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Importance of Eco-friendly Space for the Intellectual Erudition and Spiritual Enlightenment

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Introduction – Concept of 'Eco-Friendly'

Today we speak about **Eco Friendly Houses**, Eco Friendly **Products**, Eco Friendly **Clothing**, Eco Friendly **Cars**, Eco Friendly **Living**, Eco Friendly **Materials**, Eco Friendly **Furniture**, and the Ways of one could be Eco-Friendly etc. In the field of higher education we speak of Eco-Theology, Ecosophy, Eco-Ethics, Eco-Spirituality etc. This paper is on Eco-friendly Space for the Intellectual Erudition and Spiritual Enlightenment. Why do we speak so much of ECO (Ecological Scenario) related matters? It seems there is an urgency for this.

We are living in a fast changing world. This change is not only the Information and Communication Technology, Science and Industries etc. This change also affects all spheres of the life of Earth. The so called advancement about which we are very proud of, is very badly affecting the earth environment and the life in totality. Steady climatic fluctuation is one of the results of our exploitation of mother earth without even a bit of concern and love for her and for the future.

It is said, once upon a time, it was one land strip from Australia to Japan which had turned into thousands of Islands. Besides the thousands of small islands extended to the far side of Australia, the **Indonesian** Archipelago is often referred to as the largest archipelago in the world which consists of 17,508 - 18,306 islands spread at span of 5,400 kilometres area and the **Philippines** Archipelago consists of 7,107 islands. If all these stories are true and historical, certainly one could assume that after few millions of years, all these large continents will disappear into water leaving few islands here and there. Perhaps, this would be the *Pralaya* (the world coming to an end disappearing into water) that the ancient *Rishis* and Seers of India had written in the ancient scriptures which would appear at the end of a *Yuga*. It appears logical if we take into consideration what had happened in the past and what is happening today. The ice bergs on North and South poles are disappearing melted and the water level of the seas and oceans is increasing every year. Sensing this catastrophic calamity, there is a deep cry from around the world from people who are concerned of this tragic progress to save our mother earth. I tell my students to be mindful about these phenomena and ask them to be considerate of our Mother Earth and join the Greenpeace and Environment Preservation Movements and other NGO-s to voice against the undue and merciless exploitation of the Mother Earth. Otherwise, we are becoming the victim of what we are doing out of our selfishness unaware of the tragic consequences.

Therefore, today we speak much about the eco-friendly approaches!! This same concern is perhaps reflected in this paper too. It is in no way proposing a going back to the original system of intellectual formation and spiritual enlightenment. Rather it is an invitation to think and if

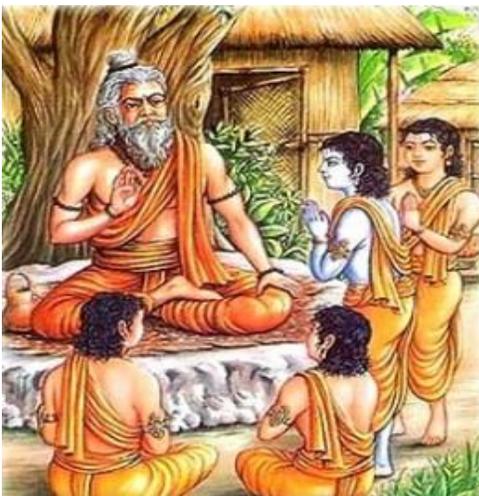
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possible, to incorporate and provide eco-friendly ambience for research and learning as well when we think of space management for the libraries.

Gurukula and Asharam Traditions of India

It is customary and very much traditional in India having the system of education being very close to the nature and being part of nature. It is clear from the ancient system of Gurukula and Ashram traditions.

In Sanskrit language *Guru* means teacher or master and *Kula* stands for extended family. A type of school that is residential in nature. "Guru" refers to one who dispels the darkness of ignorance or the teacher. "Kula" refers to the family of disciples who are staying with the Guru in his own hutment. So, **Gurukul** is a place where knowledge is shared in the midst of nature's calm and serene surroundings. The **Gurukul system** had influenced many scholars and princes in the ancient times. Gurukula has an atmosphere of serenity and calmness.



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Ancient Centres of Higher Education in India

Ancient universities

India had few ancient centres of Higher Education (Universities), when perhaps there was no universities existing in the whole world and even the name University was not yet evolved. The first university as listed in the history (Guinness Book and World Records) is one that was founded in Morocco by a Muslim woman in 859 AD. But in India we had Nalanda, Ujjain, Takshashila & Vikramshila universities that imparted higher education during the first millennium BC and the few centuries preceding it. Astronomy, Art, Painting, Architecture, Logic, mathematics, Grammar, Philosophy, Literature, Hinduism, Buddhism, Arthashastra (Economics & Politics), Law, and Medicine were amongst the subjects taught at these universities. For specializing in the study of medicine students went to Takshashila, while Ujjain laid great emphasis on astronomical studies. Nalanda, was well-known as the biggest centre, and handled all the branches of knowledge. It was one such university where 10,000 students learnt at one time. That means, India was not behind in the field of education even in the very ancient times though the modern system was not developed. The current system of education in India, along with its western style and content, was introduced and founded by the British during Colonial period.



The point of my interest here is both the fact that we had universities in the early times, and at the same time they were not confined to centralized Air Conditioned multi story (floor) buildings and rooms and rather they were situated very close to the nature. Such Higher Education centres had lots of Ashrams in the same vicinity where the teacher and disciples stayed together, lived together and shared everything with the teacher. An ashram, not of the contemporary times, be located far from human habitation, in

forests or mountainous regions, amidst refreshing natural surroundings conducive to spiritual instruction and meditation. The class rooms were these ashram huts and the shady trees. There was a spiritual tranquillity and a meditative ambiance surrounded such ashrams.

