

Ancient Science of India 1: Ethnobotanical Visions of Young Srikrishna, Reflected in the Epic Bhagavata

Sachidananda Padhy

Vedic Science Research Centre, Bhaba Nagar 1, Brahmapur 760 004, Odisha, India
E-mail: sachi_padhy@rediffmail.com

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ABSTRACT Plant life is ever devoted for the benevolence of others. The philosophy of selfless sacrifice is to be learned from the plants. This ethnobotanical theme narrated by Srikrishna to his friends while tending the cows in the epic Bhagavata, is the point of discussion in this communication.

INTRODUCTION

Human relationship with the surrounding biota is as ancient as the evolution of man, which occurred in a synchronized form with the gathering of fruits/tubers or hunting of animals for the purpose of food by the paleolithic man on this earth. The subject ethno-biology (ethno-botany and ethno-zoology) is a thrust area of research which brings out man's relationship with bio-resources, with greater emphasis on cultural, spiritual and social aspects. Of course, this relationship of men and bio-resources evolve and change keeping pace with the change of space and time. Thus any knowledge existing in an organized and/or codified form has a primary origin from common man itself. The science of ethno-biology is committed to exploring such biological knowledge restricted to the common man, may seem to be unjustified or scientifically not supported by experimental data; but is traditional and more nearer to human conception and reality.

In 1896, Harshberger coined the term 'Ethno-botany' with a limited scope of the subject to point at the plants used by the aboriginals (Harshberger 1896). In course of time the science of Ethno-biology emerged with genuine academic research activities as existing today to explore the relationship between men and surrounding biota, with multi-dimensional view point (Padhy et al. 2015). The present communication is devoted to explore the Ethno-botanical visions of Srikrishna as reflected in the epic Bhagavata five thousand years ago (Saraswati 2008).

METHODOLOGY

The interrelationship between men and surrounding biota is of two types: (a) material and

(b) cultural or spiritual. Such relationship can be further categorized into four sub-groups, that is,

- i) Relationships useful to men and biota,
- ii) Relationships useful to men; but harmful to biota,
- iii) Relationships useful to biota; but harmful to men and
- iv) Relationships harmful both to men and biota (Jain 2001).

Irrespective of men-biota relationship discussed above, the research techniques in Ethno-biology can be broadly put it into two categories, viz. (1) Field research (2) Literary research. A broad discussion of both the techniques are reflected elsewhere (Padhy et al. 2015). In literary research, study of ancient literature and mythology is a new dimension in ethno-biological exploration (Padhy 1998), as approved earlier (Jain and Rao 1983). Moreover, the ancient scientific thoughts, encapsulated in the Sanskrit (or any other language) hymns and religious icons in symbolic terms and/or forms are analysed through literary research technique. This provides scope to realise the importance of ancient Indian environmental and ethical education.

In the present context the Sanskrit epic Bhagavata, written by saint Veda Vyasa is the study material. The epic has two volumes. The first one deals with different incarnations of *Bhagawan* Vishnu and the second volume is mostly devoted to describing the different life activities of Srikrishna. In the 12th part (*Skanda* – SK), 23 chapter (*Addhaya* – AD), the ethno-botanical concepts described by Srikrishna is focused, is the theme material of discussion in this communication.

THE EVENT

Srikrishna had spent his childhood days at Gopapura. It was a village of milkmen and they

were selling their daily milk products in the nearby town Mathura. The King of Mathura was Kansa, who happened to be the uncle of Srikrishna. In a dramatic situation Srikrishna was transferred secretly from Mathura to Gopapura just after his birth, by his father Basudeva. The village Head of Gopapura was King Nanda, a friend of Basudeva; in whose house Srikrishna grew up along with his elder brother Balarama. Nanda, his family and the whole village was not aware that, Srikrishna was of *Kshatriya* cast and son of imprisoned Basudeva and Devaki, born in a jail in Mathura was an exchanged child (and more elaborations of the event is avoided in this communication). As usual, as the son of Nanda and Yasoda; Srikrishna's life started as a cowherd boy. Everyday he used to go to the nearby forest area (Brundaban) with the cows along with elder brother Balarama and other friends with their own cattle.

