

## **History of environmental conservation in the Ancient and Middle Ages**

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### **Abstract**

In the beginning, man was a vital component of the biosphere and nature. He worked as a practising ecologist with success. He most likely had a reverent, awestruck, and fearful attitude towards his surroundings due to his ignorance of numerous unknown events, including storms, illnesses, wild animals, earthquakes, volcanoes, and celestial phenomena. However, an increasing conflict between man and the environment has emerged because of technical advancement and socio-cultural change. He reached a mental state because of his apparent dominance over others and ascent to ever-higher heights. Considering this, it may be necessary for man to look to some of the world's most ancient and primitive races for guidance in the arts of human relations, physical control, and respect for the environment if he is to survive beyond the nuclear age. These races, which have flourished for centuries or millennia in some of the world's most primitive societies—such as the nomadic tribes of Australia and the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa—have resources of inner strength, stability, and harmony. This research aims to shed light on many environmental elements in ancient and middle India from a historical perspective. India has demonstrated its commitment to protecting its natural resources and environment by enacting environmental laws and regulations. Though significant progress has been made, much more must be done before we can effectively address environmental concerns and realise sustainable development. The Indian government used the legal system and the power granted by the constitution to pass several Acts aimed at protecting the environment. India may take a look at its past, work with other countries, and implement new ideas to develop towards a more sustainable and greener future.

In conclusion, India has experienced highs and lows in the development of environmental laws and rules. Over the years, as the nation has come to understand how important it is to protect its environment and natural resources, several environmental laws and

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regulations have been implemented. The Wildlife Protection Act, the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, and the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act were the three laws that were passed in 1972. The first was passed in 1972. The basis for environmental preservation was laid by this act, which concentrated on issues including wildlife protection, water pollution, and air pollution management. Modern culture is becoming increasingly rational, prioritising reason, science, and evidence over mysticism. Culture and other influences have eventually forced humans to break away from nature. We have an overdue appreciation for the environment and the old Indian models for ensuring the survival of humankind.

**Key words :** Environment, historical development, natural resources, sustainable development.

**E**nvironmental protection has long been firmly embedded in Indian culture. It is essential to look at the historical evolution of environmental protection in India in order to understand the current legislative requirements for resource conservation and environmental preservation. India has a long tradition of protecting its environment, which has inspired its people to value and love the natural world in all its forms. Ancient Indian literature contains many references to Earth, trees, water, and animals.

We can comprehend the ideas of environmental conservation and preserving forest ecology thanks to Indian texts like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedas, Arthashastra, Sathapatha Bhramanas, Manusmriti, and others. The four Vedas, the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda, contain hymns that fully acknowledge the negative effects of climate change, disruption of ecological balance, and environmental degradation, and they appropriately warn against them. However, humankind has gradually addressed the environmental problems afflicting society to find a suitable solution out of concern for the well-being of the organic world<sup>7</sup>.

Man has always been dependent on nature ever since he first appeared on Earth. The man was utterly powerless in the natural world when he first emerged<sup>17</sup>. The histories of science and technology, economic and social, disease, and even several other fields are inextricably linked to environmental history<sup>11</sup>.

*Indian customs and culture prioritise environmental protection :*

India has a long and rich history of environmental preservation, which has led to its people's reverence and unwavering love of nature. Ancient Indian scriptures have significant references to trees, water, animals, and terrain. A significant factor in the historical development process was the environment. Good or terrible conditions are largely related to the beneficial or unfavourable environmental conditions of a given time or nation.

Environmental aspects have had a significant impact on the history of nations as well as the development of culture and civilisation since, like all living things, human society seeks to adapt to its natural surroundings. Not only did nature give man food and shelter,

but it also had a big part in creating humanity. Enhancing our knowledge of how humans have impacted and been impacted by the natural environment, as well as the outcomes and ramifications of those actions, is the main objective of environmental history<sup>3</sup>.

India's ecology has a long history. The ancient Indians were deeply concerned about the environment and worshipped various natural things and manifestations with the utmost earnestness and devotion. It seems that the ancient Indians lived in perfect harmony with the natural world and followed the natural law known as Rta<sup>31</sup>. India's rich cultural and religious legacy demonstrates a profound concern for environmental preservation and conservation<sup>15</sup>.

The ancient Indians relied on hunting and gathering food as a means of subsistence at the beginning of the country's environmental history<sup>26</sup>. India is primarily an agricultural nation and has relied heavily on seasonal rains from ancient times. A good monsoon has always aided in the production of enough food for the populace, but a bad one has historically resulted in starvation and famine. In actuality, India has been set apart from other nations by its seasonal winds or monsoons. India is now primarily known as the land of agriculture and one of the world's best-watered regions because of the hydrographic conditions they established<sup>19</sup>.

