
UNIT6 INDIAN PHILOSOPHY AND ENVIRONMENT

Structure

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you would be able to:

- Gather that we are studying Indian philosophy and environment in the context of the issues we are facing today
- Understand how forests have been looked at in the Indian Philosophy
- Understand how water has been looked at in the Indian Philosophy
- Understand how different elements like water and beings like plants and animals interlinked in a complex ecological system in the Indian philosophy

6.1 INTRODUCTION

As a matter of fact Indian civilization is one of the oldest civilizations on the globe. The western civilization however begins with the Greeks who came on the scene somewhere around twelfth century B.C. on the other hand, it has recently been discovered that the city of Dwarka associated with the kingdom of Lord Krishna, dates back twenty to thirty thousand years. It had been discovered accidentally when a western crew in order to study the level of pollution on the western coast of Gujrat, happened to come across a submerged metropolis near the modern coastal Dwarka. It is not a matter of comparison between the two civilizations but in order to understand the philosophy of a particular society, justice cannot be done to it if it is not studied in the context of its civilizational background. Since the subject of our discussion is Indian Philosophy and Environment, it is imperative for us to understand the meaning of philosophy. Philosophy in plane words is 'a theory or attitude that acts as a guiding principle for behaviour.' However, some scholars define a philosopher in a lighter vein but

on a serious note as ‘a person who is trying to find a black cat in a dark room which is not there.’ Defining philosophy thus turns out to be a difficult task. But since our discussion is set within the parameters of Indian thought, we will try to understand how Indian thought has been instrumental in the preservation and propagation of environment.

6.2 SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Every now and then we hear a clarion call by the heads of the governments of various countries to save our environment. Some people are talking about global warming, CO₂ level, ozone layer depletion and glacial meltdowns etc; while others are talking about a ban on plastic and polymers of ethene. No doubt, science has made our lives very easy, cozy and comfortable but there is the other side of the picture too. Like the two sides of a coin, a scientific policy also has its negative and the positive side. It is therefore imperative that before the application of any scientific theory, we should always evaluate its pros and cons. We all know that necessity is the mother of invention. Most of the modern scientific theories have therefore, evolved on the western part of the globe. East lagged behind in these modern theories not because they could not evolve these or were incompetent to do so but because such theories were not a necessity in this part of the globe. A simple example to understand this would be the invention of electricity, glass, and nuclear energy. India as we all know has been known as a golden bird in the annals of history. Indians have had trade relations with most of the major civilizations and countries of the world. It is interesting to note that Indian merchants not only brought enormous amounts of wealth in to country but they even built temples in the neighboring countries with whom they had trade relations. Indian temples dating back to several hundred years may still be found in countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, Bungla Desh, Indonesia, and Thailand etc. it may be noted here that Indian spices were sold at a profit of a hundred times in the Roman Empire from where these were further supplied to the interiors of Europe; and it was because of this very fact that the Western countries vied with each other to have direct relations with Indian. All this however, led to the rise of colonialism and imperialism. But the interesting fact to note here is that it is they who needed us more than what we needed them. It may be recalled that India is not only strategically located on the geography of the globe but it also has the best climate in the world where even in the scorching months of May and June, one can witness the snow fall in areas like Kashmir, Leh, and Siachin glacier which is popularly known as the highest battlefield in the world as we always have some sort of skirmishes with our immediate Islamic neighbor who is better known in the world as the profounder of terrorism. Our country is hence, blessed with a unique climate wherein we have six seasons in a year; and unlike the Europeans who wish each other as ‘Good Morning’ at the beginning of the day, we find that in our part of the country, we greet with ‘Namaste’ or ‘Ram Ram’ as the morning loses its importance and the Indians go beyond the temporal to bow down and respect the soul of the other individual through the said greetings. It is so because unlike the western world where mornings are often witnessed with showers, and mud on the roads, and where Sun is not visible in a regular pattern, in India each morning is good and is greeted by sunshine. Even the sunshine is so brilliant in India that one hardly

needs any sort of artificial light. Moreover, the pattern is so brilliant that when people get up in the morning, they encounter a highly illuminated environment. One can study, work in the office, or one may do his work in the farm. There is therefore, no requirement of artificial light on this part of the globe. It is because of this reason that the invention of light took place in the western world. Similarly, the invention of glass too is because of the fact that it was a necessity as it could protect them from cold winds and provide with the sunlight as well at the same time. Modern science therefore, was born in the western world as India never needed it. Indians thought in a very different way as would be evident from our observations. Before bringing in any new concept, the Indian philosophers have always laid emphasis on weighing its pros and cons. In other words, Indian thought and philosophy has always evaluated things in a rational way, and it is after this evaluation that they think of applying these new theories.