One day while tending the cows, the whole group went far-away from Brundabana. It was summer season with penetrating sun rays. All took shelter under the shade of trees. Being impressed with the cool surrounding Srikrishna called all his friends—Sthookakrishna, Ansu, Sridama, Subala, Arjuna, Bisala, Rushova, Tejaswi, Debaprashta and Baruthapa around him. He narrated them the supreme importance of plants as follows:

Srikrishna said –

“Look look my dear friends!

Look at the trees!

These plants are so lucky.

“Their whole life is devoted for the benevolence of others. They themselves tolerate the hot sun, rain and oppression of diseases; yet save us from such troubles (SK-12/AD-23/Version (V)-32)”.

“In my opinion, their life is the best life, because they provide protection to all animals. For them only the living world has subsistence. As a beggar never returns empty handed from the house of an honest person, similarly any one whoever he may be, gets some benefit or other from these plants (SK-12/AD-23/V-33)”.

“These plants provide leaves, flowers, fruits, shade, root (medicinal), bark, wood, fragrance, ash, gum, charcoal, sprouted parts and tender leaves to everyone and fulfill their desires (SK-12/AD-23/V-34)”.

“Dear brothers! There are innumerable living organisms in this world; but the success of their life depends on one basic theme, ‘that is benefaction of others’. He, who dedicates his mind, words and

wealth for the cause of others with a simple life style; his life is praise-worthy (SK-12/AD-23/-V35)”.

“Talking like this Srikrishna and his friends along with the cows passed through the hedge of trees on two sides of their way. The plants were so much enriched with leaves, flowers and fruits that, the branches were in hanging down conditions. Finally they reached at the bank of river Jamuna (SK-12/AD-23/V-36)”.

“The water of Jamuna was cool, clear and sweet. At first they caused the animals to drink water and after that quizzed self to relieve their thirst (SK-12/A-23/V-37)”.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Srikrishna's Ethnobotanical (biological) visions reveals the following facts:

1. The plant life is devoted for the sustenance of others; the best life.
2. The sustenance of the living world fully depends on the phytodiversity (as the source of food, medicine, oxygen and other essential things).
3. Each and every one gets benefit from plants in many forms, either directly or indirectly.
4. One must learn the philosophy of selfless sacrifice from the plants,
5. Moreover, Srikrishna and his friends first allowed the cows to drink the water in Jamuna before quenching their own thirst. This is a great symbol of love for other living entities.

All the above discussed deliberations of a young boy Srikrishna is supreme and proves his extraordinary perception of the environmental knowledge. Even in His dress code since childhood had two significant things (symbols) can be marked – a peacock quill on his crest and a bamboo flute with his hand. The former represents the Animal Kingdom and the latter the Phytodiversity. Manusmruti has focused that, the birds are at higher mental status than the other members of Animal Kingdom (Manu XII / 42-44). Peacock (*Pavo cristatus*) is the National Bird of India and has rich religious and legendary involvement in Indian traditions (Padhy 2017).

The sound vibration (AUM) released from the flute is the *Anahata Naada* (Eternal cosmic vibration) which used to vibrate the whole environment, that a yogi realizes at a particular state of meditation (Padhy 2020). More about the effects of flute sound

of Srikrishna as realized by a great devotee of Sri Jagannath is reflected in Box – 1.

In Hindu mythology the philosophy of incarnation (descending of the divinity/cosmic intelligence) is so rational, scientific and elaborated, that it deserves separate status of Doctrine. There was attempt to search out the hidden scientific theme of ten prominent incarnations, who are regarded as the powers of maintenance of the cosmic ecology. The incarnations represent the concept of ancient Indians on the Biological and Anthropological evolution. Srikrishna is regarded as *Poorna Brahma* (a complete divine) who appeared with his elder brother Balarama, comparatively with less divine potentiality. Krishna's love for cows and Balarama holding a weapon system like a plough set, significantly represent both the brothers as encouragers of agriculture and animal husbandry along with cultural evolution and politics, which reached the zenith during Dwaapara Yuga (Krishna's time) (Panigrahy et al. 2002). This is a strong step to rejuvenate the biodiversity by both the incarnated brothers.

