerative forestry models anchored in ancient wisdom and modern science. The Vedic hymns of reverence for forests must be woven into lived ecological practice, not limited to classrooms alone.
- Building on the Ayurvedic tradition, certified sustainable harvesting of plants with medicinal value and significance via forest-dwelling cooperatives (Vanacharin groups), thereby strengthening conservation in the process of empowering rural livelihoods.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, the perception of forests and the natural world, so beautifully illustrated in our civilizational legacy, has been constituted by a spiritual sanctity and fused with pragmatic rules to safeguard them. There is no denying the fact that Bharat is facing a severe forest crisis. But, taking cues from ancient Indian texts as blueprints, we can reverse the situation, from this ecological setback to environmental stewardship.

## Machha Jataka (The fish jataka - No. 75) The Pali Canon



The Jataka tales are a well-known and much loved part of Theravada Buddhist literature that depict earlier incarnations of Gautama Buddha. The Maccha Jataka (the fish Jataka) is one of the most illustrative examples of the Sach-kriya (the act of truth.) In a previous life, the Bodhisattva (the Buddha-to-be) was born as a king of fish in a pond in Kosala. A severe drought occurred. As a result, the pond dried up and the mud cracked. The fish started gasping. Seeing this, the Bodhisattva rose to the surface to salvage the situation. He did not plead with the gods, instead he relied on his virtue. He made

a declaration to the entire universe, "In my entire life, I have never intentionally harmed a single living being. By the power of this truth, let the rains fall." Legend has it that the sky immediately darkened, and a torrential downpour saved the pond and all its inhabitants.

### Moral of the Fable

Highlighting the power of truth (Sach-kriya), the story suggests that the universe responds to absolute honesty. The Bodhisattva didn't perform a ritual or a sacrifice. Instead, he took recourse to morality. He stated a fact about his character, and the sheer strength of that fact forced the natural forces to surrender.

### Did you know?

Long before modern conservation laws, Dravidian communities protected biodiversity through kavu (sacred groves), which were patches of virgin forest dedicated to ancestral deities where harming trees or wildlife was strictly forbidden. Many originated in prehistoric times as burial or memorial sites of clan founders. By marking them as sacred, communities ensured that the forest quite literally grew from their ancestors, making its protection a safeguard of lineage itself. Today, these largely undisturbed spaces preserve a rich genetic reservoir of plant species that might otherwise have been lost to agricultural expansion. Within the kavu, Theyyam becomes a living bridge, where the performer transcends the human self to embody the primal spirit of the grove, entering a trance and offering blessings on sacred days.



### WISDOM WORD SEARCH

P Z W B H U M I O T S F  
O G A L I B N A D I A N  
A L V Q M I B H E Y A V  
P R A J A N Y A I U K I  
R P A T G J K L M P N V  
A L J N T L B S I A O R  
K Q T A Y V Q A A N T I  
R Y M I T A O S U A L K  
I B J D E F K Y N V Q S  
T W A Q P W Y A A A D H  
I M L I S L S I I S U A  
A V A A S G I R I O I W

### WORDS TO FIND

Aranya, Bhumi, Giri, Jala, Nadi, Parjanya, Prakriti, Sasya, Upanava, Vriksha.

**ARANYA** - Forest landscapes regarded as sacred ecological zones sustaining biodiversity.

**BHUMI** - The living earth viewed as a nurturing and moral entity in agrarian thought.

**GIRI** - Mountains considered sources of rivers, minerals, and climatic balance.

**JALA** - Water as a life-sustaining and ritually protected natural resource.

**NADI** - Rivers conceptualised as ecological lifelines supporting civilisation and agriculture.

**PARJANYA** - Rain deity symbolising climate cycles and agricultural sustainability.

**PRAKRITI** - The natural world understood as an interconnected ecological system.

**SASYA** - Cultivated vegetation representing sustainable agriculture and food security.

**UPAVANA** - Conserved green spaces or sacred groves protecting biodiversity.

**VRIKSHA** - Trees regarded as life-giving organisms essential for ecological balance

## Marvels of India

### TRIVENI SANGAM, PRAYAGRAJ



**Sacred Geography:** Triveni Sangam is the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, with the Saraswati believed to flow invisibly beneath them. The visibly distinct waters of the Ganga and Yamuna make this junction striking, while the subterranean Saraswati, affirmed in the Vedic and Puranic traditions, lends it deep symbolic and cultural meaning. This unique geography established Prayagraj as a major pilgrimage centre and a strategic seat of power from ancient times, spanning the Maurya and Gupta periods to the Mughal and colonial rule.

