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## **Cultural Practice of Natural Theology and Environmental Ethics in the Vedas**

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**Abstract**

*Vedic texts have established the cult of worshipping natural phenomena, which from the surface understanding is the process of personification, but in real, Vedic hymns show on how the Vedic people have understood the underlying power of nature. Vedas, Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda, have joined the human culture with the philosophy of nature in the mode of natural theology. The culture of sacrifice taught through Vedic hymns has conveyed the knowledge of mutual dependence of man, God and nature. Vedas have proven the natural theological notion of nature-God relation with the hymns devoted to nature phenomena as the metaphors of power, creativity, essence and purity in the forms of deities. Vedas have pertained ecocentrism as the cultural practice of nature eminence. They have further addressed the idea of environmental ethics through the Vedic view of cosmological and ontological unity in nature, and the ethics of natural law in the form of rita, dharma and karma. With the examination of Vedic priority to nature, especially from the Rig Veda, this study anticipates to link Vedic natural religion with the nineteenth century philosophy of natural theology and late twentieth century ecological study of environmental ethics.*

**Keywords:** Natural theology, naturalism, *dharma*, *rita*, ethics

**Introduction**

Natural theology, as the philosophy to make a connection between nature and the existence of God, has provided the logical theory to interpret nature in relation to the divine power, especially from early 19th century. As a response to romantic aesthetics to nature, natural theology has proposed a principle of understanding theism to understand nature. This practice has brought a change in Christian understanding of nature from just as the material factor to the realization of spiritual dimension in nature. With the idea that nature is not merely a material object, natural theology makes a connection “between

what may be known through revelation (in the Bible or through divine miracles) and what may be known through “natural” means (the application of human reason)” (Gould 369), and gives a priority to regard nature as the part of theological existence. Similarly, environmental ethics searches the value of nature, both instrumental and intrinsic, in relation to human beings and ontologically. Ethics, with this reference, is not merely the sets of rules and regulations related to nature and environment, but a pattern of generating the value as the natural law.

Vedas are the most ancient texts to address the ideas of nature and environment in the East. They have cultural impacts on people. They have set religious and cultural value to nature. Providing the knowledge of philosophy to define nature, Vedas “clearly highlight ecology and environmental science as described in present-day literature” (Mishra 2). They have also developed the cultural part of life strongly attached to nature and religion. This study aims to examine Vedic texts from the point of view of natural theology and explore how Vedas have dealt with ethical issue in relation to man, divine and environment, especially natural law as the foundation of cosmological unity.

Many studies have been made in the Vedic texts both in the East and the West. Previous studies in the Vedic texts have established the religious values and the values of sacrifice in the cultural part. Also they have seen the multiple philosophies of life in Vedic knowledge. This study makes a departure in the case that it examines the Vedic texts from the perspective of western philosophy of Natural Theology- the combination of natural science and theology. Also it makes a connection between Vedic concept of ethics and modern deep ecological understanding of environmental ethics. It intends to answer two basic research questions: What are the theological justifications in the Vedas regarding their philosophy of nature? How is the Vedic concept of *rita* and *Varuna* relevant to the modern concept of environmental ethics? - as the identified problem in this study.

### Natural Theology and Vedas

With the publication of *Natural Theology* in 1802, William Paley has formally initiated the discussion of the connection of nature and religion in the West, however this relation is much older in the East; especially it is practiced from the Vedic period with the priority of nature as the divine source on earth. Natural theology consists of two ideas at a time; “the first half addresses medicine and natural history and the last half treats of the attributes of God” (Eddy and Knight xvii). It links the concept of God and nature with the reliable logics on the existence of God in nature. As the part of these arguments, we can explore two points in God-nature relation: cosmological and ontological.