*Protection of the environment in ancient India :*

Along with worshipping various animals like elephants and humped bulls, the

people of the Indus Valley also revered trees like pipal. In Indian culture and society, the practice of worshipping trees, especially pipals, dates to the Harappan era and has become widespread. The Harappans knew how to manage and store water for irrigation in several ways<sup>16</sup>. In the Indus Valley, civilisation and culture thrived as long as the environment was favourable. However, when the climate deviated from this pattern, either because of natural disasters, ecological imbalances, catastrophic floods, changes in the climate, droughts, earthquakes, or changes in the Indus and Ravi rivers' courses, the magnificent Harappan culture was forced to deal with hardship<sup>1</sup>.

The quality and purity of water were emphasised in the Atharva Veda. It is said that pure water prevents diseases that have not yet been contracted and heal a wide range of maladies. It also discusses how domestic cattle and wildlife should be protected. The Yajur Veda forbids killing animals since they are beneficial to everyone and teaches that by serving them, one might find happiness<sup>32</sup>. The Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea (Ratnakara) are mentioned in the Vedas, indicating that the people were engaged in international trade and marine commerce and were familiar with oceanic knowledge. Indirect references to the Vindhya Mountains were also found in the Vedas<sup>16</sup>.

Based on an investigation, it may be concluded that the Aryans worshipped gods they feared or liked. 33 Rig Vedic in total<sup>18</sup> the gods and goddesses, the most important was Indra, the god of rain, thunder, lightning, and war. The other gods of the Rig Vedic era,

such as Agni (the god of fire), Varuna (the god of water), Maruta (the god of storms), Vayu (the god of air), Surya (the god of the sun), etc., are merely various forms of nature.

The widespread use of iron was the most significant technological advancement of the Kingdom of Magadha period, supporting environmental preservation and conservation in numerous ways<sup>25</sup>. It was the second wave of urbanisation in India, with the Harappan civilisation being the first wave.

Arboriculture, the highly comprehensive science that dealt with the creation and upkeep of gardens and planned greenery, originated in ancient India because of Kautilya's<sup>27</sup> recommendation that people live in sylvan surroundings and his identification of the significance of lakes, groves, gardens, and hillocks in creating a city worth living in<sup>28</sup>.

The Kalingan monarch Kharavela, who was a great benefactor of the natural world, expanded the Mahapadma Nanda-built canal from Tanasulia to Kalinganagari, his capital city, three centuries ago<sup>26</sup>. Kanishka established his capital at Purushapura, in the far northwest of India, due to the area's natural beauty and favourable climate. The most significant Shaka king of the time, Rudradaman, rebuilt Sudarshana Lake, which had been used for irrigation in the semi-arid region of Kathiawad since the Mauryan era<sup>16</sup>.

*The ecological policy in the history of India:*

During Samudragupta, the powerful Gupta era, agriculture greatly flourished, and the value of agriculture was emphasised<sup>9</sup>. An amalgam of social consciousness, environmental

ethics, spirituality, and philosophy characterised the ancient Indian perspective on nature<sup>12</sup>.

To create a new paradigm for the future, historians must play an active and independent role in the study of the environment, which is no longer limited to scientists working in diverse fields of biology and ecology<sup>11</sup>. Nonetheless, environmental consciousness is not a relatively new idea. This awareness's origins can be found in distant antiquity. Man has an "inborn ecological sensibility," and early civilisations' philosophy and traditions firmly establish that environmental awareness is an essential component of human culture.

*Vedic civilisation and environmental awareness :*

To mitigate the risks of pollution, the Vedic literature forbade the careless felling of trees<sup>13</sup> and gave guidelines on how to avoid contaminating waterways with human waste<sup>4</sup>. Environmental consciousness was present in ancient India even during the pre-vedic Indian valley civilisation, which flourished in northern India around 5,000 years ago<sup>21</sup>. Archaeological data from Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, the two largest towns of the civilisation, corroborate this conclusion. Their numerous wells, bathrooms, public baths, covered subterranean drains, well-ventilated homes, and spotless streets all demonstrate their care for hygienic conditions<sup>6</sup>.

The environment and cleanliness were highly valued in the Vedic civilisation, which flourished between 1500 and 500 B.C. Several guidelines for purifying water can be found in the Charak Samhita, a medical science text written between 900 and 600 B.C. According

to the Arthashastra, an ancient book on statecraft, economic strategy, and military tactics, which established numerous penalties for felling trees, destroying forests, and killing animals, environmental ethics of nature conservation applied to both rulers and monarchs<sup>30</sup>.

