

Environmental Themes in Puranas: A Critical Analysis with Special Focus on 17 Sustainable Goals of UNDP

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Abstract: One of the foremost challenges in the modern world is to shield the planet earth from environmental degradation and to ensure that our cities and various species are well protected from future extinction. United Nations Development Group has set up 17 sustainable development goals, which are- no poverty; zero hunger; good health and well-being; quality education; gender equality; clean water and sanitation; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production; climate action; life below water; life on land; peace, justice and strong institutions and partnerships for the goals. This paper attempts to critically examine the themes based around the Environment in the Puranic literature. Environment is the one of the most protruding themes of the Sanskrit Works ranging from Vedic literature to the modern Sanskrit poems. Ironically our contemporary catastrophe pertaining to environment and related areas totally disapproves this presumption. This research proposes to study, analyse and critically examine the various themes centred around the Environmental narratives, Forests, Flora and Fauna, Mountains and Rivers, Primordial Five elements- Fire, Earth, Ether, Water and Air. The paper focusses specially on the idea of sustainable development in the Puranic literature and attempts to explore the connection of global goals of developments and their solutions in the Puranic literature.

Keywords: Environment and Environmental Ethics, Sustainable development Goals, Indic Ecology, Puranas, The Primordial five elements

1. Research Methodology

This research is primarily based upon the qualitative comparative textual analysis. The Puranic texts have been evaluated on the basis of study of literature on Sustainable Development and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This paper shall identify and analyse the environmental themes in the Puranas and the connection of these themes with the Sustainable Development Goals of the UNDP. This paper also aims to establish and demonstrate that the modern-day requirement of sustainable development finds its foundations in the Puranic Literature and shall explore the integrated approach of ancient wisdom and modern needs.

What is Sustainable Development?

As it is very apparent from the title itself, sustainable development is the development in terms of economy and allied sectors with a focus on protection and conservation of environment. In other words, the industrial and economic growth of today should be planned in such a way that it does not cause decay of our natural resources, conservation of bio diversity and in all protection of environment for future generations.

Britannica defines it as an approach to social, economic, and environmental planning that attempts to balance the social and economic needs of present and future human generations with the imperative of preserving, or preventing undue damage to, the natural environment.

International Institute for Sustainable Development defines it as a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) was set up in 1983. It published a report in 1987. The document came to be known as the "Brundtland Report" after the Commission's chairperson, Gro Harlem Brundtland. This report provides the guiding map for the Sustainable Development. Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This report was debated in the UN General Assembly in 1989 and laid down a foundation for a UN Conference on Environment and Development.

Graciela Chichilnisky had published a paper in 1997 entitled, "What is Sustainable Development" and discussed the welfare criterion implied with sustainable development. This paper also quotes Solow, 1992 who found Sustainable development as an occasion for expression of emotions and attitudes with a very little formal analysis or path for a modern industrial economy.

The abovementioned two theories and the focus of United Nations on the goals of Sustainable development laid down the foundations for this research paper. The Vedic and Puranic way of life provides an approach to a holistic life style for an individual and encompasses an overall growth and development of society and also worshipping the nature as the divinity and hence protecting it.

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Puranic Literature is no exception to the Vedic and Epic Literature when it comes to the foundational philosophy of the texts. Nature, Environment, Ecology, Pancha Tattva are the prime themes in the Puranas and also there is an interwoven relationship between the nature and human conduct. The Puranas are said to contain five characteristic features:

- 1) Creation
- 2) Dissolution
- 3) Genealogy
- 4) Cosmic Cycles
- 5) Manvantara Order

If we carefully examine the five prime features of Puranas, then there is an evident relationship between nature and mankind.

Attribution of Divinity to Nature and Primordial Five- Vishnu purana¹ declares Earth as mother to all, so there is no question of exploiting the earth for human benefits. Matsya purana² guides us to protect and plant new trees and to protect the forests. Padma Purana³ emphasises the importance of water purity and hence water conservation.

