



Why does the Indian Perspective Matter? A Search for the Indian Views on the Concept of Ecological Harmony and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The concepts such as sustainable development and conservation that contemporary environmentalists propose and are forced to adhere to may have been inspired by what has already been said in the ancient scriptures. We need to understand the deep and comprehensible meanings of cultural and scriptural practices; to re-evaluate sustainable attitudes towards the environment. Eco-Dharma is a new term for explaining ethical ways which contribute to the consciousness of the environment. This paper will be divided into three sections; first, this paper will try to describe how eco-friendly nature is present in Indian tradition and what people are practicing. The second section will look into some environmental spirit present in dharma, and the third section will be about how these ideas can be imposed for sustainable and harmonic development.

Keywords: Environment, Sustainable development, *Dharma*, Indian tradition, Indic ideas,

Introduction

Indian tradition presents a transparent concept about the earth's ecosystems and reverently shows the need to maintain balance and stability. *Vedas* have joined or explained nature-culture with the philosophy of integrity. These narratives show the integral relationship between nature and humans. Indian tradition is well known for popularizing three major approaches as a fundamental practice in their life. These are- Non-violence, Universal acceptance of every hymn as true and the belief in God's (*Īśvar*) universal presence. It has the notion of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* in the mantra of *Mahopanishad* belongs to *Samaveda* tradition, with a thought-provoking message that the whole earth is one family and every tiny being and entity on this earth is a part of this family. Thus, we ought to preserve and respect nature together with reverence and maintain interdependency with a symbiotic relationship. The era of scientific human civilization is using-misusing and over-exploiting nature with a technical, industrial, and wholly materialistic approach. The concepts such as sustainable development and conservation that contemporary environmentalists propose and are forced to adhere to may have been inspired by what has already been said in the ancient scriptures. We need to understand the deep and comprehensible meanings of cultural and scriptural practices; to re-evaluate sustainable attitudes towards the environment.

Further, eco-dharma is a new term for explaining religious ethics which contribute to the consciousness about the environment. This is one view on the matter, others may have different views. This perspective of looking back into our heritage which developed some background of ecological conservation has become very popular now. Eco is the short form of the word Ecology, and Dharma means a holistic vision of religion, ethics, duty, virtue, righteousness and cosmic law. Unfortunately, we have no particular definition to describe the term Dharma as it has a dynamic nature. However, we have to understand the concept as per convenience. It is the concept for living life prosperously. We must also admit that every civilization before the industrial revolution was far more Eco-friendly. Indian views add something new because of their philosophical approach to the world and surrounding nature. Indian traditions flourish many ecological philosophical traditions like Buddhism, Jainism, Vedantic and many others, but we will limit this paper with some of the Vedic approaches with ecological ideas. There is both a pragmatic and transcendental approach to Vedic knowledge. The Pragmatic act expresses the importance of the environment and why we should take care and not harm nature; at the same time transcendence aspects force us to think deeply about nature as sacred. This paper will be divided into three sections; first, this paper will try to describe how eco-friendly nature is present in Indian tradition and people are practicing. The Second section will look into some environmental spirit present in dharma, and the third section is about how these ideas can be imposed for sustainable and harmonic development.

Eco-friendly Approach of Indians

We must admit that the enriched civilization of *Bhārata* actually was very nature-centric. From the *Yajña* tradition to the philosophy of *Upāsānā* we had the attitude where the great concern for nature actually reflects. Where *yajña* is associated with the welfare of the outer world the *upasānā* part actually takes care of the inner values by making them pure from the heart. This is important for ensuring a good environment, one must admit. Everywhere from the hymn from the *Rgveda* or the great philosophical observation it does not stop in the human-only but includes or tells about each and every creature. Dharma, is actually the environmentalist attitude we are taking care of while discussing eco-dharma. Although the constitution expressed the need for environmental laws some decades ago, the same approach has surprisingly existed since several thousand years ago. In India when we looked into the ethics for living or anything related to the rights of living beings we were using the word *bhūtāni*. Which actually indicates the concern about all living beings and non-living entities in a greater way. So, dharma is an environmentally oriented ethical idea.