Every individual, family, society, community or a nation has some sort of ideology. For example, some families are business-oriented, while others believe in the service sector, as it offers a sense of job security. Similarly, a country, too, is founded on some sort of ideology which may favor expansionism, an autocracy, dictatorship, or democracy. All relationships within a country or society are to be seen in the light of its ideology. It is, therefore, imperative that in order to have an in-depth understanding of a specific domain, we get acquainted with its ideology which is also in part its philosophy. However, it may not be appropriate to give a categorical definition of the term 'philosophy', as such a definition is bound to create more confusion than understanding. But going by the general perception, philosophy may be understood as a theory or attitude that acts as a guiding principle for behavior. Environment, on the other hand, is the sum total of all the elements that surround us. Earth, air, water, sky, and living organisms form the major components of our environment. When we talk about a good or bad environment, we try to judge it by the quality of its earth which is 'soil', quality of its water which may be in the form of underground water or river, or rain. Similarly, the quality of air and sky are also the yardsticks for judging the nature and quality of environment at a specific place. Since the subject of our discussion is the relationship between the Indian philosophy and environment, we would try to understand this relationship with the environment in the context of our ideology or philosophy per se.

In the present-day world, we are confronted with a plethora of problems concerning the environment. Some of these problems are the rising sea level, CO₂ level, depletion of Ozone layer, and contamination of our water bodies such as ponds, lakes, streams, canals and rivers. Air and water form an integral part of our existence. As a matter of fact, eighty percent of the human body consists of water with air as its breath. In the absence of both these components, survival becomes nearly impossible. It is because of this reason that scarcity of fresh air and water has become a global concern. Pollution in all its forms has turned out to be monstrous for life-forms, human and non-human. As a matter of fact, the

polluted water of rivers being used for irrigation has resulted in widespread devastation of our unique fauna and flora. The poisoned water of rivers is also being consumed by all living organisms, aquatic and terrestrial. This results in their immediate death. Added to it are the pesticides used in the fields which, no doubt, help in eliminating pests but also happen to destroy many organisms such as earthworms that play a very important role in enhancing the fertility of soil. Similarly, air pollution in cities caused by industrial production and vehicular traffic results in numerous deaths, especially those of children and the aged. Imagine what would be the fate of humanity, fauna and flora in the midst of these problems. Increasing use of plastic is another area which deserves mention at this point. Almost all our containers are made up of plastic which mainly consists of polyethene. It may be noted that it is one of the most toxic substances ever invented by modern science. If it is burnt, it produces toxic waste and poisonous gases; if it is buried under the earth, it takes several hundred years to decompose, and in case it reaches the water table and gets mixed up with groundwater, the water itself becomes poisonous and becomes unfit for use. It is amidst such an environment that the need to redefine the relationship between nature, environment, elements and humans assumes utmost significance. Let us now try to understand these relationships in the background of Indian philosophy, and see how Indian philosophy can help us renew our bonding with nature and environment.

6.3 FORESTS AND INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Aum dyauh shantir antariksham shantih

Prithivi shantir aapah shantir aushadhayah shantih

Vanaspatayah shantir vishvedevah shantir brahma shantih

Sarvam shantih shantireva shantih

Sa ma shantiredhi

Aum shanti shanti shantih

Yajur Veda Samhita (36:17)

May peace radiate in the whole sky and in the vast ethereal space,

May peace reign all over this earth, in water, in all herbs and the
forests,

May peace flow over the whole universe,

May peace be in the Supreme Being,

May peace exist in all creation, and peace alone,

May peace flow into us.

Aum—peace, peace and peace!