As regards to the first point, Vedas have strongly talked about the cosmological relation between nature and the existence of God. Vedic hymns, in all four Vedas, demonstrate a love for the harmony in nature with the concept of *rita* that is the natural law and order. They focus on “obeying one’s socio-cosmic and place-order duties or *dharma*” (Baindur 149). Vedic *rita*, also understood as *dharma* in broad sense, provides a moral value to maintain the natural rule and order, “the concept of *rita* is important as it connects the created cosmos to a moral order within it” (149). Vedas, openly envision the notion of cosmic unity with the notion of *rita* or *dharma*. *Rita* in Vedas does not refer to any particular god or deity. It is an abstract notion of universal principle. With a belief

to regulate the actions of all individual natural phenomena and elements as deities, *rita* is the part of Vedic concept of the unity of all cosmological existence, “meet together, talk together, let your minds apprehend alike” (Wilson trans. vol. IV, 579). With the sense of union of the deities, as nature in the Vedas are the deities; Vedas have strongly proposed the provision of cosmic essence of the world.

This Vedic idea of cosmic unity is the same to Paley’s analogy of natural world as a clock, “we and other creatures, large or microscopic, were little mechanisms living in an immense clockwork universe” (Eddy and Knight xix). As the clock, the world is the totality of the things in nature equally meaningful for the existence of the whole, which is strongly governed by the law, the law of nature and the law of the God, “the world around is being managed very smartly as per unchangeable laws” (Newar 10). The law, the *rita*, unites the world because there is the finest but hidden source of the divine in nature, “there is a God; a perceiving, intelligent, designing Being; at the head of creation, and from whose will it proceeded” (Paley 230). God therefore is linked with nature resulting to the cosmological unity through the *rita* or the natural order.

The theory of natural theology gives insight to the cosmological fact that “the universe itself is a system; each part either depending upon other parts, or being connected with other parts by some common law of motion, or by the presence of some common substance” (Paley 234). Nature has something in common to every existed ‘being’ and also it is particular in itself, “common (worshippers) by your intention; common be your hearts; common be your thoughts, so that there may be through union among you” (Wilson trans. Vol. IV. 579). Natural theology as “the practice of philosophically reflecting on the existence and nature of God independent of real or apparent divine revelation or scripture” (Taliaferro 1), particularly theorizes the fact that nature without the existence of God is meaningless. Classical theology of the Vedas design the notion that “there is a creator and sustainer of the cosmos who is omniscient, omnipotent, necessarily existing, nonphysical, essentially good, omnipresent, without temporal beginning or end, and everlasting or eternal” (Taliaferro 2), but in current thinking, a mode of connecting the cosmological thinking and theological logics is in naturalism, which “may be described as a scientifically oriented philosophy that rules out the existence of God, as well as the soul” (2). Like that of Vedic principle of realizing the divine in nature through deification, “natural theology can broadly be understood as a process of reflection on the religious entailments of the natural world” (McGrath 7). So, nature cannot be detached from the God and neither can it exist in absence of the Godly power. The world is the unity of nature and existence of God in it.

The second point is the issue of ontological understanding of nature. Ontology refers to the individual existence. Cosmic unity does not make difference on the ontological part of realizing nature in its own form. Every element is connected with everything else around. It does not necessarily mean that nature is dependent to other factors. Recent approaches to environmental studies focus on the ontological existence of nature. Likewise, natural theology provides an insight to see things in nature with new lenses. Unlike the claim that “nature is socially constructed and that all nature has been humanized” (Stephens 268), deep ecological understanding focuses on the point that nature is free, wild and independent. There is a problem in understanding “of nature

as ‘Other’, as a world existing apart from us and our artifice’ must be dropped as being the product of a false ‘dichotomy between man and nature’ (268). Ontological argument raises a question whether human is the part of nature or apart. Vedic understanding of nature has the foundation that man, nature and God are independently and freely existing, however they have relation. The relation is not dependent; rather it locates nature in its own state unaffected by human beings. Nature is humanized and nature is venerated as the divine. Vedic hymns state that nature is not dependent to anything else, but to itself. The God causes this independence, “he by his greatness became the king of the world that breaths and blinks” (Doniger 27). The God has created nature, and can create it. It is for its benevolence, not for humans. If nature is constructed for the purpose of man, it creates a considerable problem- how much for humans? Neither humans produce it, not it is for them. The God creates it independently for independent purpose.

