

Research Article

A Vedic Model of Communication for Sustainable Development: Aspects of Environmental Communication in Srimad-Bhagwatam

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ABSTRACT

Environmental problems are widespread and plague the whole planet becoming one of the major problems facing the world today. In light of such environmental exigencies, communicating to the policy-makers and the citizens about ecological issues is a pertinent issues. This leads to questions like: How should such communication must be made? Who should be at the receiving end of such communication? Also, are scientific and technological advancements enough to deal with such ecological dangers? The paper endeavours to ask and answer these questions using the instance of an episode from Srimad-Bhagvatam, an ancient Hindu scripture. While attempting to answer these questions, the paper also highlights the Vedic model of sustainability which is presented through this episode.

Keywords: Environmental communication, Srimad-Bhagvatam, Sustainable Development, Vedic, Communication studies

Environmental communication aims at communicating about ecological issues which impact our present and the future and endeavour to find a way to negotiate with such contingencies. It makes the society and the authorities wake-up to environmental threats and respond accordingly. Environmental concerns such as climate change, pollution and global warming have become one of the central issues which have arrested the attention of mankind all over the world. The urgency of tending to environmental dangers is quite realized by the authorities in their governmental capacity and to some degree environment friendly measures have also been implemented in various facets of human life. However, it is through communicating about the dangers faced by our environment and subsequently about any resolutions which can be put into practice, that we can minimize the harm which mankind is collectively meting out to its milieu. The paper attempts to put forth as to how environmental urgencies should be communicated and dealt with, and in turn also highlights a Vedic model of environmental sustainability. The study aims at discourse analysis for environmental communication where a selected episode from an oral text in the ancient Indian tradition will be analyzed to demonstrate the underlying ecological predicaments facing mankind.

The conversation between Planet Earth and King Prithu in Canto 4 of Srimad Bhagvatam charts out a course of communication and action which needs to be emulated so that harmony and peace in terms of environmental sustainability can be attained by the mankind and its animate and inanimate cohabitants. The west has in the past also, looked towards the east for answers to myriad

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A Vedic Model of Communication for Sustainable Development: Aspects of Environmental Communication in Srimad-Bhagwatam

philosophical enquiries and this episode is another example of how the wisdom of the eastern world may be applicable to the predicament faced by the whole mankind. This model of communication also establishes that for the oriental world, the environment and its anxieties were in earnest consideration much before the occident woke up to the fact. Hinting at the intermingling of environment, culture, politics and communication, the analysis ventures to contribute to the existing perspectives on environmental communication and the urgency about ecological preoccupations which must be realized by humanity – whether oriental or occidental.

Srimad Bhagvatam: Unravelling Bottom up approach of Communication

Written by Sage Vedvyasa, Srimad Bhagvatam, is an ancient Indian scripture which encompasses all that constitutes the science of spirituality in the Vaishnav tradition. It is one of the eighteen Puranas and is believed to hold the essence of all Vedas. Consisting of twelve cantos, the scripture has a wide scope including the history of creation, its inhabitants across history, and ultimately the essence of all existence – the need to develop the love of Godhead. However, through its various narratives, it can be seen that the scripture also offers an ideal way of living, one which satisfies all and harms none, in other words - environmental sustainability. As Coz and Depoe point out,

Sustainability science has been defined as applied research that spans and integrates multiple physical and social science disciplines and is directed toward the management of human-environment systems in ways that meet needs for human livelihoods while protecting ecosystem and environmental integrity. (Cox and Depoe 18)

The fourth canto of the book delineates the coronation of King Prithu as the new king after the evil King Vena was dethroned by the elite teaching class of the society i.e., the brahmanas. However, once King Prithu was coronated as the king, in an ideal example of existence of communication between the governor and the governed, his subjects approach him, complaining of all-pervading starvation and misery.

Dear King, just as a tree with a fire burning in the hollow of the trunk gradually dries up, we are drying up due to the fire of hunger in our stomachs. You are the protector of surrendered souls, and you have been appointed to give employment to us. Therefore we have all come to you for protection...You can give us all kinds of occupational engagements, for you are the master of our livelihood. Therefore, O king of all kings, please arrange to satisfy our hunger by the proper distribution of food grains. Please take care of us, lest we soon die for want of food. (Trans. SB 4.18.10-11)

Miller and Dinan assert that inspite of all urgencies related to the rising temperature of the planet “meaningful political action on climate is painfully slow” (Miller and Dinan 85), expressing that for significant policy related changes in the field of environmental sustainability and involvement of political leaders in the issue is the topmost concern. Thus, the first standard or step in the process which the episode establishes is the participation of politics and political leadership in the cause of saving the nature, as later the reason found out for all the misery is nothing, but violation of planet Earth. The situation is a perfect example of bottom-up approach of communication where the subordinates convey their dilemmas and demands to their superiors. Carvalho and Peterson put forth that bottom-up approach of communication is significant, as