There are three categories of forests mentioned in the Vedas, namely *tapovana*, *mahavana* and *shrivana*. The *tapovana* forests were mainly known for the dwellings of sages where the kings, princes and commoners could go and meet

them for advice. The word *tapa* means meditation, and through the technique of meditation, the sages could sharpen their intuitive knowledge. The *mahavana* forests were usually bigger in size and were the abode of all wild plants, trees, herbs and shrubs and animals. The *shrivana* forests were associated with temples and their flora was exclusively meant for religious use. Since endemic plants grow in specific climatic conditions, such native forests in the vicinity and jurisdiction of the temple were instrumental in the preservation of the indigenous flora and fauna. However, it may be noted that the association of fauna with flora was considered to be secondary as the primary focus was on the endemic plants.

Such forests or groves were distinct to certain communities living in specific geographical locales. Each community in the pre-Vedic times had some sort of beliefs associated with certain plants, and these were dedicated to their local deities. Groves in such situations got associated with gods, goddesses, and ancestral holy spirits. It would be appropriate to understand that the conservation of this endemic flora led to the harvesting of rainwater, as well as the preservation and conservation of soil and other natural resources. Ecological Heritage and Sacred Sites of India at CPR Environmental Education Centre has documented around ten thousand of these sacred groves from various regions and ecosystems of India. The state-wise distribution of these forests is as follows: Andhra Pradesh, 677; Arunachal Pradesh, 159; Assam, 29; Bihar, 43; Chhattisgarh, 63; Goa, 93; Gujarat, 42; Haryana, 57; Himachal Pradesh, 329; Jammu and Kashmir, 92; Jharkhand, 29; Karnataka, 1476; Kerala, 1096; Madhya Pradesh, 170; Maharashtra, 2820; Manipur, 166; Meghalaya, 105; Odisha, 188; Puducherry, 108; Rajasthan, 560; Sikkim, 16; Tamil Nadu, 1275; Telangana, 57; Uttarakhand, 133; Uttar Pradesh, 32; and West Bengal, 562. It is important to note here that the Northern states located in the lap of the great Himalayas, and the Western Ghats located in South India are the biodiversity hotspots of the day, whereas the desert areas of modern Rajasthan and Gujarat are instrumental in the preservation of local/endemic fauna and flora. It may be noted that the Gir forest is famous for its preservation of wild cats such as leopards, tigers and lions etc. Rajasthan, on the other hand, is known for its love of wild life and endemic plants. The Bishnoi community in the area has much respect for the groves. One may recall how the hunting of black buck by a filmstar had enraged and agitated the community. Despite the filmstar being a rich man, he could not influence the local population and it went all the way to take a legal recourse against him. All this is attributable to their staunch belief in the sacredness of the groves and in the protection accorded by the deities who reside in these groves. Such beliefs, therefore, play an important role in the preservation and conservation of endangered species such as the black buck.

In the state of Jammu and Kashmir such sacred forests are managed by religious bodies and are dedicated to deities such as Peer Baba and Mata Vaishno Devi. In the state of Haryana these groves are associated with Nau Gajja Peer and Mani Gaujja Peer who are endowed with the power to protect the medicinal plants and renew the underground water recharging systems.

The state of Himachal Pradesh, too, is famous for its temples and shrines, many of which are dedicated to forest deities such as Dev Van, Devata ka Jungle or

Bakhu Nag Devata, Ringarishi Devata (named after an ancient sage) and Devi, etc. Similarly, in the state of Uttarakhand also groves are known as *deo bhumi* and *bugyal*, a high-altitude alpine grassland or meadow. These groves are dedicated to Chandrabadni Devi, Hariyali Devi, Kotgadi Ki Kokila Mata, Pravasi Pavasuv Devata, Devrada or Saimyar. It may be noted that these forests represent a gene pool of indigenous species and are a source of rich plant diversity. Rituals and traditional practices in these groves play a crucial role in fostering many a threatened species.

The discussion on the subject would be incomplete without a reference to Lord Krishna who is famous for his *raasleela* and plays a pivotal role in the famous Indian epic, *Mahabharata*. Krishna grew up in the sacred forest region of Vraj (present-day Braj), where he played with his friends and milkmaids (*gopis*). It is recorded that there were several hundred forests in that area; however, in the present times this number is down to just twelve. All this is due to the negative impact of urbanization and industrialization. The most important is Vrindavana, the forest of Vrinda or Tulsi. Although they are all associated with the story of Lord Krishna, Vrinda Devi is the reigning goddess, installed in the Kamyavana.

Check Your Progress1

1. How were the forests looked at in the Vedas?Comment.
2. Do you think the forests played a preservative role in the earlier times?

