

Beyond Conservation: Re-Visiting Indian Upanishadic Deep Ecology and Ecological Harmony in the Indian Knowledge System.

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Abstract

The world at present is facing ecological concerns and environmental degradation along with the extinction of all life species. Though the world governments and various other individual institutions are working on maintaining the sustainability between human growth and the environment, such efforts toward sustainability remain limited to external policies and technological solutions. The current study aims to move beyond mere conservation of environment and to explore the ecological consciousness presented within the Indian Knowledge System, mainly through the close examination of the Upanishads. The paper revisits the core of Upanishadic teachings of the connection between the Self (Ātman) and the universal reality (Brahman). It is also going to explore the ancient Indian thoughts of ecology within the framework of Deep Ecology. The paper argues that the Upanishadic worldview toward the deeper connection between humans and other life forms and natural world offers a profound ethical and spiritual foundation for ecological harmony that could lead the world toward the understanding of the natural world in which everything exists. With this perspective, the study presents that the environmental sustainability is not merely a social responsibility but a realisation of one's fundamental connection with all of the existence. This study also argues that the ancient Indian knowledge presented in the Upanishads provides an integrative model toward the ecological awareness that aligns with modern sustainability models. Foundation for ecological harmony that could lead the world toward the understanding of the natural world in which everything exists. With this perspective, the study presents that the environmental sustainability is not merely a social responsibility but a realisation of one's fundamental connection with all of the existence. This study also argues that the ancient Indian knowledge presented in the Upanishads provides an integrative model toward the ecological awareness that aligns with modern sustainability models.

Key Words: *Upanishads; Indian Knowledge System; Deep Ecology; Ecological Harmony; Sustainability.*

Introduction:

Sustainability can be seen as a way of development in which it is focused upon the environmental resources and needs of future generations. In other words, sustainable development means to make human progress without compromising the needs of upcoming generations. It is true that governments are taking various steps toward making sustainable progress and long with the governments, various individual institutions are also taking major steps toward sustainable progress, however, the question of sustainability remains that same. It could be seen that these government policies and all the various attempts toward spreading environmental awareness seems to be turning meaning due to the mindless human consumerism. It could be said that in current times, the biggest threat to our planet is humans themselves. Whereas governments are taking major steps on global levels like United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), national policies to turn toward sustainable and renewable energy, implementing various environmental regulations, and various steps toward the protection of biodiversity. These are few of the many steps taken by the governments on national as well as on global levels, along with such efforts from government institutions, there are many Non-Government Organisations that are working with the same idea of saving the environment and various life forms that exists in their natural ecosystem. However, even with all the efforts from various government organisations as well as from the non-government organisations, our planet still is at the climax of ecological crisis, countless species are on the verge of extinction and the reasons behind it are mindless consumerism, absence of ethical values, and lack of understanding of the human connection with environment and other life forms of ecosystem.

Considering the fact that by the late twentieth century that is around 1960s and 1970s. However, within a short period of time it became one of the major disciplines and soon it became a part of all the other disciplines like literature, science, economy, psychology and even it became part of sociology. With continuously growing concern of ecological crisis the ecological studies soon turned to be a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary study. In current time, environmental studies can be seen as an umbrella term, one similar to cultural studies which in one way or another includes other disciplines under its wide perspectives. Although the field of ecological studies deals with crucial aspects of life and it could be considered as one of the fields that relate to both science and metaphysics.

With keeping the above presented aspects in mind, one thing becomes clear that though governments are making policies and other non-government institutions are also working in the same direction: toward spreading awareness in people that environment is something that has to be saved, mainly because humans cannot exist on their own without other life-forms and without the presence of ecological elements. While the above-mentioned point becomes an ethical aspect toward keeping the environment safe, the reason that people have to understand is that environmental degradation affects entire world and endangers not only the other life forms that exists in nature but on a longer terms ecological degradation also affects entire humanity itself. With the current trends and what news, it could be assumed that even with all the ecological concerns and steps taken by government organisations and other non-government organisations, people are unaware toward their own ecology due to which pollution continues to increase animal species and bird species keeps turning toward the extinction and if ecological degradation continues then time might come when entire humanity itself faces its extinction. While the above-mentioned situation sounds like something from a science-fiction-post-apocalyptic film or novel, but the fact remains the same that if they are not taking care of earth—yes because it is ethical and moral to do so, but it is also to be remembered that their lived depends on the earth's ecosystem, therefore, it becomes more evident and important to take care of earth and its ecosystem along with all the other life forms that are part of it, and if not done so earth will not take care for them and their future generation.