Engagement starts with citizens who see faults in the ways formal political institutions deal with climate change and advance alternative forms of governance, whether through proposals for different governmental policies or through social and economic changes. (Carvalho and Peterson 12)

A lesson for our present day governmental systems, the episode displays both- the surrendered nature as well as the power of those who are at the lowest level of the power hierarchy. The model asserts that in an exemplary communicative paradigm, a dialogue between the ruler and the ruled is always open. Also, unlike the modern day democratic systems when the elected representatives are unable or unavailable to hear the pleas of their electors, the episode hints at a monarchy being a more successful form of government where a possibility of direct communication is not ruled out. The denizens approach the king with all ingenuity and without any fear what so ever. As his citizens approach the newly coronated king, it is also seen that the king is quick to take responsibility for the lack of food grains on Planet Earth, implying that it an onus on the part of the ruler to ensure that his denizens are being provided for adequately. Hence, in a perfect communicative situation, the governor is able to receive, decode and understand the message and realize that if his newfound subjects are suffering with a crisis, it is his responsibility to find a panacea for the same.

Environmental Communication: Need of agencies beyond human world?

Being an ideal ruler, King Prithu proceeds to undertake a plan of action which includes killing Planet Earth. It can be understood that to acquire and win the trust and fulfil his duties as a ruler, the King must soon reach a solution to satisfy his starving subjects. And thus, 'Having arrived at a conclusion, the King took up his bow and arrow and aimed them at the earth, exactly like Lord Śiva, who destroys the whole world out of anger'. (Trans. SB 4.18.13)

And next,

When the earth saw that King Pṛthu was taking his bow and arrow to kill her, she became very much afraid and began to tremble. She then began to flee, exactly like a deer, which runs very swiftly when followed by a hunter. Being afraid of King Pṛthu, she took the shape of a cow and began to run. (Trans. SB 4.18.14)

This brings us to another idea, i.e., cultural constructions in communication. Helpless due to sudden attack, Planet Earth could not find any way to convey her guilelessness to the king as she could see that for the king, his populace is the topmost concern. As a result, she took the form of a cow to escape killing, as according to the ancient Indian belief system propagated through various scriptures, a cow is considered holy and designated a mother for its milk. As per his kingly duties, the king is also supposed to protect his innocent subjects which also include animals. Thus, to convey or articulate her surrender to and fear of the angry king, she assumed the body of a cow and ran hither and thither to escape the onslaught.

However, realizing that the king is still not ready to leave her, the cow shaped Earth at last approached the king very humbly. The episode substantiates what Milstein observes, that "the study of environmental communication [is also extended] to the possibility of articulating 'agency beyond the human world,' or nature as 'an active subject' (qtd. in Cox and Depoe 19). It is Earth herself who demands what she requires and voices her needs, being active and not passive in

**A Vedic Model of Communication for Sustainable Development: Aspects of Environmental Communication
in Srimad-Bhagwatam**

communicating to the king. The fact pertinently throws light on the idea of how in an ideal situation for environmental communication, even non-speaking subjects are given a voice. This decision of hers to take shelter of the king points out at scriptural injunction of the way a subordinate must approach his/her superior when in danger. As per the episode, the superior is bound to listen to the subsidiary when he/she puts herself in a humble position and rather calls his ruler ‘merciful’, ‘protector’ and ‘affectionate’. In fact, just few lines following the king’s reproach of the Earth, she profusely glorifies king Prithu.

Addressing the great, opulent King Prithu as the knower of religious principles and shelter of the surrendered, she said: Please save me. You are the protector of all living entities. Now you are situated as the King of this planet...I am very poor and have not committed any sinful activities. I do not know why you want to kill me. Since you are supposed to be the knower of all religious principles, why are you so envious of me, and why are you so anxious to kill a woman? Even if a woman does commit some sinful activity, no one should place his hand upon her. And what to speak of you, dear King, who are so merciful. You are a protector, and you are affectionate to the poor.(Trans. SB 4.18.18-20)

My dear Lord, although You are one, by Your inconceivable potencies You have expanded Yourself in many forms. Through the agency of Brahmā, You have created this universe. You are therefore directly the Supreme Personality of Godhead....the cause of all causes. I offer my respectful obeisances unto You.(Trans. SB 4.18.32-4)

Also, this plea of the cow conveys the fact that in a perfect political scenario, animals can also communicate directly to their king and approach them for taking shelter, a utopian situation in today’s scenario when political leaders do not give heed even to their marginalized human subjects. The planet Earth is intelligent enough to realize that without the guidance and permission of the king to his subjects, her motives cannot be fulfilled. The remedy which she could find for her stricken condition was to also acquaint the king about her misery so that he could support her, indicating that ecology and politics are deeply interconnected. Environmental solutions cannot be undertaken in a reclusive manner, but rather demands participation from everyone.