6.4 WATER AND INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Water is an essential component of nature which plays a key role in the sustenance and propagation of life. The major sources of water are the glaciers, rivers, canals, wells, ponds, *bawris* (traditional water reservoirs), bays, seas and oceans. It is, however, important to know that not all water is suitable for human use. Excessive presence of salts in water makes it unfit for irrigation and oral consumption. Therefore, our focus is exclusively on fresh water which is living-giving. The Indian scriptures refer to Indra, the god of rain. It is the same god who was defeated by the legendary king Ravana's son in the famous epic *Ramayana*. It is because of this feat that he was known as Indrajit. More curious to note here is the fact that the sources of water in India are considered to be sacred and holy and imbued with the presence of a deity. People living in the villages near the course of Ganges take utmost care to save it from all sorts of pollution and disgrace because to them it is not just a river but a heavenly entity associated with Lord Shiva and his wife Parvati. It is believed that the mother Ganges flows from the curled hair locks of Lord Shiva. Similarly, Yamuna River originates from the Yamunotri glacier which is again considered to be a sacred place. In the places where rivers fail to reach, people rely on wells which depend upon the supply from the water table located below the surface of the earth. The water from the wells is used for drinking as well as irrigation purposes. However, the water tables keep getting recharged from the rain. India is a land of seasons wherein we have four seasons, namely Grishma, Sheet, Varsha and Sharad. These correspond to summer, winter, rainy and autumn respectively. Earth receives a substantial amount of fresh water during the rainy season, and fortunately when modern means of water supply were absent in yester years, this

water was stored in the form of ponds in the villages. It is interesting to note here that this water was so neat and clean and full of minerals that it was used for cooking purposes. This fact is not very old it is just twenty-to-thirty-old practice before the advent of modern pipe lines. Villages which had hard ground water full of sanity used to follow this practice. In the desertified areas of Rajasthan and Gujarat, individual houses had their own storage tanks; and it was in these tanks that the rain water was harvested for the entire periods of dry months. Such a practice not only helped the people in getting rid of the water scarcity but it was also instrumental in recharging our aquifers. Apart from this, the ponds, wells, and tanks also served another great purpose, and that was to save the village population from the fear of flood. It is equally interesting to note that almost all the human settlements were well planned and designed without playing with the basic design of nature. One may witness the recent flooding of many modern cities like Gurgaon during the monsoon season. Despite the fact that technology has advanced so much, we wonder how these cities were planned. It throws a serious question mark on the wisdom, efficiency and concern for the environment on our modern planners. Added to it is the nuisance of wild cats in the surroundings of these mega towns like Gurgaon and Manesar. Every now and then one hears the news of a leopard being caught in the barbed wires of the fencing of farm houses or its electrocution. It is indeed a sad state of affairs that we have thrown out the ecosystem out of gear for our selfish needs garbed in the guise of modernity, urbanization, and industrialization. Water logging on the roads for tens of hours and the floating of cars on roads is the inevitable result of so called 'urban development', and man's will to tamper with the natural order.

It has already been discussed that water is one of the five major constituents of the universe. It is therefore worshipped in every part of the country. Most of the pilgrimage sites are located near the rivers. Ganga, Kaveri, Narmada, Saraswati, Sindhu and Brahmaputra are some of the well-known sacred rivers. In the traditional practices, rivers are not only considered to be essential for sustaining life but these are even imbued with the status of a Goddess and a mother. A river feeds the fields and human life in a way which is akin to that of the mother feeding a child. There are various songs and hymns in praise of our rivers which are not only found in the movies but also in our ancient literatures. The hymns mentioned in *Rigveda* are in the form of *Nadistuti* hymn wherein *nadi* means river and *stuti*, prayer. When human beings get frustrated from the fever and fret of life, they have often been seen to be praying on river banks expecting some sort of a solution to their unresolved problems. The worldly journey of a human being was also not considered to be complete if he was not cremated near the bank of some river. All major civilizations and human habitats can be found to be near the river banks. Even our major highways, roadways, and railways can be seen to be following the natural course of our rivers. The dead are also cremated near the river banks, and their ashes offered to the river. When the skull catches fire, people take bath in the river before going home; and the ashes of the dead are collected on the third day when the fire has cooled down. If someone had got drowned in the river, and had flowed with its course never to be found again, it was never said that the river had killed him or he or she had died but giving it a sacred coloring based on their firm belief that the river is a living entity, it was said that such and such person has been taken along by the mother river. Such a