Vedas venerate nature as the metaphor of God, and attempt “to establish claims about God’s existence and / or nature apart from appeal to special revelation, presupposes significant disagreement over religious beliefs” (Netland 503). With regard to the natural ontological process, they clearly mention, “Order and truth were born from the heat as it blazed up. From that was born night; from the heat was born the billowy ocean” (Doniger 34). This notion of cosmic heat as the source of creation and its further expansion of different parts of natural timing boost the individual existence with the order functioning within.

Understanding nature has many factors. It can be defined culturally, politically, or scientifically. Vedic definition has cultural base in the sense that it has set a trend of perceiving nature as part of human culture. Vedic people have strongly adopted nature as the part of their culture. Ontological understanding is much concerned with the scientific definition of nature. This has become the foundational examination of a relatively new discipline of philosophy understood as environmental philosophy. The scope of environmental philosophy is “to understand the relationship between human beings and their environment from different perspectives including the belief and knowledge that communities hold about nature, their ethical, and moral interest towards nature and the various pre-suppositions that exist in such perspectives (Baindur 2). As part of the debate of human/ nature as ‘one’/ ‘other’ for the interpretation of human-nature relationship generates a risk of the division of the world as completely humanized and unhumanized world or area. So, ontological argument has to do with the connection of human-nature relation connected by the theological understanding that nature and God are strongly linked, as God and humans are understood as connected culturally and religiously.

### **Environmental Ethics and Vedas**

The term ‘ethics’ refers to the moral values and principles behind the action. It suggests to the way people should behave. The environmental ethics is “that part of applied ethics, which examines the moral basis of our responsibility toward the environment” (Bourdeau 13). Environmental ethics, therefore, refers to the notion of the moral principles looking at the environmental concerns. It can be defined “as efforts to articulate, systematize, and defend systems of value guiding human treatment of and behavior in the natural world” (Taylor 597). It, as an abstract form, provides and observes

the moral values of connecting humans and nature.

One should base their behavior on a set of ethical values that guide our approach toward the other living beings in nature. Environmental ethics is about including the rights of non-human animals in our ethical and moral values. Even if the human race is considered as the primary concern of society, animals and plants are in no way less important. They have a right to get their fair share of existence. The scientific innovations and growing industrialization have affected the originality of nature. And as a result, nature and its purity have undergone a crisis. Present issues on environment have seen nature as a complete whole with humans or without human intercede. Environment's value in wilderness or in preservation has become a debate. In the ancient time, the reality or the truth got the position of the environment. In the modern period, the concept has been enlarged to the concept of nature. With the notion of deep ecology, the further inquiry has been made and the wider term, 'environment' has been conceived from the 90s.

Having the base of deep ecology to look into the nature and environment, environmental ethics has set the principles with the knowledge of the impact of the modern science and its consequences in the changes of human behavior to nature, and it can also be the tool to look into the literary texts like the Vedas composed prior to the origin of the notion. The Vedas present the natural description in which all the natural phenomena are described in interconnected manner. This chain of the description depicts the totality of the relationship of all the things that is generally supposed to be a Vedic world. It includes the combination of different elements and events in the form of real 'beings' of nature. With reference to these 'beings' the Vedic seers have honored nature in the forms of various deities (devas) through the hymns resulting in the mode of culture and ritual. They share the common knowledge associated with the generation and creation of deities as the myths. Vedas accept the phenomena of nature as the postulated agents of the deities while "it is certainly true that many deities in the Veda are related to natural phenomena; some gods do not fit into this model and Vedic scholarship no longer accepts this as an explanation of the pantheon" (Flood 45). The relation between the gods/deities and nature is the relation of incarnated image. Nature image has the connection to be the deity. For instance, Pippal tree is granted as the worldly incarnation or the representation of lord Vishnu. So Pippal has been respected and worshipped. As a part of ritual, human practice marrying Pippal tree with another tree, Var tree. On the one hand, this relation of god and nature appears to have been the reflection of the image of the divine force in the form of nature. At the same time, it also symbolizes how the same nature can be the humanized image with cultural practice of marriage.