Thus, the plaint of both, the human and the animal subjects of the king convey that in an impeccable system of government, the problems related to the environment can be transmitted without any medium or fear of reproach. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that in such a society and administrative set-up, it is the most natural way of communicating things. Also, the fact that the Earth refers to itself as a woman reveals that in the Vedic way of existence, the Earth is not seen as inanimate, rather, it is seen as the source of life itself. This idea precedes the occident’s concept of Mother Earth, corroborating that for the Vedic civilization, the Earth was always seen as a person and not a thing. And as per the Vedic injunctions, the Earth, (who is a woman) also needs protection from those which to assault her and demean her existence. In an almost symbiotic way of co-existing, the Earth is seeking protection just as women of the world do, articulating the need of not only planet Earth, but also the women who constitute a part of the king’s populace and any populace whatsoever. To seek assurance for their own protection and communicating to the ruler for their protection acquires one of the chief dimensions in this instance, which the cow-shaped Earth exhibits.

Communication through Protestation: A Vedic Model of Environmental Sustainability

As Moser opines, ‘In seeking to support human evolution toward our highest possible self, it must seek, communicate, and engage in exploring new cultural ideals and aspirations that will lessen the destructive human impact on the planet’ (Moser 407). It is precisely this ancient/new model of philosophical outlook and its practical application that the conversation between the king and planet Earth constructs. The cow-shaped planet Earth points out to the king is that in spite of all her pleas, if the king kills her, it will drown the whole inhabitation on the Earth in the garbha water. This consequence not only hints at a grave threat in the episode but also divulges a threat for us, the people inhabiting Planet Earth in the post-millennium century.

My dear King, I am just like a strong boat, and all the paraphernalia of the world is standing upon me. If you break me to pieces, how can you protect yourself and your subjects from drowning? (Trans. SB 4.18.21)

In spite of all its warnings, if we continue to assault and plunder the Earth, its collapse will endanger our own existence. It can be understood that the human population and the planet are subsisting together and that it is the human population which will pay a bigger price if environmental exigencies are not dealt with in a cautious manner.

Hearing the argument of the cow, King Prithu agrees to share his immediate concerns with the Earth and explains that he is trying to kill her because she refuses to give food grains to his citizens, continues to hide them and as a ruler he is duty-bound to give succour to his subjects. The answer of Planet Earth to the king’s blatant accusation forms the chief substance of the whole model of environmental sustainability that the episode communicates. Seeing that the king’s anger cannot be pacified immediately she puts across her perspective before him ‘and began to speak as follows in order to convince the King’ (Trans. SB 4.19.1). She expressing herself in a humble manner that the king must listen to her viewpoint as well because ‘a learned man takes the essence of knowledge from all places, just as a bumblebee collects honey from each and every flower’ (Trans. SB 4.19.2). The cow presents a humble, strategic and assertive approach of communication to somebody who is not in a mental frame to receive positive communication. By first glorifying she reminds the king of his greatness, and later in a subtle way acquires some scope of being heard by her outraged master, to convey the most significant aspect of this interchange.

As Lester and Cottle suggest, it is protestations which convinces the policy makers of their lapse in decision-making, consequently aiding in communication about ecological dangers. The plaint of the cow is protest against injustice being meted out to her. In modern day world where digital technology aids the spreading of any such campaign, it is imperative that we must make each other aware and raise a voice against compromises being made with regard to environmental sustainability. In an ancient instance of protestation against environmental threats, the cow refuses to give any source of life to those who do not follow the natural way of co-habitation with planet Earth

Through creative protest repertoires, campaigners seek to bring recognition to issues of global concern, secure legitimacy for their cause and mobilize identities and voices of support worldwide... Protests and resistance increasingly serve to focus political and public opinion on crises and issues of international and global concern (Lester and Cottle 101-2)

A Vedic Model of Communication for Sustainable Development: Aspects of Environmental Communication in Srimad-Bhagwatam

To make the articulation of her viewpoint more reliable and bona fide, the cow begins to refer to the fact that what she will be saying is not her mental concoction. Rather, it is sanctioned by ‘the great seers and sages [who] have prescribed various methods conducive to the prosperity of the people in general.’(Trans. SB 4.19.3). The approach of the cow hints at way administrative communications must be made- that it should have a proper basis. In this case the srutis (Vedic injunctions) and smritis, (additional supplementary explanations) written by ancient sages, legitimize and validate the case of the cow. She reiterates the significance of her authentication by saying that ‘A foolish person who manufactures his own ways and means through mental speculation and does not recognize the authority of the sages who lay down unimpeachable directions is simply unsuccessful again and again in his attempts’ (Trans. SB 4.19.5). Moving forth, she comes to the chief reason why she is retaining all the foodgrains inside herself.