Keeping above mentioned aspects of challenges regarding ecological conservation in mind one thing becomes clear, that no matter how much stronger external forces like government and non-government organisations work upon the conservation of ecology, until and unless humans do not understand their fundamental connection to the earth's ecology, no matter how hard organisations work environmental problems cannot cease to exist. Human realisation of one's ethical and moral responsibility toward environment and other life forms plays a core role in maintaining the sustainable growth of one's own generation without sacrificing the future of the next generation. With this fact that human understanding plays a major role in maintaining ecological balance between human development and their environment, there are two possible ways by which individuals can become more aware about their own existence and its connection to environment and earth's ecology. One such way is to make them realise about the consequences of their actions, for example, the hypothetically and scientifically presented future presented in films and works of arts where

due to ecological collapse the social structure and entire human civilization faces its end. With such presentations of hypothetical and scientific future, individuals can become more aware toward their surroundings and their environment. Although this approach proves a basic understanding of the fact that it is important to maintain and take care of environment along with other life forms that are there in the earth's ecology to maintain not only one's own life but this is the only way to keep the future generation safe from the ecological degradation. However, this solution remains on the surface level as by this approach people faces the fear of being extinct and the fear of losing the comfortable life of human civilization and social structure. Hence a better way is required to make people understand the deeper connections between themselves and the earth's ecology. That leads to the second method, that is to re-visit the ancient Indian scriptures like Vedas and Upanishads. Indian scriptures provides knowledge that begins from the very beginning of the universe. For example, the mention of how the first man (Manu) and first woman (Shatarupa) which presents an idea that Indian thoughts and metaphysics presented in scriptures goes deeper. Throughout the various events presented in scriptures and various stories presented in historical scriptures like Ramayana and Mahabharata suggests toward the understanding of the importance of environment and the other life forms that are part of the ecosystem. With this approach, as it follows scientific along with the metaphysical methods of teaching, one could understand the deeper connections between oneself and with the world here environment and the other life-forms that exists along with humans on the same planet. Though there are multiple events in various contexts that puts light on the importance of environment and teaches that environment is a force that allows you to have the life and all the comforts of it hence, it becomes everyone's moral responsibility to make sure that they do not hard environment or other life-forms co-existing in the ecosystem. For the current study, the paper focuses primarily on the study of the Upanishads from the perspective of Deep Ecology. The reason behind selecting Upanishads is that Upanishads, compared to other scriptures, are more direct and even though Upanishads contains knowledge that could be considered as larger and deeper than the oceans and, even with such vastness and depth of knowledge, Upanishads are relatively more compact than many of the other Indian Scriptures. Upanishad focuses on the connection of oneself with the world, ultimately suggesting that taking care of one's environment is the same as taking care of one's own self. There are multiple Upanishads teaching various aspects of life, in some studies it is mentioned that there are more than two-hundred Upanishads available. However, the current study focuses on the major Upanishads

on which Adi Shankaracharya gave his commentary and, the current study uses *The Ten Cardinal Upanishads A Brief Study* by Swami Harshananda as a primary source of the study.

Upanishads and its Teachings Toward Ecological Conservation:

Upanishads can be considered as a basic and fundamental scriptures of Indian metaphysics; they are also considered as a part of Vedas. A simple and direct meaning of Upanishad is to sit by the teacher (Guru) and listen to the knowledge he is giving. Upanishads mainly talks about the connection between one's self with the absolute creator of everything. It follows the ways of Advaita Vedanta leading the student toward the non-dualism. Which leads toward the realisation toward one's own self and with that a sustainable development no longer remains a mere social and moral concept that individuals are forced to follow instead, it becomes ethical and with self-understanding it becomes more evident and self-less work toward sustaining of the environment making sure that no other life forms get affected due to one's unnecessary needs. With this, let's move into the Upanishadic teachings that could lead toward a future that is beyond the mere conservation.

Isavasya Upanishad:

Isavasya Upanishad is believed to be the first and one of the most important among the other Upanishads. In the very first shloka it delivers the solution to almost all the human problems including the one of the sustainability and conservation of other life forms.

