

Environmentalism in Vedic Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Environmentalism or environmental consciousness has become a key dominating area in many academic discourses of last few decades. The reason is crystal clear. Since last few decades humankind has been experiencing a lot of problems for environmental degradation. Particularly, the occidental world has discussed a lot of things related to the realized crisis due to pollution and other. If we look into the philosophy that has born in the Indian soil then we find that proper treatment of nature was in-built in its ancient literature in the form of Vedas. The present paper tries to seek the element of deep ecology, considered as the most radical form of environmentalism of the western world, in the philosophical literature of ancient India.

Key Words: Environmentalism, Deep Ecology, Vedic Philosophy, Purusha Shukta, Intrinsic Value

Introduction:

Concern for the protection of the environment is considered as one of the basic areas of the 1st half of 21st century. This concern has its origin in the realized crisis of the environment. There is a little dispute that human being along with the rest of the nature is in crisis because of the increasing environmental degradation. One can see a lot environment related schools of thought developed in the last century. Most of the schools have their origin in the western world. Many environmental related literatures that have jerked the academic fraternity have come into existence in the western world. In such situation one can reasonably ask about Indian Literature.

Have Indian think tank played a passive role in meeting the environmental related issues? In search of this answer the present paper tries to see if there is any element of environmental thought in the most ancient literature of humankind known as Vedas. And it is asserted that the Vedic thought contains some in-built forms of environmentalism having some affinities with deep ecology, the most radical form of environmentalism of the western world.

Objective of the Study:

The present study is purely a general descriptive history and it is undertaken basically in a qualitative approach. What is attempted here is to extract the ethical implications of the ecological descriptions and man-environment interaction in various phases of the development of Indian philosophy, particularly in the Vedic literature. An attempt is made in this paper to make a comparative study with the Deep Ecology philosophy of Arne Naess to find some possible points of similarities with the recently developed western environmental ethics. The available resources on environmental ethics and Indian philosophy are searched in both printed form as well as from web sites. The study has been confined to library work for the theoretical observation of environmental ethics.

Man-Environment interaction in Indian Philosophy:

In all the schools of Indian philosophy, more or less, we find the elements of man-environment relation directly or indirectly. Environmental consciousness is in-built in Indian philosophical schools may it be originated philosophically or out of religiosity. But most of the things were found in a crude form. There was nothing like environmental consciousness in the early period as it is used in today's world environmental degradation. In Sankhya philosophy we find the purusa and prakriti in the forms of nature and its observer. The Yoga philosophy says that by meditation one can be back to the natural freedom away from the alienated form. In Samkhya Yoga, nature is viewed as separate from spirit; nature is valued because it is only with the help of Nature that Spirit can achieve its ultimate aim of Self-realization. The Vaisheshika philosophy has great importance in terms of environmental matter. According to Vaisheshika, nature is manifold existence under a unitary law. The Nyaya also discusses the forms of

knowledge and the rules of nature. According to Mimamsa, nature is a fragmented appearance of a transcendental reality. In *Vivekacūḍāmani* Śāṅkara declares that everything is common only three things are rare of the rarest: human birth, wish to salvation and a perfect master. Man is different from other species whether animals or gods or demi gods (*Yakṣa*, *Gandharva*, *Nāga*, etc.), as they all are *bhoga yoni*, i.e., they reap the fruits of their deeds of past life, of self realization, free to act accordingly. Hence the responsibility of humans is to conserve the environment in maximum extent.

Ecological thought in the Vedic Philosophy:

If we look into the ancient Indian literature, right from the Rig Veda period down to very recent centuries, we find man had established various relationships with natural elements. Ancient people had treated them as their parents and siblings. They had as if personified and deified to these natural elements and had treated them as their own family members. Rig Veda says, 'To be us easy to approach, even as father to his son, *Agni*, be with us for our weal' (RV. 1.1.9). Again dealing with the relationship between man and natural elements the Rig Veda says, 'Widely-capacious pair, mighty, that never fail, the father and the mother keep all creature safe: The two world-halves, the spirited, the beautiful, because the father hath clothed them in goodly forms (RV. 1.160.2). Thus we can find the trace of ecological thought among Vedic people who had established various relationships with the nature which they believed is bound by the cosmos and of which even the human being is not an exception.

