



## CONCEPT NOTE

### **UnderGraduate Research Aptitude (UGRA) An Intercollege Interdisciplinary Research Competition**

jointly organized by

**Harithkram, the Environment Society**

and

**Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems**

under the aegis of

**Internal Quality Assurance Cell  
Shaheed Bhagat Singh College  
University of Delhi**

Focal Theme:

### **Ecological Consciousness in Ancient India: Life Then and Now**

The ancient Indian scriptures bear testimony to the fact that Indians in ancient India lived in harmony with nature, environment and mother earth. Ecological consciousness was engrained in the very fabric of the daily lives of the *bharatiya* people in the days of yore. The people of Bharatavarsha followed a lifestyle that was founded upon man's inseparable bondage with nature and the environment.

Concern for nature and the environment did not manifest as a separate cause in the lives of people in ancient India. There were no green leaders or environmentalists; rather, everyone championed the cause of nature and environment. Ecologically conscious practices were part of the everyday lives of people: they incorporated local herbs and grew plants and trees of medicinal value; made the first daily offering of food to pets, insects, stray birds and animals, grew and consumed a diversity of grains and millets to allow the soil to get re-nourished, and revered and protected biodiversity a part of their extended family. In a nutshell, Indians treated the entire world with the spirit of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," which defined the Indic way of life, which, needless to say, was an inherently ecological one.

Perhaps no other civilization pays as much attention to environment and environmental ethics. Ancient Indians sought the divine in nature and considered everything as sacred. *Ishavasyam idam sarvam* in the yogic philosophy meant that divinity is omnipresent and takes infinite forms. Our ancestors regarded everything—rivers, mountains, trees, lakes, animals, flora, fauna, the mineral world, even the stars and planets—as pervaded by a subtle divine presence. It was considered to be the dharma (prime duty or responsibility) of individuals as well as communities to care for the earth and maintain the balance. Indic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism viewed the earth as mother, and hence, advocated that it should not be exploited. In the 'Bhumi Sukta' of the Atharva Veda, the earth is adored and respected like a mother. The Rig Veda contains several hymns that foreground a strong tradition of *ahimsa* (non-violence), which ensured the preservation of all biodiversity. The concept of karma, or

the cosmic law of cause and effect guided the understanding that every action we take has a planetary and cosmic effect (what is understood as carbon footprint in contemporary terminology).

However, approximately 800 years ago, these strong and continuous traditions suffered a setback with the onslaught of pirates and invaders from the Middle East and Europe. As a result, the Indic way of life was dismissed as paganism or animism, the ensuing industrialization destroyed forests, reckless drilling and mining became synonymous with progress and large-scale hunting led to the decline of wildlife. It led to further abuse and indiscriminate exploitation of the earth and its resources. The people from the west failed to recognise the scientific and spiritual basis of the relationship between man and nature and how this is the only way to sustain ecological balance.

Thus, for ecology to be truly saved and revived, we have to return to the meanings and practices that infuse sacredness and reverence towards nature, as has been the case in Indian traditions since times immemorial, and re-awaken and nourish our relationship with nature. For Indians, the environment is not protected because of the selfish urgency to save biodiversity and hence save human future, by corollary, but because it is the dharmic way (the correct path) of life and hence a righteous duty that all humans are obliged to perform. Some recent examples of seeing ecology, ethics, spirituality and religion as one complex whole, are the simple living and use of indigenous products exemplified by Gandhi (that ensure a sustainable economy); strong communal practices of the Bishnoi, the Bhil and the Swadhyaya communities to protect local ecosystems such as animals, forests and water resources; environmental movements like the Chipko and Appiko; and the ascetic practices of *tantra*, *yoga* and *sanyasa* which teach practicing restraint in consumption, to name a few.

The solution is to go back to the well-known Indic teaching: *tain tyakten bhunjitha*, or, “take what you need for your sustenance without a sense of entitlement or ownership.” It is by going back to these and other such Indic practices that we can truly recover the ecological consciousness that so definitively defined us as a culture, and thereby have any hope of saving the environment in the present, as well as leave behind a breathable world for the future generations. The way ahead is to start by going back to our roots, discovering ancient wisdom and lastly, by applying local, indigenous knowledge to our current lifestyle and future ‘developmental’ projects.

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