Most central texts in the Indic knowledge and tradition describe the mutual relationship between nature and humans not as that of domination, but of friendship and harmony. In this context one concept comes about the cosmic creation and law. The three *śloka* from *Gītā*'s third chapter (11-13) narrate this in a very beautiful way. We can quote the translation of those *śloka* by Dr. Nagraj Paturi Sir here. The Creator, in the beginning, created human beings along with the *Yajñas*. These *yajñas* can be described as fire-mediated sacred procedures that are obviously eco-friendly and nature nourishing sacrificial procedures. And the Creator or the *Prajāpati* said: 'Through these procedures get what you want; they fulfill whatever you want. Through these procedures, nourish

and nurture the *devās* [who can be described as divinities or natural forces] and they nourish and nurture you back. Thus 'treating' each other, may you humans and natural forces both achieve the best for your welfare. Luxuries and pleasures that you want are provided by the *devās* who get treated by your *Yajñas*; thus, you enjoy all the luxuries provided by them'. So, these views from the mainstream Indic texts can be highlighted in this regard.

Not only in the *Veda* but also in *Tantra* texts or *Āgamas* has the earth been described as Mother earth with very feminine characteristics actually acknowledged and honored by the Indians, one must admit. This predates the philosophical approach of modern day eco-feminist approach. As a result, from the morning prayer for forgiveness to touch the mother earth with feet feeding to the animals, even to the snakes; everywhere in the vedic to folk tradition, we can notice a great affection for nature and its creatures. *Bhūmisukta* of *Atharvaveda* says that the muni prayed to mahabhumi to forgive because the earth mother has been terribly disturbed by human beings with agricultural work.

Vedas speak extensively about the sanctity of the rivers, the mountains, the forest, and so. The text on *dharma* earnestly exhorts people to practice non-violence towards all beings and enjoys a harmonious relationship with nature. This worship of fertility as the *śakti* or Devi is so well accepted that we can see at least one goddess temple in any village in India while there are no male counterparts with temples.

Significant words like *Jagat*, *Prapancha*, *Prakriti*, and *Vishwa* have different significance in explaining nature. *Jagat* refers to the perishable nature of the ecology; *Vishwa* defines environment as all-pervasiveness and the capacity to exist in every smallest part of the universe. The term '*Prakriti*' could be taken as '*Pra*' and '*Kriti*', indicating that the environment is a purposeful or teleological creation. *Prapancha* can be defined as the combination of *panch mahabhut* of *agni*, *ap*, *vayu*, *prithvi*, *akash*. Much before Jagdish Chand Basu scientifically proven, it was said in the *Rigved* (10/97/23) that plants and trees have life and destroying plants should be the most unethical. Indian thinkers had this unique spiritualist ethics in which rights were given to both humans and non-humans. Many eco-spiritualists claim that the destruction of the world is near not actually due to a cosmic anomaly but, because humans are losing their morals and destroying their nature and environment. Contemporary eco-philosophers raise the questions and criticize whether Vedic eco-spirituality is still playing any role to conserve nature?

So, we can say that it is playing a role to conserve nature, even not to a large extent but with the help of awareness and reinterpretations in people language we can regenerate the ideas of harmonical and sustainable relationship with nature. As nature is a whole and humans are also a part of that like other entities, we should not try to overtake nature, but maintain harmony. We can take examples of some communities, they try to conserve and sustain nature with the ideas, which are there in ancient Indian traditions.

Case Studies from the Different Parts of India (Republic of India)

