

REJUVENATING ADVAITA VEDĀNTIC MODEL FOR ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Current Pandemic caused by covid-19 has resurfaced the debate on our relationship with the nature. What should be the right approach of human being towards animals and other components of environment? Can we live on this planet for long with the anthropocentric mindset? Different models have already been proposed by philosophers and scientists in recent past. They have their own contributions in the field of environmental protection. However, we, in twenty first century, need an approach which is holistic in nature i.e., which integrates all the components of environment and thereby fixes human responsibility towards 'other'. This article is a humble effort to propose a model for environment on the lines of Vedāntic understanding. The non-duality, as declared by Advaita, has to be re-established by the method of gradual extension of Advaita at all levels. This model, which was practiced by Indians in past needs to be rejuvenated keeping modern conditions of the world in mind.

Key words: Pandemic, Covid-19, Environment Model, Advaita, Vedānta, Environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current phase of the twenty-first century, the entire human race is faced with an immense amount of challenge not just with respect to ecology but an even more intense form of challenge in the form of our responsibility towards the 'other'. As in the present Covid situations, it did severely hit us quite hard; to see how adversely the nature has been impacted due to human beings' self-centric approach. Human beings have time and again exercised their free will on the species, which were easy to subdue but when the natural forces coerced the human beings to become submissive under the clutches of nature's will, then even man had to bow down. The debate on this issue of anthropocentrism has even witnessed significant resurfacing in the present pandemic situation, caused by the covid-19 virus.

Herein, we have tried to examine various environmental problems from the multiple perspectives of Feminism, Marxism, Socialism and Liberalism etc. Whereby, each of these theorists have exemplified their own set of theories through a vivid display of both pros as well as cons. This article is to primarily investigate, if there is any scope of establishing any kind of relationship between the human-based understanding of the Advaita Vedānta and the current environmental issues? Secondly, whether there could possibly be an Advaitic Model of the Environmental Philosophy?

2. OUR RELIGIONS AND MAN-CENTRIC APPROACH

Our religions play a very influential role when it comes to determining the attitudes of their believers or followers of the same faith especially with context to the flora, the fauna and even towards the entire nature as a whole. Some of them¹ have provided a set of anthropocentric world-view, by advocating that the Godly creation of this universe is only for the sake of human beings. Thus, everything or everyone who inhabit this planet including animals, trees, natural resources etc., have been created in a stipulated time frame solely for the welfare of humans. Such an anthropocentric worldview is what is responsible for shaping our attitude towards the 'others'. At the practical level, not only the followers of the Abrahamic religions but also a majority of Indians who follow the Dhārmic Traditions² believe in this anthropocentric worldview. We believe that we are the sole beneficiaries of this planet Earth and our main purpose is to ultimately derive happiness out of it.

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¹Mainly Abrahamic Religions

²Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism

So, if this nature or even the animals existing herein are created for the sake of human beings, then what is wrong if 'I' exploit them? Exploitation is thereby, considered to be the birthright of human beings to the extent of endangering and in the worst-case scenarios even the extinction of a few species of birds and animals since the 'other' could not take the burden of the domineering one.

A majority of people on account of whom, all of us are facing various environmental problems along with the ecological imbalances, do not hesitate even one bit in sharing this self-centric mentality. It is thence, on account of such loftiness, which results in the repulsive reactions of the natural forces. Even the pandemic of covid-19 is one of such instances wherein the human beings' doings were largely superseded by the nature which could no further tolerate the anthropocentric approach and thereby, it had to give a hard blow to the mankind by causing him to realize the sufferings of the 'other' in a more pronounced manner by locking him up in the four-walls of self-confinement.

3. WESTERN PHILOSOPHY AND ECO-PHILOSOPHY

In the West, existential thinkers³ view human being as the maker of his own destiny due to his rationality and free will. This use of free will tends to make a human being, truly human. He is responsible for determining his own destiny. However, such a philosophy neither tells us about our place in this society nor about our social responsibilities. This consequently leads us into becoming a fully nuclear person.