Compassion for all living beings and treating equal to the mankind-

Compassion and non-violence are one of the prime themes of Puranic literature. Padma Purana⁴ confirms non-violence as the highest dharma. Bhagavata Purana⁵ prohibits cruelty against animals as it is cruelty against God.

Some of the quintessential features of a Sanatani life are as follows:

- 1) **Varna system-** education for all- ritualistic education for Brahmins, warfare techniques and formal education in the conflict management for the kshatriyas, agriculture and trade practices were taught to the Vaishyas and all the skill-based learning was taught to the Shudras. Women were taught home management and some of the women were also taught religious and philosophical texts. This division of work ensured that all can make livelihood and hence no unemployment, no poverty and no hunger. The Capitalist and Industrialist models of economy are definitely not the right approach to sustainable development.
- 2) **Four Ashramas-** The 100 years of life of a human being was divided into four major stages, Brahmacharya up to 25 years, Grihastha, 25-50 years, Vanaprastha 51-75 years and then Sanyasa 76- 100 years. So, an individual was sure to spend his three fourth of life in Aranyas ie forests and only one fourth of the total years were spent in the Grihastha Ashram in the towns. A life style that promotes living in the Forests for almost 75 years of life can only be protective towards deforestation and Forest Fires. The wildlife was protected by the common man and no commandments, fines or punishments were needed from the state to sustain the green wealth of the

country. Agni purana, in chapter 191st illustrates the general dharma for the four Varnas and Ashramas. Nonviolence, truthfulness, compassion for all living beings, pilgrimage, donations, celibacy etc are the basic and common duties of each individual.

- 3) **Pancha Yagya-** The Grihastha is supposed to perform the Vihita and Kamya rites and rituals and abstain from Nishiddha Karma. Agnipurana in its 192nd chapter very clearly accentuates that small creatures are killed while ploughing the fields and also during other domestic chores, so there is an onus of Sin. Each Grihastha has to perform Yagya and Deva puja in order to get rid of the sin. In the chapter number 264th detailed Balivaishyadeva Yagya is well elucidated. For instance, there are mantras for the Kaka Bali, Kukkara Bali and Gau Graas-

- a) **Kaka Bali-** meaning sacrifice for the crow-
इद्वरूणवायव्या याम्या वा नैक्ताश्च ये।
ते काका: प्रतिगृहण्तु इमं पिण्डं मयोद्भूतम् ॥
- b) **Kukkura Bali-** meaning sacrifice for the dog-
विवस्वतः कुले जाती द्वी श्यामशबली शुनी ।
ताभ्यां पिण्डं प्रदास्यामि रक्षतां पथि मां सदा ।
- c) **Gau Graas-** meaning sacrifice for the cow
सौरभेयः सर्वाहिताः पवित्राः पापनाशनाः।
प्रतिगृह्णन्तु मे ग्रासं गावक्षेलोक्यमातरः॥

- 4) **Panchatatva-** The entire universe is made up of the five primordial elements- Earth, Water, Air, Ether and the Fire. These five elements have been attributed divinity to these and hence there's not any scope of exploitation and extinction of the natural resources. Earth is referred as Mother in the BhumiSukta of the Atharvaveda, 12.1. The seer finds a mother in the earth and calls himself as the very son of this caregiving and all nurturing earth. This is one of oldest tradition of earth worshipping which still continues from the Vedic times. Every morning, we get up and chant to pray mantra seeking forgiveness from mother earth as we touch it by our feet- विष्णुपूर्णी नमस्तु यं पादस्पर्शं क्षमस्व मे

Water, in the form of rivers is worshipped in almost all the Vedic, Puranic and Classical texts. In the 109th chapter of Agnipurana, importance of various Teertha kshetras is explained such as Pushkar, Narmada, Chambal, Sindhu, Somnath, Kurukshetra etc. Detailed importance of Ganga is explained in the 110th chapter, Prayag- Mahatmya in the 11th chapter, Varanasi- Mahatmya in 112th chapter, Naramada- Mahatmya in 113th chapter, Gaya- Mahatmya in 114th Chapter.