These Vedic devout images of nature possess human qualities out of which the majority of them appear as male deities and some others like Usas, Aditi as females. The Vedic hymns address them; they share human emotions, get invited in sacrifice and share the ritual meal. They have the association with the whole Vedic universe and the *Yajnya* of sacrifice having the history and story in the form of myths. This description of nature as the deities, Gods and Goddesses transfers as the Vedic nature myth as pantheism, monism and ethics in the Veda.

The Rig Veda does not refer directly to the environment as such. The notion

of modern environment, as the combination of all the living and nonliving things in nature, has recently been conceived. Still the environmental issue gets explored in the hidden meaning of the Vedic thought. The Vedic hymns speak for the purity in every natural element, such as, “purity of the intellect (*prajna*), mind (*mana*), vitality (*prana*) and physic (*anna*) and all together” (Bhatt 73). This Vedic search of purity establishes a strong point of environmental ethics. Vedic hymns speak about the physicality and spirituality of the elements in natural life. These elements interact collaborating one another. One element of nature is helpful to another, such as “the *Agni* glances that all the *lokas*, should protect us from the ill-will of enemies” (Wilson trans. vol. IV. 576). This mutual functioning of one element for the well being of other makes it certain to the ethical unity among them.

A holistic and integral view of environmental ethics along with the differential treatment of each type is a way of looking at ethical issue. The Vedic thought of internal working regards, “the purity of the physical depends upon the vital, the purity of the vital upon the mental and the purity of the mental depends upon the intellectual” (Bhatt 73). Therefore, the purity in the physical environment also depends on the purity of the intellectual, mental and vital aspect as the purity on spirituality. This Vedic reference indirectly threats human conduct and suggests that it needs to be regulated, balanced proportionally to ensure the smooth progressive environmental and cosmic process. Similar notion of co-working of the physical and spiritual nature phenomena is depicted in the Rig Veda: “*Agni, Indra, Varuna, Mitra*.... with one consent, (Wilson trans. vol. IV. 352). *Agni* and *Saraswati* represent for light and heat. They symbolize for mind and intellect. Similarly, *Varuna, Mitra, Vayu*, and *Saraswati*, in the form of river act as the symbols of vitality and physics. All do have a single consent of equality and commonness in action and behavior. It identifies that all these natural deities are ethically responsible for the mental and physical purity of nature at a whole.

This unity of nature phenomena enhances the Vedic environmental analogy of the unity of different elements. All the parts are interrelated in the natural body. An element functions in association with other. They have both bodily and spiritual domains. For instance, *Agni* as heat and power, *Saraswati* (river/water) as cool and mind, *Vayu* (air) as cool and breath, *Soma* (plant) as liquid and enthusiasm etc. are connected to each other with their individual values and they function for the totality of the existence and purity.

The modern environmental ethics promotes the idea that there should be widening moral codes of ethical considerations to bring regulation in human conduct not only in relation to other human beings but also with nonhuman or inanimate things. One should not only think about the self but to the welfare of others. Humans should respect the life, essence and value of the nonhuman phenomena. Similarly, the Vedas deliver the environmental awareness with the dictum that “*dharmoraksatiraksitah*” if we care nature, nature will care us” (qtd in Bhatt 74). Dharma, in this sense, symbolizes nature and its rita in a greater notion. It endorses the idea that the life of one depends and ensures on the life of others.

It is necessary to formulate the mechanism for environmental awareness among the five elements (*panchamahabhut*): earth, water, air, fire and space. Vedas portray these ingredients as gods to which all Vedic poets and mortals behave and worship. By

deifying, worshipping and respecting them both as nature and gods, Vedas arouse the ethical respect to them in the form of personified and deified beings. The Vedic hymns praise *Agni*, *Prithvi* Surya, Vayu, Usas, Sarasvatias the deities and give deepest value to nature phenomena and share the message that we should approach nature with love, adoration, respect and gratitude.