Bhagavad Gita is a part of epic Mahabharata, is based on the question- answer between Arjuna and Srikrishna in the mid of the battle field five thousand years ago. The human work culture of Gita is analyzed from knowledge, yoga, devotion, duty, worldly affairs and renunciation point of view by many learned persons. Srikrishna's mission for environmental education to humanity has explained the awesome nature of the cosmos, age of the universe, fundamental principles of environmental science, creation of life and evolution, basic theme for conservation and ramification of the biodiversity, diversity of human characters and work culture for sustenance of life at par with the modern science (Padhy 2019). This is how Srikrishna stands as an ethno-environmentalist amidst his diversity of characters.

In the 10th chapter of Gita, Srikrishna has focused the whole Animal Kingdom based on animal classification reflected in Manusmruti and presented Himself as tree *Asswattha* (*Ficus religiosa*) representing the phytodiversity (Padhy 2019). In fact throughout India *Asswattha* is worshipped as a representative of *Bhagawan* Vishnu (Padhy et al. 2020). Interestingly in Chapter 15 of the Gita, the Human Ecology is presented symbolically as an *Asswattha* plant existing in inverted condition (Padhy 2021). Srikrishna's love for plants is highlighted in the Gita as follows:

Box 1

The Magical Flute of Srikrishna: Analysis of an Ardent Muslim Devotee

In the 16th Century, there was a great devotee of Sri Jagannath (incarnation of Srikrishna) at Puri, Odisha, India, named Salbeg. He, was the son of a Muslim invader Jahangir Kulee Khan (nick name Lalbeg) and a Hindu Brahmin Childhood widow (a forceful relationship). Salbeg was not allowed to enter into Sri Mandir. He had to wait for a year to have a *Darsan* (Look) of Sri Jagannath during the *Ratha Yatra*. He had written a good number of lyrical devotional prayers, which he used to sing roaming around the temple every day. These songs are so lively that they are still vibrating in the tones of Odisha people everywhere every day and the vibration is attracting outsiders, pilgrims.

Now also, every year during the world famous *Ratha Yatra*, the chariot of Sri Jagannath halts near the tomb of Salbeg on the way during Lord's journey. This is the highest regard to the devotee shown by Odisha people and culture. In a specific lyric, Salbeg has focused the peculiar changes happened in the environment due to the *Melifluoxus* tune in the flute played by Srikrishna, such as: All the three worlds overwhelmed, the water of river Jamuna became motionless and the fishes leaving the resort in water fell on the shore. The vibration of the tune molten the rocks that streamed.

The deer's clenched the grass in their mouths by observing silence and their looks out of the corners of their eyes became unbalanced listening the magical sweet tune in the flute.

The music of the flute induced fertility in infertile women and the yogis enjoyed the cosmic sound in deep meditation. The leaves felled from the trees and dried plants blossomed (as if the untimely spring season had appeared).

The young brides became socially shameless (and came out of the house to listen the flute). The Gopis of the Gopapura forgot the pain caused by the mundane world and without paying any heed to the admonition of the in-laws, left for Jamuna river to bring water (with an inner urge to meet Srikrishna). They stared curiously by almost becoming wooden idol (Misra 1976).

Salbeg requests Srikrishna at every step of the lyric not to blow the flute for the stability of the environment and says at last that without Radha Krishna, there exists none. Moreover the analysis of the flute tune of Srikrishna by a Muslim devotee and spell bound reactions of the whole ecology convey a great divine message of religious integrity and love for Biodiversity.

"If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit or water, I will accept it (Gita 9/26)" (Prabhupada 1972).

God does not want our costly offerings, but only a plant part with devotion. This is how Srikrishna has expressed the importance of phytodiversity and his love. Moreover, plants have consciousness, feeling and expression just like the animal world (Padhy et al. 2020).