Ecological philosophy was thus, developed as a response towards one-sided unscientific theory of religious anthropocentrism. This philosophical school of thought extends its inherent values to all the forms of life. This philosophy gives value to all the sentient beings despite their natural diversity. It propagates a relationship of cordial co-existence amongst humans and nature as neither nature nor animals exist merely for the sake of being devoured by the humans, rather it is the humans which are just one of the many species of the animal kingdom. It calls for inter-dependency among all the species of earth, either directly or indirectly. It is evolutionary in form, starting with sentient-ism and Bioethics to Deep-ecology. This philosophy emphasized on the central concept of "The World as a Sanctuary" quite contrary to the Newtonian world-view of "The World as a Machine." It reveres for life as a guiding force. Eco-philosophy, however, finds it difficult to locate the connecting link behind this interconnectedness i.e., why is it so that everything in the world is interconnected and what is the metaphysical reason for it?

4. VEDĀNTIC RESPONSE TO THE 'OTHERNESS'

Vedānta, especially Advaita *Vedānta*, advocates non-duality, which is of the view that at ultimate dimensions of reality, there is no 'other'. It diffuses all the differences, as no forms of difference are ultimately real. This philosophy denies any essential differences between two things or beings whatsoever. Advaitins believe in the existence of only consciousness at ultimate level and non-difference or non-duality has been established on the ground of consciousness. At the level of consciousness plurality is impossible. However, differences are found in the various manifestations of this consciousness. In this context Vivekananda says:

*'...There is only one life and one world, and this one life and one world is appearing to us as manifold'*⁴

Vedānta believes that true happiness cannot be experienced through the fulfillment of one's sensual desires. As sensual pleasures at most have the capacity to just provide us with a short-lived happiness. *Vedānta*, on the other hand teaches us about our divine nature through which we could feel connected with 'all that exists'. True happiness is possible through the proper realisation of such a connection of oneness with the whole existence. *Vedas* acknowledge such interconnectedness by considering life as a cycle of not just taking but also giving back. So, the Natural forces are given divine status through the method of personification. *Yajña*, is a cosmic principle, which emphasizes for our duty towards nature. What we take from the nature should be returned back to it. There are many Vedic hymns to

³Sartre and other existential philosophers

⁴*Complete Works of Vivekananda. Vol.III. P. 303, Advaita Ashrama, 2006.*

seek the blessings of the five natural gross elements (*pañca-māhābhūtas*). People diligently refrained from activities, which had the potentiality to harm natural resources. It was maintained that the well-being of Mother Earth was dependent on the sustenance of the environment.

The *Vedic Seers* speak on behalf of the entire earth and they looked at every part of nature through the eyes of a friend and an empathizer. In Yajur Veda, seers pray with this realization only: ‘May all the creature look at me affectionately. May I look at all the creatures affectionately. May we all look at each other affectionately’⁵

It is remarkable to note how the people even during the Vedic times holistically elaborated nature and environment and paid deep reverence to each of its constituents through the process of diligent preservation and conservation. *Bhāgvat Gītā* calls this universe — a cycle of interconnectedness (*Evam Pravartitam Cakram...*).⁶ If we pollute this natural cycle at any level, then the whole cycle gets polluted.

The Taittirīya Upaniṣad says: “...Creating all things, Brahman entered into everything. Entering into all things, he became that which has shape and that which is shapeless; he became that which can be defined and that which cannot be defined...”⁷ Further continuing in a similar vein, is one of the most glorious declarations in the *Taittirīya* which declares thus: “...So long as there is the least idea of separation from him, there is fear. To the man who thinks himself learned, yet knows not himself as Brahman, Brahman, who drives away all fear appears as fear itself.”⁸ Similarly, in an extraordinarily beautiful passage from the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, the earth is seen as a living, responsive being.