- The *Bishnoi* Traditions are reflected in modern-day's love and dedication to the environment by Indians. The Bishnois are a community of nature worshippers mainly from Rajasthan. They follow 29 sets of rules and one important and sustainable rule is no felling of trees and no killing of animals. Trees and animals are sacred to them and they are following this rule continuously, saving the environment is their religion. They walk a long distance to get wood from fallen trees. They do not cut trees at all and use only fallen wood, they are leading a life that is eco-friendly and sustainable.
- The black softshell turtle in 2002 was declared extinct in the wild, but now a centuries-old temple in Assam and caretakers are helping them make a comeback. Assam was once rich in freshwater turtles, but its habitat was lost, and over-exploitation massively depleted its population. Now, the pond of Hayagriva Madhav temple in Hajo has become a safe home for the black softshell turtle. People believe that turtles protect everyone from harm. This project has been so successful that eighteen other temple ponds have been identified for similar initiatives and leading towards ecological conservation with the message of the importance of every entity in the universe.
- As per the increasing ecological crisis, the Venkateswara temple at Tirumala-Tirupati started the scheme of *vrkṣa-prasādam*. *Prasadam* can be taken as favor of deities. The temple is situated at a height of 3,000 feet and was once surrounded by heavy forests and biodiversity, but gradually they were endangered. In an effort to sustain the natural beauty and biodiversity of its original setting, the temple has started a large nursery and encourages devotees to take trees as *prasādam*.

This is not only how some communities are working like this, but they are spreading our thousand of years back ideas also. We should try to reinterpret those ideas of conservation and harmonic relationship as a whole, and encourage people to take initiative to maintain harmony and not pollute or destroy them. This is not about religious activity but it is our culture and duty to have the idea of sustainability and conservation in our mind so deeply, so that we can act like that as well. If the Yamuna River or any other river is holy in itself, then we should take it for its own sake in deciding what should we do? we can pollute more, but as contrasting at least in principle we will talk about removing toxic industrial wastes and other wastes from cities largely from rivers. *Atharvaveda* advocates that humans should treat the earth as a mother with oneself as the child of the earth but should act in a spirit of trusteeship. If humans do faulty things or do anything against nature, they will suffer from their own actions. If we are doing harm to ecology, it is our duty to protect them and maintain sustainability, the thought which is already mentioned in ancient Indian traditions. Ecological sustainability is possible if and only if the richness and diversity of life forms are sustained.

Ecological Spirit in *Dharma*

Dharma can be expressed or explained in many ways. We must understand the concept of *Svadharmā* too. *Svadharmā* is such a thing that can be decided as per the real nature of a person or creature as when a peacock eats a snake, a snake eats a mouse and that mouse eats seeds. In this chain, everyone is doing or eating anything only according to their particular *Svadharmā*. So, *svadharmā* is a kind of duty to be performed to make the environment sustainable. It is expected that nobody should force anyone to leave his/her *svadharmā* in any circumstances. Likewise in ancient Indian society, there were strong boundaries within the *Varnas*. A *Brahmin* had to maintain the *svadharmā* of *Ahimsā* or Non-violence. *Kṣtriya* must act in the opposite way to protect society. That's why *Kṛṣṇa* approached *Arjuna* so many times to take part in the war not to leave and maintain their *svadharmā* for balancing nature. [not clear what the author wants to say here]. When anyone does not follow this cosmic law or wants to go against it, there is harm to the whole world.

Ancient India was very much interested in understanding the natural beauty and importance of forestry too. As a result, we have the *Vrikśāyurveda* in the tradition. We can also find the depiction of the holiness of the forest in many of our ancient literatures. There was also a classification for each type of forest in terms of importance and sacredness. *Vivitarṇ* was grassland for cattle rearing. *Brahmanaraṇyārṇ* was meant for study. *Somaraṇyārṇ* was the forest from where the people used to get the wood for the *yajña*. *Mrgavanaṇ* was used as deer sanctuary. *Dravyavanaṇ* was for growing raw material for industry. *Pakshivanaṇ* was bird sanctuary. *Vyalavataḥ* was meant for wild animal sanctuary. It is also important to note that in our tradition we had a clear concept about the life in the tree and the emotion different types of emotions were also acknowledged in the *śāstras*. The sense of touch, smell and the ability to hear in the tree was acknowledged at that time- '*Tena śrṇvanti pādapāḥ*', '*sparśastenātra vidyate*', '*tasmajjighrati pādapāḥ*' (*Mahābhārataṁ, śāntiparva* 184.12, 14, 16).