Similarly, the concept of heaven and hell transpires apparently in the Vedic hymns. They frequently state about the righteousness of the righteous and wickedness of the wicked. Vedic apparition focuses on the righteousness of the right for the balanced collective co-existence. It gives the message that the worldly organism involved in the righteousness receives award with heavenly place. This sense of the proper treatment to righteousness and wickedness has been introduced in the Rig Veda: “Like women who have no brethren, going about from their own to their father’s house, women averse to their lords going astray, so the wicked, false in thought, false in speech, they give birth to this deep abyss of hell” (Wilson trans. vol. II. 263).

The position of the wicked resembles with the wandering lonely woman in the hell. The wicked doers create this situation because of false thought, speech and action. The righteous and wicked actions are distinguished on the basis of the due actions of the mortals to other mortals and rest of the world, the works for and against the worldly value of ethics. Naturally and logically, “the wickedness of the wicked would demand a separate abode as a prison or place of punishment” (Griswold 318-19). This Vedic distinction of these two poles emerges as the reinterpretation of value in the modern period. The concept of hell materializes to have been forced by the facts of the moral life of humans originated from the Vedic understanding. Vedas clearly state this supposition with the idea of rita that maintains what is ethically wickedness and righteousness with the active role of the lord Varuna for natural law, “the natural law tradition (of which natural theology is a part) has been focused historically – and ironically – on human nature, but now must be extended to include nonhuman nature as a source of moral insight and guidance” (Gould 368). Natural law is a strong aspect of Vedic natural order through the link of Varuna.

The presence of Varuna has a significant role in the matter of ethics. He exists in the abstract form to maintain rita that copes with all the ethical problems. Macdonell elucidates the presence of Vedic Varuna, “there is no hymn to Varuna, in which the prayer for forgiveness of guilt does not occur” (27). On its basis, Vedas kindle the thought of forgiveness to all types of guilt that has greater value on ethics. Rita, notwithstanding its greatness as an ethical concept, “has taken up in the later notions of karma and dharma.... rita as embodied in the will of Varuna, was connected with god of grace who could pardon sin and restore the sinner to his fellowship” (Griswold 341). The mere mechanical working of the principle reflects the retribution or sin and ‘dharma’ with the sense of responsibility and individual as well as religious wisdom. The Rig Veda awakens the concept of ‘dharma’ that “is an obligation declared by the Veda to perform ritual action, karma” (Flood 53). It reveals the performance of Vedic ritual, “the ritualistic order of Vedic sacrifices” (52). The Vedic sense of karma as the leading factor of dharma further confirms the ethical concern of life and action in the mode of natural law as the “tradition of “following nature” can be used effectively today when “eco-systemic compatibility”

is used as a norm from which to derive ethics” (Gould 368). Ethics, dharma and karma come together in Vedic notion of natural law, rita, and Gods (deities), humans and nature are responsible equally.

Vedas revere Varuna, Surya, Agni and Vayu as the ethical gods because they have been invoked as the forgivers of sins in the Vedic hymns. They represent three different zones: Surya, the heaven, Agni, the earth and Vayu, the midair. All Vedic gods are reduced into these three identities. These three have “a common fiery nature; Surya, the ‘sun’, Indra ‘lightning’ and Agni, ‘fire’” (Griswold 357). Agni is a messenger between earth and heaven, a mediator between gods and humans. Varuna in heaven and Agni on earth are not only reflecting the righteous of their activities but also “making men righteous through the putting away of their sin and guilt” (358). This mode of ethical justice has reinforced the imagination of happiness and pleasure in the Vedas: “Grant to us happiness, pleasure and freedom from sin” (Wilson trans. vol. IV. 285). Other Vedic gods that the Vedic poets worship intend to forgive sins of the human beings. The poets pray to grant them happiness, pleasure and freedom from sins.