person was considered to be a part and parcel of that particular mother river's life. Based on the beliefs and faith of people in the river Ganges, the Uttarakhand High Court in a landmark judgment has considered the river Ganges as a living entity with all its fundamental rights. Visiting the river for a holy bath is considered to be a *tirth*, a sacred pilgrimage spot. The *Rigveda* suggests that *tirtha* means 'a way or road' (I.169.6, IV.29.3) or 'a ford in the river' (VIII.47.11). Yet, in other cases, it refers to any holy place, generally by the sea, river or an expanse of water made sacred by important events or the presence of great sages. Places such as Kashi are pilgrimage sites. The *Brahma Purana* classifies *tirthas* into four categories: *daiva*, i.e. created by the gods (such as rivers, the towns of Kashi, Pushkar, Prayag, etc.); *asura*, i.e. created by the demons (such as Gayasura); *arsha*, i.e. created by *rishis* or sages (such as Badari, Prabhasa, etc.); and *manusha*, i.e. created by mythical ancestors of humans such as Puru, Manu, etc. The Vedic sacrificial cult was transformed into *tirthas*, ensuring its spread along the banks of waterbodies. Sacrifices were conducted on the banks. Though the legends associated with the *tirthas* in the *Puranas* glorify their efficacy, they mention that merely a holy bath is not enough. The real pantheistic nature of the Hindu religion is reflected in these tales. The quality of *dana* at the *tirtha* is fused with the social religion of the *Puranas*.

6.5 LAKES AND INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Lakes in India have always been the reservoirs of water. The pure rain water was stored in the lakes, and the village ponds. Apart from daily supply of water for household needs and cattle requirements, these water bodies served as agents of replenishing the water table. Digging of ponds, lakes and wells was considered to be a noble act and many well off people were engaged in the maintenance of these water bodies. Like other elements of nature, the lakes were also significant for their direct relationship with the heavenly powers. One may recall the famous lake Rakshastal located to the west of Mansarovar. It is at one of the islands of this ubiquitous lake that the famous king of Lanka, Ravana offered each of his ten heads, one after the other, to lord Shiva till he granted him the powers he wished for. Unlike the Mansarovar lake which is round in shape, Rakshastal is of a crescent shape. The former is considered to be pious while the latter is treated as inauspicious owing to its association with the demonic king *Ravana*. In the village Narkatari of Kurukshetra district of Haryana, there is a pond which is named as Bhishma Kund. It is said that during the epic battle of *Mahabharata* when Arjuna had defeated Bhishma, he asked for water from the great warrior. Arjuna then with his sharp arrows drew water from the earth. Since, it was Bhishma who required water; the pond therefore, is named after him. There is a small temple near the pond where pilgrims from all over the country come every year to pay their homage to the legendary Pitamah Bhishma.

Temple tanks are artificial reservoirs generally built as part of the temple complex. They are called *pushkarini*, *kalyani*, *kund*, *sarovar*, *baoli/baori*, *vav*, *tirtha*, *talab*, *kovil kulam*, etc. in different languages and regions of India. The water of these tanks abounds in medicinal properties. It is curious to note that medical tourism which is considered to be a new phenomenon in the present-day world has been in vogue in India since times immemorial. Since India is known for its diversity, absence of a specific fauna or flora in a demarcated region may

be found to have its presence in some other area. The deficiency of certain minerals which led to diseases could be cured by the water from a specific source. It may be noted that the groves played an important role in the medicinal properties of the water found in the lakes near the temples. It is possible that the Great Bath of Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus–Sarasvati region was a temple tank, probably the oldest in the world. Pilgrims are permitted to wash their faces and feet in these tanks. Another notable feature of the temple wells is that while the water was extracted from other water bodies for daily use, the water from the temple tanks was not taken out for use as it was considered to be holy and sacred. Therefore, the temple tanks became important and valuable water bodies to recharge the ground water.