Water was also very sacred in our culture. Pure water is considered as the Super medicine in the *Atharvaveda*. Some texts deal with the purification of water in natural ways such as when '*añjana*', '*āmalaka*', '*uṣira*' etc. is added to well. By that formula, even the muddy, salty or water with bad taste can get good quality. There are also discussions about the production of perfumes in a natural way without using any chemical but water. Some of the texts like *Kṛṣiparāśara* suggest some refined methods for the use of water and seed properly in agriculture. As we have discussed the *yajña*, we might be surprised by the fact that it also describes how it can cause rain. The ancients also observed the behavioral changes in insects like ants and birds to forecast rain, which can be also used as proof of their engagement with and observation of the environment. In the same context, a few verses in *gītā*, the book even talks of following the 'cycle' of each effort, a concept that is so frequently found in contemporary ecological literature. One who does not follow life according to the principles of the cycle (as described in the verse 3.15) is a sinful creature and lives a vain life. This is the teaching of Bhagavān which can be also an inspiration to be aware and do our *svadharmā* and live on this earth prosperously with others. Vedic texts largely articulate the theory behind such narratives holding that whenever *Dharma*, the nature-sustaining principle is harmed or damaged, the force of sustenance manifests itself and restores

dharma, the nature-sustaining principle. This sounds very similar to the understanding from the famous quote from *gitā*- ‘*Yadā yadā hi dharmasya... tadātmānaṁ sṛjāmyaham*’ (4.7); or the quote from *śrī śrī candī- Itthaṁ yadā yadā bādhā dānavotthā bhaviṣyati tadā tadāvātīryāhaṁ kariṣyāmyarisamkṣam* || (11.55).

Sustainable Development and Indic Ideas

What is to be done to achieve the goal of sustainable development. It is not only the discussion about our heritage that will work. As such, we shall look at the practical usages that can be made from our traditional practices in the modern world. But before that, to answer the first question the most acceptable and proper answer is to create greater awareness. We also have to be dedicated to executing the ideas. Let me also be clear about one thing. The ideas we are dealing with now or discussed so much are ideas that existed before the ecological crisis. The proper solution to real problems about ecology we are facing now might therefore not come from that source. They can only make us motivated to understand the importance of the protection of the environment, which our ancestors took as their duty. If we look at the *vedāntic* literature, then we can see the world in a completely different aspect, *Upaniṣads*, the end part of *Vedic* text discussing the concepts of *Ātman* or the self, and *Brahman* or the imperishable essence manifest as cosmos, also known as *param-ātman*. These texts almost always talk of the all-pervading nature of the divine essence of the cosmos. As we have discussed above, one of the terms for nature is all-pervading. The key concept of *Vedānta* is to highlight the oneness in everything in this world, which actually indicates the very interconnection in everything in this universe. They also argue that *Jīvas* or *jīva* (individual self) is the limited version of *brahman* or the imperishable essence manifest as cosmos known as *paramātman* also. When a body part is hurt, the whole body actually suffers. Likewise every action positive or negative has an impact on the whole universe, however small or major impact.

If we take nature as sacred or divine and human beings ought to consider the environment as intrinsically valuable, why are we suffering from degradation and depletion of the environment? It indicates in a way that the eco-friendly Vedic tradition is limited in historical scriptures and fails to make a realization that nature is sacred and intrinsically valuable. The arena of eco-spiritualism gets criticism on the basis of efficacy and practicality in today’s scenario. Many find this field isolated and limited which fails to work with multiple aspects of any society. To go into environmental problems requires people of vibrant backgrounds to work together. We can see the pollution level increases due to religious rituals. It is not enough to only acknowledge the environmental crisis in the world, but more important to get into and understand how individuals and communities are affected by the crisis and to find out how they are trying to address it. There are many simple solutions to environmental problems, but they demand some radical shifting in our thought, values, perceptions, and understanding. In Rabindranath Tagore’s view the true quality of life emerges from a respectful and cooperative attitude towards nature. He believed that if it is introduced through education at an early age, the experience of the richness of vast nature would be enough to limit the desire for unnecessary possession of material things.

The knowledge of Vedic sciences is meant to be aware of or save human beings from falling into the utter darkness of ignorance and should have been an insight of oneness with nature. The unity in diversity (not only cultural but with the environment also) is the message of Vedic knowledge. Physical and metaphysical sciences, the essence of the environmental ethics and sustainability in the *Vedas* can be drawn here by citing a partial mantra of the *Īsopaniṣad-1*.