Realizing this non-difference, Vedas pray for peace in every sphere of this universe-animate or non-animate:

‘May peace radiate there in the whole sky as well as in the vast ethereal space everywhere. May peace reign all over this earth, in water and in all herbs, trees and creepers. May peace flow over the whole Universe. May peace be in the Supreme Being Brahman. And may there always exist in all peace and peace alone. Aum peace, peace and peace to us and all beings!’⁹

5. REJUVENATING THE VEDĀNTIC MODEL

In order to regain our earlier relationship with mother earth, we need to regain the holistic vision of the our *Ṛṣis*. This is one of the highest realizations of the *Upaniṣads* and it has the potential to awaken the entire humanity from its selfish slumber. It is an eternal truth that selfishness is the root cause of our current environmental crisis. *Īsopaniṣad* addresses this issue in its very first verse: ‘*tena tyaktena bhujjīthā mā gr̥dhaḥ kasya svid dhanam*’¹⁰ i.e. therefore protect yourself through detachment. Do not covet anyone’s wealth’. Protecting ourselves through renunciation is to learn, as Vivekananda said, “That the whole of life is giving; that nature will force you to give. So, give willingly. Sooner or later, you will have to give up. You come into life to accumulate. With clenched fist you want to take. But nature puts a hand on your throat and makes your hands open.”¹¹

Coveting the wealth of others in the global context means taking more than one’s fair share of the earth’s resources. As Mahatma Gandhi once said: “There is enough in the world for everyone’s need but not enough for everyone’s greed.” Greed in this context refers to greed for utilization of more than one’s fair share of resources. In modern terms it also warns us against excessive consumption of those resources which are non-biodegradable and thus, cause more strain the earth due to its non-biodegradable nature viz., various forms of plastic, various other such toxic substances which are contributing towards depletion of the ozone layers like CFCs etc. Human beings cannot anymore act

⁵Yajur Veda V.36.18. ‘Mitrasyāḥam cakṣūṣa sarvāñibhūtāni samīkṣe Mitrasya cakṣūṣa samīkṣā māhe.’

⁶BhagvataGītā, Chapter 3, V-16.

⁷Swami Gambhirananda, Eight Upaniṣads(Advaita Ashram, 2009) Taittirīya Upaniṣad. (2:6:1c)

⁸Ibid. (2:7:1c)

⁹YajurVeda 36:17, Trans. Swami Abhedananda, Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, India (Aum dyauḥ śāntirantarikṣam śāntiḥprthivī śāntirāpaḥ śāntirośadhayah śāntiḥvanaspatayahśāntirviśvedevāḥ śāntirbrahma śāntiḥsarvaḥ śāntiḥ śāntireva śāntiḥsāmā śāntiredhi... Aum śāntiḥ, śāntiḥ, śāntiḥ)

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Swami Vivekananda. Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Vol II.)

(http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_2/work_and_its_secret.htm)

insensitive towards their Earthly duties as Mother Earth cannot take anymore strain of the inhumane actions towards itself.

It is quite essential to note that the ecological crisis which is being faced by humanity in the contemporary times is actually the result of a spiritual crisis. This, somewhere, is related with our attitude towards the 'others'. Even though various factors like: Industrialization, over-population, consumerisms, alienation from nature, are certainly considered to be the generic reasons for ecological imbalances; nonetheless, its deepest roots lie elsewhere. For, it is actually deeply related with one's own understanding about the nature of 'oneself' and 'one's' relation with the 'other'. 'How do I see this universe and what is my place in it?' 'What are my roles and responsibilities towards the environment and the animals inhabiting it?'

Morality is about opening up one's life for 'others'. However, the standard of morality is mainly based on by its extension i.e., the size of group covered by 'others' and the intensions behind it. A selfish person gets less respect in society than a family-oriented person. Morality and its consequent recognition increase when this 'family person' acquires social concerns. If he continues to extend his morality and adopts a humanistic outlook, he 'certainly' would gain a greater moral status. But still much greater are the ethics and the bigger is the size of the heart of the man who covers all the living beings in the blanket of his love and care. However, *Upaniṣads* teach morality, which is perhaps the highest possible moral concern for the whole existence, which includes all the Living and Non-Living beings, animals, humans, environment or ecology etc.

The Advaita philosophy of *upaniṣads* believes in the reality of non-duality and by that parameter humans, animals and nature are essentially non-different. Everything in this universe is deeply interconnected and interrelated. Since we are all a part of one large whole; we are all one, nested in unity with the rest of the universe. *Upaniṣadic* morality demands the expansion of our moral horizons as well. This realization, to some extent, can bring positive change in one's attitude towards nature and other animals. *Vedānta* will deeply rejuvenate the rooted conviction of the sanctity of nature and the interconnectedness of life. This Advaitic realization of *Vedānta* can be a perfect environmental model for our upcoming generations.