Baolis or *baoris* as they are called were quite common in northern India. Since water is a precious resource, and life without is not possible, our forefathers took utmost care of preserving this precious life giving source. There are famous baoris located in different parts of Northern India like the *baori* of Jaani Chor at Maham in Haryana; in Delhi also we have some of the well-known baoris. However, the best known *baori* that we have is located in Abhaneri village of Jaipur district of Rajasthan and is named as Chand Baori. It is not only a remarkable example of a water conservoir but is also an architectural marvel. It has 3500 steps, all made up of stones; and at the bottom is the well, conserving the rain water for difficult times. Over time, the *baori* in Abhaneri has become a tourist hotspot. Northeast India, too, has a tradition of temple tanks since the mediaeval times. Ahom kings are known for their dedication and devotion to patronizing the temple wells. The most notable among these tanks are: Joysagar tank (318 acres), Sibsagar tank (129 acres), Gowrisagar tank (150 acres) and Rudrasagar tank, which are still extant. Half of the Joysagar tank stands underwater. South India too has a tradition of maintaining wells. South India, being rain-fed, is heavily dependent on temple tanks formaintaining groundwater levels. Every temple has one or several tanks, with steps going down into the water. Haridra Nadhi, the temple tank of the Rajagopalaswamy Temple in Mannargudi (Tiruvapur district in Tamil Nadu), is the largest temple tank in India. It covers an area of 23 acres (93,000 sq. m). It is also known as the daughter of the Kaveri. It may however be noted that owing to the demands of urbanization and modernization many of these tanks and wells have become the dumping grounds for garbage while some others like Dharambudhi in Bangaluru district of Karnataka has been dried up to construct a bus stand for public use.

6.6 PLANTS AND ANIMALS IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Plants are an integral part of our environment. Apart from giving us food, fresh oxygen and rain, plants are also instrumental in the preservation of the soil. It is indeed impossible to imagine life without plants. That is why plants are considered to be highly sacred by the Indian society. Plants are also important because of socio economic importance and medicinal properties. When humanity was transforming itself from the hunting practices to food gathering habits, earth

came to be symbolized as the mother and plants were considered to be its blessings. Over the period of time, trees became the symbol of fertility and were supposed to be the abode of good as well evil spirits. Initially, when the forests were being cleared for agricultural purposes, at least one tree was left in the open. Spear, cane, plough or a sword was put under the tree. Later on, the area was fenced with wooden sticks. Gradually the wooden fencing was replaced with stone and this is how the modern temples evolved from the crude structure. It is curious to note the presence of trees in the vicinity of the temple. The site where the tree was present inside the temple was termed as *sthal vriksha*. Such sites have led to the preservation of the endemic endangered species of plants and trees. The earliest example of tree-worship dates back to Indus-Saraswati civilization as depicted on the seals of that period. One of the most holy trees is the *peepal* tree or *ashvattha* which is imbued with the power of removing the hundreds of year old sins. It may be noted that lord Buddha attained *nirvana* under a pipal tree, and lord Krishna breathed his last under the same. The *peepal* tree is therefore, sacred to both: the Hindus and the Buddhists. Moreover, the first instance of fire that we come across in literature is also because of the rubbing of pipal wood with Khejari, a tree which found in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan. The sanctity of these trees increases manifold, as they happen to be the originators of fire which forms the major component of the vital elements of universe. Fire is used in almost every Hindu ritual. Marriages are solemnized in the presence of fire, and the dead bodies are cremated, since fire only consumes the decayed human body. In rituals too, fire has an important role to play as almost all Indian prayers are begin with the lightening of a lamp or performance of a *havan*.

Banyan tree too is one of the most sacred plants. The sermon of *Shrimad Bhagvad Gita* was delivered by lord Krishna to Arjuna in Kurukshetra under a banyan tree. Natives still claim that the tree which is there at the site dates back to *Mahabharata* itself. Moreover, it is believed that lord Shiva sits under the banyan tree and Devi sits under a neem tree. *Neem* tree is famous for its medicinal qualities and is highly useful in the treatment of diseases like small pox. *Tulsi* is another plant which is usually found in every Indian home and is associated with Goddess Lakshmi. Inspired by the qualities of Tulsi plant, Bollywood has even made a film on it named as '*Main Tulsi Tere Aangan ki*'. Cluster fig or *udumbara* is another tree which can be witnessed in many a Indian household. It is associated with lord Vishnu and is believed to a life-wish fulfilling plant, and is generally termed as *kalpavriksha*. The trifoliate leaves of *kimshuka* represent the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar (Shiva). Similarly, mango which is considered to be a rich and prosperous fruit is also associated with important rituals. Its leaves are used to make a *torana* which is usually at the entrance of the house whereas; five mango leaves are used to decorate the coconut during prayes and other rituals. The coconut with three eyes is again considered to religiously important and it is usually broken by the priests in the temple and then distributed among the worshippers as *prasada*.