- 5) **Govardhan Parvat and Krishna Leela for sustainable development-** In the x skandha of Srimadbhagvata mahapurana 25th chapter deals with the theme of lifting up of Govardhana Mountain and protection of Brij and its dwellers. It is one of the very valuable anecdotes in the Bhagwatam from the view point of sustainable development. Lord Indra, the King of heavens had to stop the heavy rainfall because the

¹ पृथिव्यां यानि भूतानि सर्वाणि स्थावराणि च ।

तानि सर्वाणि भूतानि मातरं पृथिवीं स्मरन्ति ॥ विष्णु पुराण 2.12.38

² एकवृक्षो दशकूपानां दशवृक्षाः हुताशनम् ।

दशहुतास्सुतां स्नातां दशसुतः समो दृढः॥ मत्स्यपुराण 114.37

³ अप्सु शुद्धेषु यः स्नायात् पापं तस्य विनश्यति।

नदीनां पूजनं कुर्वन सर्वतीर्थकलं लभेत्॥ पद्मपुराण, क्रियायोगसार, 19.8

⁴ अहिंसा परमो धर्मः सर्वप्राणभूतां हितम् ।

सर्वभूतेषु चात्मानं पश्येत् सम्यग् विचक्षणः॥ पद्म पुराण , उत्तरकाण्ड , 233.2

⁵ भागवत पुराण, 3.29.22

citizens under the leadership of Lord Krishna choose the local means of conservation of their existence.

6) **Reincarnations of Vishnu and conservation of Bio-diversity by attributing divinity-** Chapter 4th in the XI Skandha is also of pivotal mentioning as there is a very generous approach towards various species existing on the earth, air and under water. The God reincarnates himself into different species in addition to his humanly appearances, such as- Purusha, Nara, Narayana, Hamsa, Dattatreya, Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana, Sanatkumar, Rishabha, Hayagreeva, Matsya, Varaha, Kurma, Nrishimha, Kalavatara, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Kalki.

7) **Nature as a Spiritual and behavioural guide-** There is a conversation between Dattatreya and King Yadu in the 7th chapter of Srimadbhagvatam. Dattatreya enlists 24 gurus from nature- Earth, Air, Ether, Water, Fire, Moon, Sun, Pigeon, big Snake, Sea, Flies, honey bee, elephant, honey puller, deer, fish, pingala prostitute, kureer bird, a child, unmarried girl, arrow maker, snake, spider, bringi insect. If nature is the spiritual guide how can this society not achieve sustainable development goals?

8) **Pollutants, Punishment and Kaliya Mardan-** There is another important theme of Kaliya Mardan in the X Skandha, Chapter 16 of the Srimadbhagvatam. One Kaliya Snake was polluting Yamuna with his poison and Lord Krishna punishes him and the snake is forced to leave Yamuna River for the welfare of the Brij dwellers.

2. Conclusion

After conducting the analytical, critical and textual study of Puranic literature in connection with 17 SDGs of the United Nations following conclusion can be drawn:

- 1) Environmental themes in the Puranic literature are in continuity with Vedic paradigm of environmental conservation.
- 2) Environmental Ethics and daily practices of nature protection are related to Dharma and hence compulsory for one and all.
- 3) Modern need of Sustainable development cannot be denied therefore a collective approach is needed to achieve 17 SDGs.
- 4) Puranic literature is of utmost importance for us to find a perfect solution for the modern environmental crisis and Sustainable development needs.
- 5) Environmental ethics as illustrated in puranas need to be included in our curriculum and also a part of the individual life style to materialise the idea and to achieve all 17 of Sustainable Development Goals.

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