Gita has described the Supreme Divine personality as follows (11/16, 23; 13/13) :

“He has endowed with numerous arms, hands, thighs and feet on all sides; many bellies and heads in all directions with innumerable mouths, teeth, eyes and ears all round, extended in countless forms pervading everywhere.”

This description is the most appropriate representation of the global biosphere as a single unit as per the modern ecological science (Padhy 2019). Moreover, Srikrishna has said that, perception and realization of one imperishable divine existence as undivided and equally present in all individual beings in the true essence of worship to the divinity. Latest research has focused that, this greatest philosophy of Gita is the only means for the conservation of the Biodiversity (Padhy 2018).

Few significant ethno-biological versions of Srikrishna in Bhagvad Gita are as follows:

Who is delighted in the welfare of all beings, attains the beatitude of the Supreme Being (*Brahman*) (05/25).

He who sees Me (the universal self) present in all beings and all beings existing within Me, never loses sight of Me and I never lose sight of him (6/30).

He who, established in oneness, worships me abiding in all being; abides in me. No matter what he does (6/31).

He who looks on all as one, on the analogy of his own self, and looks upon the pleasure and pain of all with a similar eye-is regarded as supreme (6/32).

The life element by which this universe upheld -is my higher nature (7/5).

I am the life in all beings (7/9).

Know Me as the eternal seed of all beings (7/10).

All beings reside within the Supreme *Purusha* (God) and by whom all this is pervaded (8/22).

My divine power (of yoga) is the sustainers and creator of the beings (9/5).

Know that all beings abide in me (9/6).

I generate all beings again at the beginning of next creation (9/7).

I send forth again and again all this multitude of beings helpless under the regime of nature (9/8).

I am equally present in all beings, there is none hateful or dear to me (9/29).

I am the self-seated in the hearts of all beings. I am the beginning, the middle and also the end of all beings (10/20).

I am the consciousness (life-energy) in living beings (1/22).

I am the seed of all life (Genetic principle DNA). No creature, moving or inert, that can exist without me (10/39).

Those who are engaged in the welfare of all being- verily they come unto me (12/4).

He who is free from malice towards all beings, friendly and compassionate to all – is dear to me (12/13).

He who is not a source of annoyance to his fellow-creatures, and who in his turn does not feel vexed with his fellow-creatures - is dear to me (12/15).

He alone truly sees, who sees the supreme lord as imperishable and abiding equality in all perishable beings, both animate and inanimate (13/27).

Whatever forms (species of various kinds) are produced, in any womb whatsoever, the nature is the conceiving Mother, while I am the seed-giving Father (14/4).

The eternal; *Jiivaatmaa* in the body of beings of the biodiversity (*Jiivalaka*) is a part of My own being (15/7).

I support all creatures by my vital energy (5/13).

I am seated in the hearts of all (15/15).

The Lord dwells in the hearts of all beings, causing them to revolve as though mounted on a machine (18/61).

The great Indian saint Srikrishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1536) has focused the art of God realization adopting the character of plants such as (Padhy 1999; Padhy et al. 2020):

“*Trunaadapi suneechena
tarorapi sahishnuna;
amaaina maanadena
keertaneeyah sadaa Hari.*”

Meaning:

Be humble like a grass,
tolerant as a tree;
being egoless, respect all,
always sing the glory of *Hari*.

CONCLUSION

Research on the epic Bhagavad Gita reveals the scientific background of the then time, five thousand years ago, as narrated by Srikrishna in the midst of the Mahabharata battle field, discussed earlier. By that time He was the king of Dwarika and was sufficiently aged and learned. But the Ethno-botanical theme narrated by young Srikrishna to his friends, while tending the cows regarding the philosophy of selfless sacrifice of the

plant world; proves the truth of the long existing proverb 'Morning shows the day.'

RECOMMENDATIONS

Plant life is ever devoted for the benevolence of others. This is the greatest lesson for the self-oriented human beings.

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