Enriched with the universal forgiveness as the central point of Vedic principle, Gods and goddesses possess benevolence to all the earthly organisms. Agni, Soma, Vayu, Vata are all involved in purifying the evil doings of the mortals because they concentrate on forgiving rather than punishing the evildoers. The hymns dedicate on evoking gods as the sources of purifications. Most of gods praised in Rig Veda are concerned with the forgiveness of sin by providing prosperity to mortals, and granting purity and vitality to the earthly living things. Vedas do not give priority in describing devils, evils and demons. Rather the heavenly gods transform into earthly quality with full potentiality to change the things into pure and sacred and modify the evils by forgiving their sins. This transformation takes place in a process, “*Twam Soma pavamanoviswaniduritatara, Kaviseedanivarhis*” (RV. 09. 61. 10). Soma descends from heaven, comes down in the form of rain, enters into the Soma plant and becomes the Soma juice, the drink of immortality and the source of purity, fertility, courage and wealth.

Regarding ethics, the question arises whether there is any concept of suffering of mankind and other living and non-living beings in the Vedas. The perception of sacrifice of the ‘Purusa’, the cosmic man in the form of ‘Prakriti’ is dominant in the Rig Veda. The whole creation of human and non-human living beings is said to have sprung as a result of the sacrifice of Purusa. This Vedic design of conscious self-sacrifice on behalf of the origin and life of other reveals the truth of Vedic ethics. The ‘Purusa Sukta’ clearly affirms the voluntary action of self-emptying of ‘Purusa’ for the sake of the universe through which the whole universe-- humans and the environment-- comes into existence. Nature preserves its nature, “Yama preserves our loved bodies” (Wilson trans. vol. IV. 219). Yama delivers up his own body. Vedas propose the reference of the self-sacrifice of Yama for the immortality of gods and humans. This sacrifice is also guided by the mode of ethics, and Vedas clearly mention about the power of ethics, the ethics in nature and life. It validates that Vedas have practiced the culture of “the well-being of entire ecological communities, not just individual species or individual organisms, should be the axial moral concern” (Taylor 598). One individual natural part becoming ready to self-sacrifice for the well-being of others is the highest point of ethical value of the Vedic image of nature.



Vedas do not talk directly about the environmental ethics but they arouse the environmental awareness aiming to regulate the human conduct to the other humans and non-human beings. Vedas not only refer to the kindness, behaviours and the roles of gods and goddesses, but also give ample treatment to humans as preservers and protectors of environment. It teaches the lesson of 'Dharmorakshatirakshitah'. Nature, as dharma, cares humans if they care nature. Vedic poetry bestows the position of mother to nature; the earth mother is worth worshipping and adorable. Worshipping nature embodies a keynote of Hindu way of life originated from the Vedic arrangement. This method of worshipping and adoring nature as Vanaspataya, Bhumi, Parvata, Surya, Chandra, Agni, etc. does not mean to exhibit the primitive animism, but it reflects an expression of love, regard, and reverence to nature that enables organisms to sustain and provides nourishment to them.

### Conclusion

Theology and ethics share a common ground that both ideas focus on the part of value. Theology talks heavily about the religious value of life and world with the belief on the existence of God. Ethics also concerns with the value that is primarily moral one on the judgments of what is right and what is wrong. Natural theology, likewise, is a theory, which attempts to analyze and interpret the value of nature with the connection of value of the God in it. And environmental ethics concerns on the value of the environment both intrinsic and extrinsic. Both concepts are related to the search of value in nature and environment; one refers to the search of religious value in nature and another for the moral value in nature.

Vedas have properly combined the idea of natural theology and environmental ethics in a cultural pattern. Vedic hymns teach humans to look nature as the gods/deities and revere them, which is the essence of natural theology. Further, Vedas have the hymns to ethical god and goddesses, such as Varuna, Agni, Aadityas, who in the form of deities, maintain the natural order and law with natural interconnectedness. They have proposed the idea of unity in nature as cosmological and ontological. The greatest value of Vedic hymns is that they have properly connected God, man and nature. This is not just the depiction in writing or in philosophy; it has become the part of everyday life through cultural and ritual practice.

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