My dear King, the seeds, roots, herbs and grains, which were created by Lord Brahmā in the past, are now being used by nondevotees, who are devoid of all spiritual understanding. My dear King, not only are grains and herbs being used by nondevotees, but, as far as I am concerned, I am not being properly maintained. Indeed, I am being neglected by kings who are not punishing these rascals who have turned into thieves by using grains for sense gratification. Consequently I have hidden all these seeds, which were meant for the performance of sacrifice. (Trans. SB 4.19.6-7)

With much clarity and pertinence, the Earth proclaims that the cause of the mankind’s misery is they themselves, as they do not follow the scriptural way of co-habiting with the nature and do not fulfill her demands. The model of environmental sustainability which planet Earth suggests, rather asserts, is one that co-exist with a life of sacrifice. Hinting at the presence of lack of compassion and resulting selfishness, the cow asserts that she would refuse to supply to those who simply use the natural resources to fulfill their senses and do not understand the science of spirituality. Most poignantly, the Earth admits to having hidden all source of life within herself because neither the human race, nor their governors are taking charge of a scripturally approved way of living. As the natural resources are not used in a scripturally sanctioned manner, she refers to the human population as thieves. As per the Bhagvad-Gita and Srimad-Bhagvatam, if one enjoys anything without first offering it in sacrifice or yajna is considered a thief, as his sole motivation is to satisfy his own senses and mind. Also, due to such sensual use of its resources, the Earth feels uncared for by people who plunder her for their selfish use. The cow’s appeals repeatedly hints at the idea that the Earth is seen in the Vedic scriptures as a person with her own requirements and not an inanimate thing to be exploited ceaselessly.

However, realizing the desperation of the king, planet Earth relents that the king can arrange to take out the seeds from inside her. But, the condition remains- the king must follow the process recommended in the shastras or scriptures. This implies that under no situation, must a subordinate comply with her superior if it involves a compromise of principles since here the pivot around which the whole episode is constructed is scriptural injunctions and putting them into practice to avoid any environmental threatening emergencies. Thus, in the concluding action, the king is instructed by the cow,

O great hero, protector of living entities, if you desire to relieve the living entities by supplying them sufficient grain, and if you desire to nourish them by taking milk from me, you should make arrangements to bring a calf suitable for this purpose and a pot in which the milk can be kept, as well as a milkman to do the work. Since I will be very much

affectionate towards my calf, your desire to take milk from me will be fulfilled (Trans. SB 4.19.9-10)

The cow-shaped Earth conveys the most potent truth in the whole conversation – that it will automatically, willingly and rather gladly endow the inhabitants of the planet with abundance, if she feels happy and satisfied by their conduct. The planet Earth becomes her own mouthpiece to convey to the population at large that life full of sense gratification, selfishness and lack of compassion cannot please the Earth. It is this underlying truth which forms the basis of all conversation in this instance. In the proceedings of the First World Congress on Communication for Development, sustainable development was one the key issues and it was pointed out that

participatory approaches can facilitate the dialogue and exchange of knowledge and information on natural resource management, increase the community knowledge base (both indigenous and modern), promote agricultural practices compatible with the environment, and develop awareness in policy makers, authorities, and service providers. (World Congress on Communication for Development 71)

This instruction also establishes that the cow-shaped earth has now realized the good intentions with which the king poses a threat to her life and seeing the grave concern of the king she decides to relent. In the events that follow, planet Earth gives milk to various types of earthly inhabitants and all categories of living beings receive their share of requirements to continue life.

Conclusion

The model which the instance reveals is one that fosters connection and communication within a community so as to bring the governors and the governed together. It highlights the importance of dialogue in the power hierarchy, inclusion of extra-human subjects and the importance of protest to attain the desired objective as effective tools of environmental communication. The model of environmental sustainability which arises out of the episode is one that is built on sacrifice of the subjects and nurturing the Earth by using it for unselfish motives. The episode reveals that in order to meet our present day environmental contingencies we must look at the solutions which may not always arise out of technological advancements but rather from going back in the course of time and acquiring some ancient/new cultural ideals. These measures entail the consolidation of relations between human beings and extra-humans where the humans visualise a world beyond their own sense gratification. The present disconnection which we feel from our ancient wisdom (already communicated by many sages and seers) needs to be revoked and revived if we wish to bring a constructive change in the way the environmental crises are dealt with. The solution offered here is one that would contest the technological driven resolutions of all problems which the present population seems to concentrate on. The need of the hour is to realize the potential resolutions offered herein and disseminate them using technology so that we can restore our planet back to its former glory. The wisdom may have arisen and have been conveyed in an Indian cultural context many centuries ago, but holds true for the whole mankind across nations and borders and across timelines.

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