The *Atharvaveda* has a unique status among the four *Vedic Samhitas* owing to its subject matter. According to Niranjana Jena (2002), *Atharvaveda* is said to be Veda of the masses for its close relation with the common man and his life. The earth is addressed as mother number of times in the Atharva Veda. 'The earth is our mother, Aditi is the cause of birth, the space is our brother. May these all save us from sin. Sky is our father. May he be auspicious to us in our faults with forefathers. Let me not fall from the world by offending against relatives' (AV. XII. 1.1). 'Your centre, your navel and all forms are born from your body. You keep us in that, breath up on us, Earth is my mother and I am her child, rain is my father, may he complete us' (AV. XII.1.12). The tone of keeping the environment protected is also marked by the Atharva Veda. It says, 'sweet be the plants

for us, the heavens, the waters and full of sweets for us be air's mid-region! May the field's lord for us be full of sweetness and may we follow after him uninjured' (AV. XX.143.8).

The Atharva Veda recalls that three things cover the universe the air, water and the plants and they are essential for all lives on earth to exist. In one place it says that "Plants and herbs destroy poisons (pollutants)". In another place it says that "Purity of atmosphere checks poisoning (pollution). Some herbs purify the air. The fragrance of *guru (Commiphora mukul)* purifies the air and cure diseases. Atharva Veda has also warned not to dirty and add toxic substances into water bodies as it may lead to spread of diseases. The Vedic Hymn to the Earth, the Prithvi Sukta in Atharva Veda, is the oldest and the most evocative environmental invocation. In it, the Vedic seer solemnly declares the enduring filial allegiance of humankind to Mother Earth: 'Mata Bhumi Putroham Prithivyah: Earth is my mother, I am her son.' Mother Earth is celebrated for all her natural bounties and particularly for her gifts of herbs and vegetation. "O purifying Earth, you I invoke! O patient earth, by sacred Word enhanced Bearer of nourishment and strength, of food and ghee O earth, we would approach you with due praise!" (Atharva Veda XII.1.29)

Similarly in the Yajur Veda also we find environmental concerns. "No persons should kill animals helpful to all" (Yajur Veda 13.37) "O King you should never kill animals like bullocks useful in agriculture or like cows which gives us milk and all other helpful animals and must punish those who kill or do harm to such animals" (Yajur Veda 13.49). The oceans are treasure of wealth protect them" (Yajur Veda 38.22). "Do not poison (pollute) water and do not harm or cut the trees" (Yajur Veda 6.33). "Do not disturb the sky and do not poison the atmosphere" (Yajur Veda 5.43).

Deep Ecological thought in Vedic Philosophy:

Deep Ecology, a catchphrase for eco-centrism or biocentrism, is considered as the most radical form of environmentalism dominating in the last two decades of 20th century. The name associated with this environmental school of activity is Arne Naess (1912-2009), a Norwegian philosopher and environmental activist whose basic aim was to achieve an ecologically balanced future. In order to do that Naess criticizes anthropocentrism. At the same time he attributes equal intrinsic moral worth to non-human life-forms and to ecosystems as with human. Naess first

outlined this shallow-deep split to replace the destructive philosophy of modern industrial society by a new eco-philosophy or “Ecosophy”. The term “deep ecology” received wide appreciation after a famous article by Naess (1973), ‘The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary.’ Deep Ecology takes a holistic view of nature. Its image of the natural world is that of a field-like whole of which we and other “individuals” are parts. It encourages us to seek our true identity by identifying with wider and wider circles of nature, presenting the natural world as an extension of ourselves.

Vedic thought is primarily rooted in religious thinking. Religion puts intrinsic value in God. Naess does also derive the concept of deep ecology from religion. During a climbing expedition in Nepal, Naess was pleased to find that the Sherpa people would not venture on to sacred mountains. Naess and two of his Norwegian friends discussed formulating a new philosophy that would extend such reverence for mountains to all of nature in general, emphasizing the interconnectedness of each thing in larger webs of value. Similarly, Indian philosophy of ‘*Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*’ explains the concept of fraternity with the environment. Vedic thought that recognized omnipresence of God believed that everything in the world bears an element of God in it and be treated accordingly. Purushottama Bilimoria in his paper, ‘Environmental Ethics of Indian Religious Traditions’ writes:

‘The Vedas speak of the uncanny unity of creation and, more significantly, the mysterious interconnectedness or co-dependence of everything to everything else. Each thing, element and each species or bio-organism - which we can be characterized as having the mark of being-hood - has an interest and purpose to fulfill in the larger scheme of things. It is this that makes each thing ‘sacred’ and therefore worthy of moral consideration, by human beings and the gods alike.’ⁱ

The spiritualization of the entity of nature was started in the early portion of the Vedas. The Aryans believed that they cannot treat nature just as an object of self gratification because nature is an animated entity which cannot be ruled. In front of nature a man is a dependent entity and his relationship with nature is based on a sort of primordial awe. The Aryans believed that

the visible world is actually animated by invisible forces. A man needs the benevolence of these forces in order to obtain from nature what he needs for survival. The Vedic prayers are the proofs for it. Man sees himself as the child of nature but he does not have direct relationship with it. A man searches for this relationship through the Gods who are believed to rule various aspects of nature. He tries to win them over by supplications, prayers etc. Vedic prayers are poetic expressions of man's search for understanding the nature of his own being in the context of the animated universe. It was in fact a quest for a coherent natural law and the conception of a single substantial source generating all forms of existence.