**Scriptural and Ritual Significance:** Ancient texts such as the Manusmriti and Agni Purana describe Prayaga as the site of Lord Brahma's primordial Yajna, conferring upon it cosmic sanctity. Hindu belief holds that ritual bathing at the Sangam, especially during auspicious celestial alignments, purifies sins and can lead to Moksha. This faith sustains the Kumbh Mela - recognised by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage and the world's largest religious gathering - along with annual observances like the Magha Mela.

### QUIZ Environment & Sustainability

Questions	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
1 Which one of them is an ancient Indian fermented organic manure designed to improve crop productivity and soil health?	Udaka	Kunapajala	Mrida	Nadi
2 What is the Jala-kataka-renu (powder of Strychnos potatorum seeds), an ancient Ayurvedic purifier used for purifying?	Air	Water	Soil	Vegetables
3 Which of these historical texts contains a verse which instructs to abstain from damaging seed and plant life?	Mudrarakshasa	Sulbasutra	Panchasiddhantika	Brahmajala Sutta
4 In the Tamil Literature of Sangam Age, land is divided into five basic ecological zones. Which of these zones refers to coastline and seashore?	Marutham	Palai	Neithal	Mullai
5 Which is the 13th-century treatise composed by the Jain poet Hamsadeva that provides the physical characteristics, temperament, habitats, and life spans of various animals and birds?	Mrigapakshi Shastra	Acaranga Sutra	Tattvartha Sutra	Jiva Vicara Prakaranam

ANSWERS: 1 - B, 2 - B, 3 - B, 4 - D, 5 - A

## panchtantra

## A Cunning Crow and A Stupid Quail



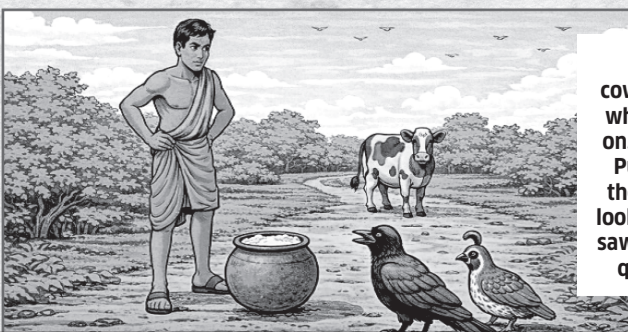
Once, on the feast day of Lord Garuda (the God of the birds), all the birds went on a pilgrimage to the seashore.



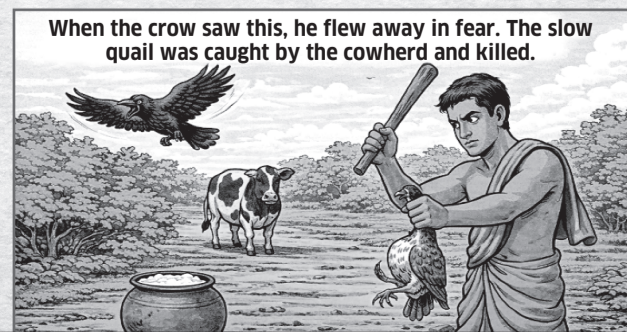
Along with the others went a crow and a quail who had been friends for quite some time. On the way, the two birds saw a cow-herd, with a pot full of curd on his head, walking ahead of them.



The Wicked crow, true to his nature, went after the man and kept dipping his beak into the pot, eating curd.



When the cowherd noticed what was going on, he stopped... Put his pot on the ground and looked around he saw a crow and a quail nearby.



When the crow saw this, he flew away in fear. The slow quail was caught by the cowherd and killed.

**MORAL OF THE STORY:** It is wise to avoid evil company, or one may come to grief.