*Consequence of Environment Protection in Middle Ages India :*

For the Mughal emperors, forests in mediaeval India were solely used as hunting grounds. In mediaeval India, Muslim emperors ruled much of the time, and it was not until the Mughal Emperor Akbar's reign that environmental laws began to take a major shift. During Akbar's rule, hunting and shikar are forbidden to non-rulers. Throughout the Middle Ages, the government's primary concerns were war, the spread of religion, and the expansion of their empires, not environmental protection or the preservation of natural resources. Apart from "royal trees," which could only be taken down for a fee, there were no restrictions on taking down other trees or shooting animals. The forests' area dramatically shrunk throughout this period<sup>5</sup>. The story of Babar (also known as Baburnama) provides a thorough and methodical overview of India's fauna. He begins by describing the physical landscape of India before moving on to discuss the mammals, birds, and eventually aquatic species<sup>20</sup>. The author goes on to state that a wide range of flowers may be found in Hindustan, such as the white Champa, or jasmine, kiura (Pandanus odoratissimus), kanir (Nerium odorim), and jasun (Hibiscus rosasinensis)<sup>2</sup>. Legendary are Akbar's initiatives to support the afforestation of common property resources, water body management, and his opposition to animal

slaughter<sup>20</sup>. Jahangir designed some of Mughal India's most exquisite gardens. In the Indian plains, he also made it possible to grow high-altitude trees like the Javanese sandal tree, juniper, pine, and cypress. He commissioned the creation of almost a hundred paintings of Kashmiri flowers, including tulips, jasmine, hollyhock, lotuses, and lilies. Jahangir clearly meets the qualifications of an astute investigator and skilled observer of Kashmir's flora. He also conducted a thorough inventory, observation, and study of Kashmir's fruit plants. These included Persian melon, grapes, pomegranates, guava, pears, and mulberries<sup>2</sup>. Only members of the royal family were allowed to hunt during the Mughal era, particularly lions and tigers. Over time, this assisted in keeping them intact<sup>29</sup>.

In conclusion, there have been many highs and lows along India's path to enacting environmental laws and regulations. Since the country realised how crucial it is to preserve its environment and natural resources, it has passed several environmental laws and regulations<sup>22</sup>. Following the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act of 1972, the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, the Wildlife Protection Act, and other acts were passed. By focusing on specific issues like wildlife protection, water pollution, and air pollution management, this act established the foundation for environmental preservation<sup>8</sup>.

However, the Bhopal gas tragedy in 1984 raised concerns for the Indian government. This catastrophe brought attention to the need for more extensive environmental rules, which led to the passage of the Environmental Protection Act in 1986. This act established the State Pollution Control Boards (SPCB) and the Central Pollution Control

Board (CPCB) to monitor and control pollution levels<sup>10</sup>. Following this, the Indian judiciary issued several noteworthy rulings that had a major influence on the development of environmental laws and regulations<sup>14</sup>.

Sustainable development and resource protection have been stressed in multiple decisions by the Indian Supreme Court. Because of these rulings, laws such as the National Forest Policy of 1988 and the National Environment Policy of 2006 came into being. Furthermore, India has endeavoured to enhance global collaboration on environmental issues. The nation has ratified a number of international agreements and conventions pertaining to climate change, including the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement<sup>24</sup>. These accords demonstrate India's determination to address environmental issues on a global scale and promote sustainable development<sup>23</sup>.

Notwithstanding these achievements, India continues to face several obstacles in implementing and upholding its environmental laws and policies. Nonetheless, insufficient public awareness, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, and the requirement for improved agency cooperation all hinder effective environmental governance. The country's sizable population, increased urbanisation, and industrial development also present unique difficulties.

To tackle these issues, India must focus on strengthening its institutional framework, increasing public participation, and promoting sustainable practices. Enforcing and implementing environmental rules and regulations at all levels effectively is essential. It is also essential to regularly review, evaluate,

and amend existing laws to address emerging environmental concerns.

In conclusion, India's enactment of environmental laws and regulations demonstrates its dedication to safeguarding its natural resources and environment. Notwithstanding the advancements, there is still much work to be done before we can accomplish sustainable growth and effectively address environmental issues. Through the enactment of several Acts and the application of the law, the Indian government attempted to protect the environment. Through historical reflection, international cooperation, and the adoption of creative ideas, India may work towards a more sustainable and greener future.

Modern culture is growing more logical, emphasising logic, science, and proof over faith. Humans have eventually been compelled to separate from nature by culture and other factors. It's past time for us to appreciate nature and the ancient Indian precedents for safeguarding humankind's continued existence.

#### **Conflicts of Interest :**

The authors do not have any conflict of interest.

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