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A Critical Inquiry into Ecological Visions of Ancient India Versus, Modern West

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Abstract

The paper explores the fundamental thoughts of ancient India, specifically Vedic and Upanishadic ideologies, which believed that man has no authority to dominate the Earth at the expense of his/her benefits. Each and every one ought to protect, preserve, take care and show genuine concern for the Earth to whom he/she has ascribed divine motherhood. We shall also observe that western anthropocentrism is itself facing a great challenge, and as a consequence, a new shade of ethical consciousness coined as 'environmental ethics' has emerged. Environmental ethics mainly a non-anthropocentric ethics in its approach recognises that nature and her beings should not be exploited and dictated by man, since nature is thought to be an end in itself which should be treated with love, care and respect. One of the major off-shoots of this new shade of non-anthropocentric ecological ethics is deep-ecology which has unlike anthropocentric attitude, of the mainstream-European tradition ascribed intrinsic value to nature. Finally, the paper will try to arrive at a conclusion by making a critical yet comparative analysis, between the basic and positive observations of the Indian classical thought as well as central doctrines of deep ecology of

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Western environmental thought by relating both of them. Such an attempt intends to relate both of them by pointing out striking similarities between them, in spite of the difference in time and cultural milieu in which they emerged.

Keywords: Man, Nature, Veda, Upanishad, Deep-ecology.

Introduction

“Sila bhumi rasma pangsuh sa bhumi sandhrta tasyai
hiranyabakshasey prithivah akarang namah”

(*Atharva Veda*, vxii 1.2b)

The aforesaid Vedic hymn by an *Atharvāna* seer reflects one’s profound reverence for the Earth; a divine motherhood has been ascribed to the Earth. The entire gamut of living and non-living beings taken together constitute the totality of Earth’s existence, and Earth is worshipped and revered by the ancient Indian minds for achieving this totality. While pursuing this praise, towards earth which arises spontaneously from the core of his/her heart, the *Atharvāna* priest also reminds us that Earth nourishes us, ensures our preservation, expresses her wrath when she observes her exploitation by others and punishes them severely. Recent natural phenomena like ozone depletion, global warming, extinction of rare and endangered species, loss of bio-diversity and increase in pollution may be cited as manifestations of Earth’s anger for the disrespect with which we treat her now (*Atharva Veda*, Xii.i.xi).

To begin with, the hymns of *Atharva – Veda* (*Atharva Veda* v.xii.i. 26) clearly reveals that contrary to the mainstream anthropocentric European civilisation and culture, Indian classical thought upheld an integral and holistic approach towards Earth and her creatures. Unlike ancient Indian mind, classical mainstream European consciousness tried to justify and authenticate man’s exploitation of nature on the firm belief that man is created in God’s image and so he can dominate her at will (Genesis, 1:24-8). Such an anthropocentric attitude has engulfed the entire world and has made the entire planet stand on a critical threshold.

To save the Earth from the crisis, a retrospective yet analytical study of the traditional Indian wisdom particularly the Vedic and Upanishadic observations about nature seems essential. The paper intends to study the fundamental thoughts of ancient India particularly Vedic and Upanishadic literature which believed that man has no authority to dominate the Earth at the expense of his benefits. To that end, Western anthropocentrism which has played a key role behind this crisis is sharply criticized. Newer and positive trends of non – anthropocentric ideologies are emerging where nature is thought to be treated with respect and love. The paper hereby citing crisis amidst which we have been entrapped takes the initiative to cite the fundamental premises that provided the foundation for Vedic and Upanishadic literature and their philosophical acumen. Citing the basic problem, the paper proceeds to provide a new comprehensive ideology which can make us aware of the pitfalls of anthropocentricity and perhaps rekindle the spirit of ancient classical thought combined with the newer and deeper aspirations of deep ecology. Such a shift in perspective could help us re-think in a more eco-friendly way, how to confront the crisis which we are encountering today.

Section – 1

Several archaeological evidences in areas covering Punjab, Sindh and the present day Pakistan and Baluchistan reveals that prior to the onset of Aryan culture in the Indian subcontinent, a well – advanced, civilisation where a deep and intimate relation between nature and the original inhabitants of India prevailed (Cooper & Palmer, 1998, p. 1). Subsequently, with the influx of Aryans, from different parts outside the country, a new culture and civilisation emerged which has been coined as Vedic or Aryan civilisation by the historians. The agrarian culture of the Aryans made them realize that to attain material prosperity and worldly happiness and more significantly to survive in their struggle for existence, they ardently need the co-operation of different natural forces like wind, water, air, fire and others. They therefore thought to appease different natural forces on which they depended to a great extent. Henceforth, the practice of worshipping Vedic deities who were thought to be personifications of different natural phenomena emerged. Elaborate rituals were prepared to eulogise forces of

nature, including mother Earth in which they inhabited and survived, in the hope that rituals would help them to receive benefits they desired. Moreover hymns recited in different Vedic verses reflected Aryan fondness for nature and the desire for establishing close kinship with all other creatures of nature.