'One should enjoy renouncing or giving up others' part'. One should therefore accept only those things necessary for themselves, which are set aside, and one should not accept other things, knowing well to whom they belong and should not harm or poison them. They should live as part of nature and sustain without any pride to be a higher authority in nature. Therefore, human beings were not at the apex of the environment, even if they personified nature to elaborate and explain to others.

The 17th sustainable development goals announced by United Nations are similar in some respects to Indian ethics. Zero poverty the first goal was also there from ancient times in every civilization. It also means everyone should have sufficient and justifiably life conditions like pure air, water and food for leading life with sustainable nature. For achieving that, India had the practice of *Dānaṁ* or charity, as we can see in the various text from the *upaniṣad* to the *Smṛtiśāstras*, even in the *Arthaśāstra*. From the four *varnas* in the society, the *kṣatriya* has the utmost duty to that but it can be done by anyone for the welfare of the society but to the right person. For achieving the second goal we must take a pledge individually that we must not waste food. In India eating food is a very sacred thing. One of our Maharaj in college days used to say that we, Indians, eat privately but can defecate very publicly. We have to do both privately. For taking food we had the practice to first give it to the *Īśvar* that means nature and after offering, eat the food with the attitude that we should respect every particle of that food, called as *prasādaṁ*. The *Veda* clearly says that it is the duty to not waste the food. We can think about this respect and awareness to stop food-wasting all over the world and help to achieve the second goal.

Good health and wellbeing are also a thing to be concerned about and Indian Texts also suggest living even up to a hundred years but with a very active mind and body. The *śāstras* in *Ayurveda* texts are dedicated to human well-being, a process that should be natural. If quality education is a concern then the Indians are the best in that area as we actually always prioritized the truth over information collection. Holistic education was the aim for all. One-fourth of one's life (about twenty-five years) one had to be dedicated to the Education process, called the *Brhmacarya* Period. Affection about the woman and the respect for the power of a woman is old in the Indic civilization. We must bring the same respect and honor to achieve the gender equality goal. We also had the idea for pure water as we have mentioned in the water purification method in the *brhatsamhitā*. The seventh, eighth, and the ninth goal can be achieved by the proper awareness and building skills. As *krṣṇa* also told about *Yoga* and explained *yoga* as the art of doing the work easily. Other three goals after that actually an important thing and can be achieved at least to some extent, only by the helping each other or building consciousness for cooperation everywhere This can be also useful for the last goal. Affection about the woman and the respect for the power of a woman is old in the Indic civilization. We must bring the same respect and honor to achieve the gender equality goal.

For Climate Action to protect life on the land goal, we must take care of our ethics as our great ancestors did, we have discussed. We must make others aware about the 16th goal. India is once again an example where evidence can be found of the text like *vedānta* proclaimed and teaches about peace only both in the inner and outer world.

Conclusion

We are not saying that everything has been done and nothing to do now but many more to do. One thing we must understand is that the West cannot escape or deny the most responsibility for this climate or environmental crisis. As per the above discussions, this paper comes to a position to conclude that the ontological shift for an ecologically sustainable future has much to gain from the world-views of ancient civilizations and diverse cultures that have survived sustainably over centuries, so this Indian perspective matters as gives us a rich wholesome idea of nature and culture. As with the teaching, there is no dichotomy between two (nature and culture) and we should maintain harmony. Also, Indians should not only be proud of their rich heritage but act as per the instruction from those teachings. It is the duty of all people to stay under the sky. So, this is not the finish line to stop. This degradation of the environment is going on under the name of development, but it is clearly seen that the notion of development has something wrong with it that is a threat to existence; we are doing violence to nature which is inherent to the dominant progress models. We must update ourselves and create awareness for others. In the extreme situation of the pandemic, we have seen what are the priorities in our lives and what can be omitted very easily. So, the old idea of *Tyāga* (in the broader sense) is coming in a new way as the practice of minimalism all over the world. And we should not forget the *svadharma* as the children of Mother Earth and the Creator of the next generation.

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