Benefits of Eco-Friendly Space for Intellectual Erudition and Spiritual Enlightenment

We read in Bhagavad Gita – the Sacred Scripture of Hinduism as follows:

śrī-bhaḡavān uvāca, ūrdhva-mūlam adhaḡ-śākham
aśvatthamā prāhur avyayam, chandāmsi yasya parnāni
yas tamā veda sa veda-vit (BG.15.1)

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pours down its perfections to its creatures but never loses its fullness'. Learning and meditating sitting under such Banyan Tree will create a kind of awareness which will in turn lead the candidate to a right attitude and aptitude: a right attitude to the world and a correct aptitude for the Supreme knowledge. It gives us the simple but very valid and valuable message that be rooted in deep spiritual experiences but get involved in the world and its activities with detachment. The sap – the life juice – that flows in you and I should be the spiritual sap from heaven, the spiritual world. It is the right tone for one's both intellectual endeavour and Spiritual activities. Therefore, sitting under Banyan and meditating or making a discussion or even doing the studies will facilitate right goal setting for all such programmes.

We could see again a reference to the Sankhyan metaphysics with this symbol of Banyan tree described in Gita XV.1. From the absolute comes all the evolutions and makes the entire world. So, ultimately, the absolute is the source of all – whether transient or eternal.

True education and intellectual endeavours must lead everyone to the knowledge of this great wisdom of the distinction between the two – eternal and transient (*Nitya anitya vastu viveka* – Sri Sankara) and it will lead to proper detachment to what is not eternal.

However, instead of giving a positive outlook and transcendental vision and right understanding of reality, it also could lead to enslaving the person. One could be caught in the magnanimity of the world, though it is the expression of the ONE ABSOLUTE, enjoying the temporal and sensuous pleasures. One may spend time in enjoying the beauty of the leaves, branches, and the wonderful shade it provides.

Buddha – Bodhi Tree and Enlightenment

Banyan tree has played major role in the origin and development of Buddhism as well. It is the common tradition of India that the people in pursuit of truth and knowledge leave the comforts of life and go to the nature and natural setting (*vanaprasta and sanyasa*). When Buddha left the palace in search of meaning life, after trying with various groups of people who were trying different methods of meditation and ascetic practices to attain the experience of the true reality, Buddha sat under a banyan tree following a middle path. Being the symbol of eternal life, perhaps the banyan tree provided him the ambience of serenity and peace.

Buddhism itself considers the Bodhi Tree or Banyan tree as a symbol of the ultimate potential that lies within us all. The Bodhi Tree today performs a very important role to all Buddhists of all traditions. For them, it is a reminder and an inspiration, a symbol of peace, a symbol of Buddhas' Enlightenment. Therefore, it refers to the unique consciousness of a fully liberated being. It is also sometimes described as complete and perfect sanity, or awareness of the true nature oneself and of the universe.

The Banyan tree also reminds us that there is nothing substantial in the world. Understanding the material world is a reflection of the spiritual world is a greater wisdom. Everything in the material world is having a meaning only if takes our mind and heart to that reality which is other worldly. Perhaps for the western world, it may sound senseless, but it is what gives meaning to our life.

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Scenario of Eco-Friendly Ambience and Enlightenment

Considering trees as 'sacred' is not alien to Indian culture. We get references for this in the ancient literatures. As it is already mentioned, in India, there is a tradition of moving to the nature leaving all luxuries of life searching for an experience of the absolute Truth. It is considered as the third stage of one's life which is called *vanaprasta*. The atmosphere that an eco-friendly space provides cannot be substituted or provided by anything in the world. The tree shades and the open space provide the aspirant an apt atmosphere for meditation and reflection. The ambience of the nature with its freshness, openness and wider perspective gives lots of many natural warmth, homeliness and needed solitude and serenity. Such situations certainly make the intellectual and spiritual endeavour most effective and fruitful. Many of the ancient literatures evolved from such situations. Even today such practices are existing in India. Ashrams are existing in the solitude of mountain tops and far forest areas.

The *sanyasis* spend their life in small huts under holy trees in meditation and ascetic practices. The life close to nature makes it easy for them to develop an attitude of detachment to the things that entangle their life to this world. When people are close to the nature, the possessions are minimal and the needs are less and the cravings are nil. Such people never look for comforts since it comes from their own inner thirst and personal choice for the experience of the divine. Siddhartha Gaudama left all luxuries of the palace and practiced asceticism and later followed the middle path sitting under the banyan tree until he attained enlightenment. It is said that Lord Krishna exhorted Arjuna in the battle field sitting under the Banyan tree. Lord Shiva is also depicted sometimes as sitting under the Banyan tree with his devotees sitting at his feet.

Again another important dimension of the Banyan tree is that its seemingly vast expansion is considered as the symbol of eternal life. Holy tree is also called '*kalpavriksha*', a tree that fulfills the wishes of the people. So, there is a greater importance for the tree in the life Indian people and that could be the reason why *vanaprasta* is depicted as one of the stages one enter into as he completes his responsibilities. There one takes refuge under the trees on hill tops or in huts in far forests and spend more time in meditation leaving all passions and emotions down there in the valley.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is highly recommended to provide such ambience in the libraries where people could experience the sacredness of the nature, enter into deeper meditations and reflections. Sitting close to the nature, the mind becomes free of all limitations, attractions, and suffocating surroundings. Imaginations, creativity and intuition into the reality would be greater in the natural ambience than in the artificial settings. However, one does not deny the need of the other. Both have their own importance and validity. Both are complementary and mutually enriching.