

# Environmental Ethics in Vedic Concept of Rta

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*According to Vedas, Rta is connected to the movement of the universe. The natural scheme of things that occur in the world is managed by a set of cosmic laws that maintain a sense of universal balance, which is defined as Rta. The expression Rta is based on the Sanskrit verbal root 'R' ("go, move"). Hence, Rta denotes the cosmic law regulating the whole universe.*

## Introduction:

Vedas are the epitome of all knowledge. Vedas contains eternal wisdom for humans and has guided him through out all tribulations and sagas. Vedas contain certain set of ideas which will be an adjunct to the environmental thinking. Highest among the Vedic thought is the relation of Cosmic Law or Rta to the working of the universe and all its entity. There cannot be a law which is not enforceable in practical living. The Vedic sages have written various hymns based on functioning of Rta. An appreciation of these hymns to the environmental affairs concerned will help in delimiting the environmental problems.

## Vedic Concept of Cosmic Rta:

There was an omnipresence sense of sacredness in all facets of nature in the Vedic period. Laws could be seen in the serene

functioning of the universe. Rta is described as emanating from the primeval principle. It is inherent in the cosmos itself.

Thus, Rta can be said to be the unique original power which regulates and coordinates the stable running of the universe. It is the cosmic order which entails the course of things that should be and hence becomes the 'Law'. The earth mediates between humans and the unyielding cosmic order inherent in nature; the eternal bond between humans and nature is nourished by the law of Rta. It is a vibrant display in which each and every entity and their proceedings have their own place in the universal field. It is the cosmic law which penetrates and transcends the whole universe.

Rta is seen in the daily rising of the sun in the east (revolution of the sun) or the water running downhill (due to gravity), in the movements of

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stars, alterations of day and night, of changing seasons – these truthful cosmic events echo the cosmic harmony. Vedic verses highlight the importance of Rta as: The appearance of Ushas (Dawn) and its activity of illuminating the whole universe is because of Rta. The flow of rivers, the rise and fall of tides and all other phenomena that occur with cyclic regularity and sequence are regulated and controlled by the law of Rta. All life forms follow the cosmic law Rta true to its spirit in their actions.

Rig Veda is full of anecdotes put in a mythical way where the verses address a plethora of Gods such as Indra, Varuna, Mitra – all of whom are in charge of the smooth functioning of the universe and upholders of the cosmic law. Especially Varuna is praised as the protector of Rta again and again in Vedic hymns. Gods are not above Rta. Rig Veda 1-75-5 says “Ritam satyam vijñani” meaning ‘knowing the truth, which is Rta, is the true knowledge’. Rta is the universal truth and never personified. In the annals of Vedas, there is a mention of only a single Rta for both human being and Nature. The characterizing of Rta in the human sphere to social and moral order originated from the view of identifying the highest goodness to the entire harmony of the natural cosmic order. The social and moral order is thus conceived as the correlate of the natural order.

The vast universe was not strewn about in random chaos, but had an inner order, a unity with an inexorable law and purpose (Rta) that governs the working of both the macrocosm and microcosm (Dandekar, 1979:15). Concept of Rta has two fold significance namely natural order and ethical order which are interlinked with each other. That means if there is moral order in the society, there would be order in the

cosmos. Cosmic order is traced to the ethical order in the society. There is a suggestion in Rta that whatever disorder is there in the cosmos, it is all because of the moral disorder prevalent in the human society.

Vedic seers saw in Rta an outline of innate order that could be put into practice in human way of life. Rta, initially a feature of natural law, has been given a deeper ethical touch and became a law of morality with a sense of righteousness. In A.V (VII.24.1), Satya (truth) has been acknowledged with Dharma, as the supreme law which governs all beings. Many sages and seers like Vyasa, Yajnavalkya, Kautalya (philosopher, writer, statesman) and others used Rta in social, legal and political institutions and also in describing certain principles of ideal human conduct to avoid exploitation of Nature, earth and other animate life. All these laws were framed for maintaining the serenity of the environment.

There was a tremendous abidingness to live according to Rta. It acted as a guiding force and governed human conduct such as avoiding accumulation of material excesses, following the path of righteous action and being virtuous and altruistic. Thus Rta became an ethical code of conduct bereft of which causes moral disorder.

### **Environmental ethics:**

Ethics is to do with the behaviour of human being. Environmental ethics is nothing but an applied ethics as it figures out the proper and just base for human beings’ accountability towards their environment. It is the part of environmental philosophy which extends from its conventional restrictions of including only humans to take into consideration the other animate and inanimate world. It deeply

questions the ethical affiliation that exists between humans and the natural environment and categorizes the different ways the natural environment is valued.

In the Indian philosophical context, ethics when allied to Rta, signifies the natural and moral order envisaged towards environment. The four fold values prescribed in the Indian philosophy is the path of following dharma, artha, kama and moksha. Dharma is an established order of doing things with a proper attitude befitting the truth. Pursuit of material necessities (artha) and enjoyment of the same (kama) follows dharma, the final goal being moksha or liberation. When this path is devoid of Rta, then it becomes adharma.

**Dharma often translated as duty can be reinterpreted to include our responsibility towards earth.** In the Vedic society, the comprehension of Dharma was very strong and acted as a preventive measure from performing erroneous deeds not only against human beings but also against nature. Understanding Rta acknowledges the fact that the world functions in a harmonious way befitting all life forms and this when translated to ethical and moral order encourages humans to follow the true law of righteousness. In traditional India, there was a ritual act of pacifying the tree before cutting it down for utilizing the same land for human habitat. In the words of Dr. S.Radhakrishnan, “Rta can be trusted. The dawn follows the path of Rta, the right path; as if she knew them before. She never oversteps the regions. The sun follows the path of Rta.

Yajur Veda 26-1 states that the correct knowledge of Rta can be obtained from the seven forces of Nature which are the Sun,

Moon, waters, clouds, firmament, fire and the earth.<sup>9</sup> Rta is absolute and definite. There is clearness, holiness, decorum, reliability, promptness, simplicity in Rta which is observed in the functioning of the Universe. This ethical content needs to be used when dealing with environmental issues. Sincerity, mutual aid, love, truth, honesty are the other virtues than can be derived from the dynamic functioning of Rta.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus the study of the Rta or cosmic order reveals that there is a bigger picture untold in the universe that one may not understand from the limited human perspective. The environmental ethics plays a major role in inducing humans to conserve and preserve nature, as earth is a self-contained system and whatever natural resources one retrieves from nature is restricted in its production.

The bond between human being and nature which was predominant in the earlier period is missing and this connection has been severed due to many factors. The ethical code of conduct prescribed by the various scriptures and treatises (Arthashastra, Manusmriti, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana) were being followed succinctly by the people. The working of the universe was seen as a most significant and honorable moral order which got fine tuned in day-to-day living of the Vedic people.

The moral content with respect to Rta as an eternal order is seen as a fixed principle which has been mentioned in very many treatises – social, political, philosophical. An in depth analysis of these various texts will not only help the present generation to thrive but also the future generations to blossom.

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**Footnotes:**

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