The first lesson of Naess' philosophy is his severe criticism of Western-anthropocentrism or human-centric behavior. His target of western anthropocentrism by his Shallow-Deep difference has been considered "probably the most influential article of the last half century."ⁱⁱ "Shallow ecology" is an ecological movement to fight against pollution and resource depletion, the central objective of which is health and affluence of people in the developed countries. According to the shallow approach, technology seeks to purify the air and water only to spread pollution more evenly. Laws limit permissible pollution. Pollution industries are preferably exported to developing countries. Here, emphasis is given upon resources for humans, especially for the present generation in affluent societies. Unlike deep ecology, shallow ecology gives attention to humans. In contrast, deep ecology evaluates pollution from a biospheric point of view, not focusing exclusively on its effects on human health, but rather on life as a whole, including the life conditions of every species and system. The impact of pollution is looked not in the context of human interest in deep ecology. Rather, deep ecology looks the impact of pollution on life as such. Any form of exporting pollution is not only a crime against humanity but it is a crime against life in general. Natural resources are not only for the humans alone. They are for the sake of all life forms.

Similarly, ancient Indian cosmologies commune on one point, that is, the absence of an anthropocentric perspective in nature. Some schools of thought regard creation as a naturalistic process, while the other regard it as spiritualistic. But irrespective of their nature of interpretation

of creation, man is never regarded at its central. Stefano De Santis (1995), an Indologist from Rome and cultural anthropologist, writes:

‘Even when the whole of cosmos is conceived within a Gnostic perspective where the reality of nature is identified as the content of consciousness, this consciousness is still not conceived in human terms, but on the contrary it is regarded as a transpersonal universal entity.’ⁱⁱⁱ

Indian spiritualistic conceptions, though not all, are centered on the universal entity of nature rather than on the individual entity of man. This means that the terms of the relationship between man and nature as the substance and as the form of consciousness are reversed with respect to the anthropocentric doctrines of the west. De Santis (1995), writes:

‘In fact while Indian spiritualistic cosmologies attribute the faculty of intelligence to an impersonal entity of reality which contains the individuality of man as one of its reflected forms, generally western idealistic schools conceive the reality of nature to be immanent in the consciousness of the human spirit who thinks of it.’^{iv}

Naess coined the term “deep ecology” to distinguish a moral relation to the natural world from simply an instrumental one. To put it in simple terms, deep ecology is used to express the idea that nature has *intrinsic value*. It is based on the idea that non-human parts of the environment deserves to be preserved for their own sake regardless of their utility to human beings. All lives and even ecosystems themselves have inherent or intrinsic value – that is, value independently of whether they are useful to humans. Naess is of the view that the well-being of non-human life on Earth has value in itself. This value is independent of any instrumental usefulness for limited human purposes. It is based on the idea that humans are a *part* of nature rather than merely being *in* an external nature. According to Kinsley (1995), ‘Hinduism, in general, views nature as sacred and the universe as a living being...in which all is interconnected and pervaded by the same vitality.’^v For example, rivers such as the Ganges are considered sacred. This belief that the landscape has intrinsic sacredness and sacred power is in accord with the tenets of deep ecology, which views all of nature as alive and as having intrinsic value.

Naess' philosophical sense of deep ecology is found in his concept of self-realization. For Naess an abiding concern for environment can emerge from a deepened and expanded sense of self. Self realization is the process of acquiring that deepened sense of self. This is called by Naess as self-realization. According to Naess, society and human relations are important. But our self is richer in its constitutive relations. Moreover, joy of life and the meaning of life are increased through increased self-realization. This is possible by fulfilling our potentials. Therefore, increased self-realization implies broadening and deepening of the self. The primary purpose of human life according to each of the six systems is liberation or Self-realization, which is in accord with the ultimate norm of Ecosophy, as described by Naess.