Yakshas and Yakshis

Yakshas and *Yakshis* are the angelic guardians of a specific community or a village, and it is believed that they reside on specific tree which is endemic to

that region. The word *yaksha* occurs several times in the *Rig Veda*, *Atharva Veda*, *Upanishads* and *Brahmanas*. We find among the Buddhist *Jatakas* the *Rukkhadamma* (or *Vriksha Dharma*) *Jataka*—dedicated to tree-worship. It is important to recall the traditional stories one might have heard from one's grandparents. The word *rukh* means a plant or a tree. It may be recalled that Vishvamitra and Jamadagni were produced by their mothers by embracing trees. The *Yakshas* bestowed wealth and progeny; they were supposed to bring about marriages, guard women's chastity, grant children and grandchildren and protect the foetus. The *yakshas* are vegetation spirits with powers of life. In Jainism also we find the mention of *yakshas*. It is believed that each *tirthankara* is attended by a *yaksha* and a *yakshi*; the most prominent being Ambika (*aam* or mango). Trees also provided shelter to the travelers, protected them from storms and rains, and also taught them metaphorically the lesson of resilience. When a strong gust of wind dashes against a tree, it bows and bends before it; however, when the gust of wind passes, it again becomes erect and regains its original position. Human life, too, is full of such gusts of fate, and it is nature who teaches us to be resilient in odd situations. We notice that with the passing of each day, the population on our planet is increasing by leaps and bounds, and each one of us is releasing a substantial amount of carbon dioxide. In such an odd situation, it is plants and only plants which can come to our rescue. Present-day scientific interpretation may term the phenomenon of associating the trees with deities as superstition, but even the strongest critic would agree to the fact that these beliefs were highly supportive in saving our ecosystems for generations and generations. Even in the present-day modern world where people believe in the tradition, culture and past practices, it may be noted that they are doing great service to the humanity through the preservation of our rich heritage of unique trees and biodiversity. It is thus noted that trees and plants have always been treated as the abode of Gods in the Indian philosophy and any intrusion on a plant is a sign of bad omen and is considered to be one of the most heinous religious and spiritual crime.

Animals

India's major contribution to the world in the domain of philosophy has been that of non-violence or *ahimsa*. People often see non-violence in the context of Gandhi. It may, however, be noted that the term is as old as the *Upanishads*; Gandhi had just borrowed it from there. It is in the *Upanishads* that we find the term '*Ahimsa Parmo Dharmah*'. Hence, the Indians believed in the non-killing of the animals as they believed that the Supreme Being resides in all forms whether it is animals or vegetation. Killing of animals therefore was forbidden; and the rise of Jainism which is an offshoot of Hinduism took place because while doing farming which necessitated the ploughing, many worms and reptiles were killed. Sensitive people therefore, left farming and became traders. It is because of this reason that nearly none from the Jain sect is a farmer. The *Chandogya Upanishad* bars violence against 'all creatures' (*sarvabhuta*) and the practitioner of *ahimsa* is said to escape from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, the transmigration of the soul of a human being or animal into a new body of the same or a different species. It also names *ahimsa*, along with *satyavachanam* (truthfulness), *arjavam*

(sincerity), *danam* (charity) and *tapah* (meditation), as one of the five essential virtues.

Check Your Progress2

1. How was water looked at in the Indian philosophy?
2. What was the place assigned to plants and animals in the Indian philosophy?

6.7 LET US SUM UP

After reading this unit you have become aware as to how Indian philosophy looks at various elements of the environment. From textual and other evidences you could understand the different ways in which the importance of the environmental elements were worked out, preserved and propagated in the Indian philosophy.

6.8 KEYWORDS

Gene pool: the stock of different genes in an interbreeding population.

Ecosystem: the interrelated complex of living and non living beings in our environment

6.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress1

1. See Section 6.3
2. See Section 6.3

Check Your Progress2

1. See Section 6.4 and 6.5
 2. See Section 6.6
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