The first verse of describes that the whole world is created and ruled by the God and it is advised to humans to enjoy the world, however, with the spirit of detachment as the world and everything in it does not belong to the humans but to God, at the same time in the first verse asks to not covet that belongs to others. Second verse continued the first one and asks humans to live a long life to work for the betterments of oneself and of the world and, it also says that such life cannot be cause of one's suffering.

While the other verses go deeper in this ancient knowledge of the world and its connection with each individual suggesting that each are connected even humans and non-human life-forms are also connected. With this knowledge of one's connection with the world and elimination the unnecessary desire for the materialistic things form one's life, one can live a life without harming environment at the same time with such a way of life it

becomes clearer that one is neither harming his fellow humans nor he is harming environment and other life-forms existing in the environment.

Katha Upanishad:

This Upanishad is in a dialogue form presenting a story of a ten-year-old sage boy named Nachiketa and Yama, the God of death. The story opens with a sage named Auddalaki Aruni, he was performing the Vishvajit yajña, sacrifice. During the sacrificial rituals Nachiketa noticed what his father was doing and to draw his attention toward it he, Nachiketa, asked his father as to whom he was being gifted away. Getting the same question again and again with irritation Auddalaki Aruni said that he would be given to Mrutyu (Yama, the God of death). Though he said it with uncontrolled mind, Nachiketa was allowed to go to the Yama. Where he waited for Yama's return for three days and three nights without accepting any hospitality. Yama returned and upon learning about his young guest, Yama offered him three boons for the inconvenience Nachiketa faced in his absence. This conversation between Yama and Nachiketa is the at the center of the Katha Upanishad presenting deepest knowledge of Brahman.

At the second valli (section) Yama explains Nachiketa about the difference between two ways of life: Shreya, meaning what is really good in its ultimate analysis; and, Preya, which suggest to the life that is momentary pleasant but ultimately turns disastrous. With this distinction, Yama explains that the wise ones lives that lives by following the path of Shreya whereas, the dull-witted ones cannot discriminate between Preya and Shreya and falls for the momentary pleasure. Further Yama explains that the one who follows the path of Shreya can realise the Atman, the true self of all, with this one could see the ultimate reality that he is not separated from the others and everything is but one, in all is the one same Brahman.

With this understanding, it could be said that if one attains the Brahman through the self-realisation and self-Knowledge that true self of all is one same Brahman, it is possible for the one to overcome the worldly attachments and greed of materialistic pleasures. With this Atma-gyan, self-knowledge and self-realisation, one could attain the Moksha, the ultimate liberation. However, the one who walks on the path of Preya falls for the earthly attachments and with greed and lust for more possessions consumes and collects more than what is needed to sustain a good life, which ultimately leads toward the over-consumption of natural resources leading toward the ecological and social imbalance.

With the knowledge of Katha Upanishad, one can learn that even in the current fast-moving world it is possible to choose the right path of living that leads toward the ultimate realisation that everything—living or non-living, human or non-human—is connected to the one supreme being that is Brahman. With this self-realisation one could find himself detached from the materialistic world and aspect such as lust and greed turns meaning less for him. With way of life the problems such as over consumption of natural resources and the endangerment of other non-human species would solve on its own as the men is no longer connected in the chains of worldly attachments he would not desire for more and for the things that belongs to others.

Prashna Upanishad:

This Upanishad is assigned to the Atharva-Veda tradition. This Upanishad deals with the six questions hence, it is also called Prashnopanishad and it is also known as Satprasnopanisad. Divided into six chapters, each deal with a question asked by a student to his teacher, sage Pippalada. These questions are directly related to the human life and their answers provides a prominent insight into life.

Kabandhi asked the first question: “O Venerable one! From where are all these creatures born?” (Harshananda 79) answering to this question Pippalada explained that the Prajapati, the Lord Creation, performed tapas and brought out of himself a pair: the Rayi and the Prana. This pair followed the Prajapati’s desire and produced various creatures. Here, the sage describes Rayi as the matter and Prana as the sentient spirit. Rayi as the moon and Prana as the sun, together they are also responsible for the concept of time. He further explains about the paths by which humans can attain higher worlds in accordance with their deeds. He also explains about the state and working of the world and said: “Even anna or food is Prajapati, because, it is out of the semen, the product of food, that people are born; and Prajapati is the origin of all beings.” (Harshananda 82)

Third question of Kausalya concerns the prana, the vital energy and its working inside the body. The sage answers this question and describes that the prana comes into the body effortlessly like the shadow following a man. He explained that the Prana is manifested form the Atman—the Paramapurusha or the Supreme Being, the one from whom everything has come. He further explains about the types of the prana and how it flows though the body.