The Purusha sukta or the Man-hymn of the Rig Veda is one of the widely discussed chapters among the students of Indian philosophy of all corners. In the Moksha-Dharma-Parva of Mahabharata, this crude form philosophy is summarized in the following way:

*The Lord, the sustainer all beings, revealed the sky.
From space came water and, from water, fire and the winds.
From the mixture of the essence of fire and wind arose the earth.
Mountains are his bones, earth his flesh, the ocean his blood.
The sky is his abdomen, air his breath, fire his heat, river his nerves.
The sun and moon, which are called Agni and Soma, are the eyes of Brahman.
The upper part of the sky is the head. The earth is his feet and the directions are his hands^{vi}.*

The Vedas have taken up a discussion of the natural world through a systematic approach to the five elements or panca-bhuta. These elements are not seen as abstraction or metaphors but literally compose the reality of the world and of one's own body. The vision of the relationship between the body, divinity and the order of the things becomes both descriptive and prescriptive in terms of the human relationship with nature in India. The world cannot be separated from the human body nor can the human body be separated from the world.

Similarly, Deep Ecology encourages an egalitarian attitude not only towards all members of the ecosphere, but also to all identifiable entities in the ecosphere. At a fundamental level, all organisms are intrinsically related in a bio-spherical net or field. In principle, therefore, deep

ecology posits *bio-spherical egalitarianism*. Bio-spherical or bio-centric egalitarianism is the view that all living things are of equal moral worth or equal intrinsic value. The basic tenet of biocentric egalitarianism is that human are in nature and in no way above or outside of nature. To distinguish man from his environment is to think at a superficial and artificial level. This attitude, therefore, is extended even to such entities as rivers, landscapes and species etc. According to Chapple (2001), ritual worship is directly related to deep ecology through the Vedic teachings of the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, and space), which “literally compose the reality of the world and of one’s own body” (p. 61). Chapple describes how the traditional Hindu view relates to deep ecology: ‘Just as the Hymn of the Person in the Rig Veda identifies human physiology with the cosmos, correlating the feet with the earth and the head with the sky, so also a vision of deep ecology in the context of Hindu faith will seek to integrate and include its understanding of the human as inseparable from and reflective of nature.’^{vii}

Conclusion:

Philosophical thinking is constructed by one’s own thinking with experiences and traditional exposures. Knowledge gets perfection when there is the listening of others. Knowledge transforms to wisdom when different modes of thinking are taken from consideration. Here lies the importance of seeking the similar elements in two systems of thought, two modes of thinking related to man-environment interaction and in fact, one’s own place in this vast cosmos. This place is enquired to find whether he/ she/ it is independent existence or just a part in the larger web of life/ things.

Although different Vedic philosophical systems express it in different ways, they are all in basic accord with the tenets of deep ecology: All of life is interconnected, all of nature is alive and has intrinsic value, and self and nature are one. The Vedic tone of self realization is echoed in the ecological thought of Naess. Self-realization is possible in a variety of ways. Naess’ approach to Self-realization is through extending his sense of identification to a *larger sense of Self*^{viii}. Naess believes that we have the capacity to connect with a much larger sense of self, transcending ego, by extending our sense of identification beyond the usual narrow focus on ego to a wider sphere of relationships.

It is not difficult for us to identify with other living beings. We can actually practice or cultivate this capacity. The enquiry of truth should be holistic and not to be partial. The knowledge which is developed by Vedic tradition as well as by deep ecology tenets is not for the sake of knowledge, but for the sake of application. It is at the same time the urge the 21st century global world.

Notes and References:

ⁱ An abridged version of this essay was published as 'Indian Religious Traditions'. In David E Cooper and Joy A Palmer (eds.) *Spirit of the Environment Religion, Value and Environmental Concern*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 1-14

ⁱⁱ Lome Hammond, personal communication, April 16, 2004

ⁱⁱⁱ Santis, Stefano De (1995), *Nature and Man: The Hindu Perspective*, Vol. II, Sociocos & Dilip Kumar Publishers, Varanasi, p. 468

^{iv} Ibid, p. 468

^v Kinsley, D. (1995). *Ecology and religion: Ecological spirituality in cross-cultural perspective*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, p. 57

^{vi} Quoted in Chapple, Christopher Key (2001), *Hinduism and Deep Ecology*, in Barnhill, DL and Gottlieb, Roger S (2001) eds. *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*, State University of New York Press, New York, pp. 61- 62

^{vii} Chapple, C. K. (2001). *Hinduism and Deep Ecology*, in D. L. Barnhill & R. S. Gottlieb (Eds.) *Deep ecology and world religions: New essays on sacred ground* (pp. 59- 76). Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 62

^{viii} Naess is of the view that, self-realization represents the actualization of our greatest potentiality for being. Naess argued that we should care for the extended or ecological-Self, since each of us is larger than his or her body. The concept of Self realization means to realize oneself, one's true nature of the self through an intuition and clear ecological knowledge that each one is embedded in and supported by a network of relationship, not only to the human community but also to animals and plants, to the world as a whole. He explains what is meant by "self" with a small s (ego-self), "Self" with a capital S (ecological self), and also what is meant by "extension of identification" to larger entities.