Answering to the questions asked by other disciples Pippalada explains that the Purusha is in one's body and that is the Atman, he is the creator of anything that is in the world. He, the Supreme One—the Atman, first created Prana or Hiranyagarbha also known as the primary Person. From that he latter created all the other elements and everything that is in the world including living, non-living and human, non-human life forms. At the end the sage concluded that, during the time of dissolution the world and all that is in the world gets merged in the Purusha, similar to how rivers merge in the ocean.

Mundaka Upanishad:

“All the living beings—from the gods right up to animals and even the inanimate objects—river, oceans, mountains and vegetation have been projected out of him.

Hence one who realises him, the highest Brahman, in one's own heart, successfully destroys all bods of ignorance here and now.” (Harshananda 97)

While Mundaka Upanishad explains that from the very beginning everything is came out of the one supreme god that could also be called as Atman and, in the end, everything returns to the supreme god. Hence, one should not look after the world as if it belongs to him and him only. However, upon observing the world it could be seen that man generally behaves like a senseless child who does not know what is right or wrong but he wants everything that he sees. His ignorance is the manifestation of the lack of knowledge, due to which he often indulges himself into the worldly-pleasures, thinking about his self only while he ignores the world and other creatures of the world and, when he indulges in the worldly matters thinking of himself as a great doer, he often times harms the natural flow of the nature and society.

It is possible to make sure that one is neither harming himself not his actions are harmful for environment and everything else that exist in the environment, it is possible only though the self-realisation of one's connection with one's true self. Only with that knowledge one could detach himself from the materialistic world and can look after the betterment of the world without considering himself as a centre of the world.

Mandukya Upanishad:

Though Mandukya Upanishad is smallest of all the other Upanishads, it is considered to be one of the most important one. Containing only ten verses, it deals with one of the

deepest aspects of Indian metaphysics called Advaita Vedanta in other world it teaches about non-duality. "He is the lord of all, the knower of all and the inner controller. He is also the origin of this world." (Harshananda 105)

Among all the other teachings that are part of Indian Knowledge System Advaita Vedanta could be considered as the core of all teachings. It, in simplest way possible, explains that the world, even though it seems to be running in binary, is made by, made of and ran by the one same element that is the supreme one known by many names such as Atman, Brahman, Prana, Paramapurusha, and many more names are given to that supreme entity that exists in all living beings and also is available in all the non-living things.

Only with the understanding of this deeper truth one could realise his position in the world and how he has been harming the world due to his ignorance toward the ultimate truth. With the understanding of the Advaita Vedanta, one could feel the real compulsion toward the world and all that is in the world, all the greed, ignorance, jealousy and all the aspects that could be harmful for the environment, society, and world in general could be eliminated.

Conclusion:

Entire world, as mentioned at the beginning of this study, is at its climax of the natural crisis. The seasonal cycle has already been disturbed, glaciers are melting, countless native vegetation species have already been extinct and countless more species are on the verge of extinction. Government are making policies after policies to maintain the balance similarly, all around the world, countless small and large non-government organisations are also working to spread the awareness toward the conservation of the earth's ecology, however, all the efforts of maintaining the ecological balance seems to be failing after a certain point. When it comes to the application of such policies, it become necessary for each individual to be aware about their responsibility toward the environment, however, that is the point from where all the efforts starts to turn meaningless mainly because individuals are not aware about their responsibility and their connection to the world, they are all too busy enjoying the materialistic world that they have already forgot about the natural world and other life-forms that are part of that world.

In such times of crisis, it becomes more important to look back at the ancient scriptures for better solutions. When it comes to sustainable development, teachings of Upaniṣads becomes more than just a useful tool to the humanity. While it deals with deepest

of the human metaphysics, with the teaching of Upanishads one could understand his stand in the world and with the realisation that he is not alone but a mere part of the larger system. With his realisation that he is not the core but the supreme being, Atman, Brahman is the core and he, the supreme one, is at the core of all living and non-living things only with this knowledge and self-realisation a dream of sustainable development can be achieved.

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