Citations from aforesaid Vedic hymns distinctly reveal that deep and intimate relation between man and nature guided the Vedic mode of life. *Samaveda* for instance, contains various mantras, where *Agni* or Fire a natural element was worshipped with considerable significance. Fire was observed by the Aryans to be the protector, and beneficiary to man (as cited in Ghosh, 2006, p. 27). It was believed that when *Agni* or Fire is pleased, he resides in the home of the house-holder (as cited in Ghosh, 2006, p. 27). *Yajurveda*, specifically *Sukla - Yajurveda* also emphasized fire-worship since *Agni* was considered to be *Grihapati* or lord of the House (as cited in Ghosh, 2006, p. 29). Besides, *Agni*, water was also regarded to be the mother who protected and preserved all creatures, bestowing energy and rescuing all creatures from death (as cited in Ghosh, 2006, p. 30). Moreover *Yajurveda Samhita* and *Satapatha Brahmana* prescribed performance of various *yajnas* amidst which *bhuta - yajna* was most prominent. Such a sacrificial ritual included offering food to all beings of the earth for the promotion of welfare to all beings of the Earth (Anirban, 1991, p. 94).

Atharvaveda in a similar manner echoes the same spirit of appeasing natural phenomena for procuring happiness and security in this mortal life. *Atharvaveda* eloquently speaks about the vital role played by air or *Vayu*, which is thought to be the *Prana* or life of the universe (as cited in Ghosh, 2006, p. 38). And Sun or the solar energy was described as the initiator of all activities of all beings of the world (ibid.). *Prithvi* or mother Earth was also eulogized in *Atharvaveda* with special significance. *Atharvaveda* states that Earth is the sustainer of various living and breathing things, provides abundant food grains for all and provides ample nourishment to all animal life (ibid.). Profound respect was shown to earth, where prayer was offered to the earth for bestowing to her progeny, the ability to interact harmoniously among its members. Earth, which is considered to be the mother of all, was worshiped sincerely to

foster a stable environment for sustenance of life. Acknowledgment of *Rta* which controlled the activity of every being indicated a natural order within the earth. There was a firm conviction that

“The vast universe was not strewn about in random chaos, but had an inner order, a unity with an inexorable law and purpose (*Rta*) that governs the working of both the macrocosm and microcosm (Dandekar, 1979: 15). This is the ordered course of things, the truth of being or reality (*sat*) and hence the ‘Law’” (Billimoria, 1998, p. 1).

Beings who followed the *Rta* received benefits, while those who transgressed the law were severely punished. Two distinct observations can be made from the aforesaid Vedic thoughts about nature. Firstly though natural forces were worshipped mainly for promoting pragmatic interest, different Vedic verses repeatedly speak about inter dependence or reciprocity between everything in this world and every animate and inanimate being are thought to play a significant role in the natural order, which considered each thing sacred and worthy of moral consideration. Such a sense of inter-connectedness and acknowledgement “value” in each being, denied domination of human beings over nature and her beings and man was prescribed to show reverence to all (Billimoria, 1998, p. 4).

Secondly, another astonishing feature of Vedic culture and civilisation was sacrificing various animals and birds to appease different natural forces. To put it in other words, in spite of ascribing considerable moral significance to all in the cosmic order, the practice of offering various creatures, in order to obtain favour from different natural forces was a regular feature of Aryan people (Billimoria, 1998, p. 6). But simultaneously a parallel trend to protect animals were also observed in different Vedic hymns which signified that ancient Aryans were fully conscious of their actions and were involved in restoring the ecological balance. Different rituals and religious practices were framed to give relief to this aforesaid practice. Moreover, particularly Ayurveda revealed deep knowledge about nature and put emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between different beings and the environment.

Vedic ideology attained a more matured stage in the Upanishads. Upanishads believed in a supreme, absolute, indivisible underlying reality termed as “Brahman” which manifested itself in every individual beings of the world; pre-supposition of such an entity served as a uniting force between man and nature. Consequently, a sense of harmony with the environment, her preservation and development, development of empathy and compassion towards all creatures were repeatedly emphasised in different Upanishadic verses. *Isopanishad Bhasyam*, for instance, clearly states that a natural resource does not belong to anybody (“na kasya cid dhanam asti”) and thus it must not be coveted by anyone (“yard gradhyeta”) (as cited in Dasgupta, 1999, p. 15). The aforesaid statement depicts that nature should not be exploited by anyone, to promote individual welfare, since earth’s resources belong to everybody.

Taittiriya Upanishad indicates a close and intimate relation between the basic elements of the cosmos and the supreme-being. More precisely, *Taittiriya* Upanishad explained the order in which the world evolved. From the supreme self-sky has emerged from sky; air has emerged from air originated fire; from fire came water and from water Earth originated and from Earth came medicine; from medicine came food grains and from food grains came *Purusa* (as cited in Ghosh, 2006, pp. 47-48).

Quite akin to *Taittiriya* Upanishad, *Chandogya* Upanishad also states that Brahman is the cause of the world. He has created this world out of his own desire (as cited in Ghosh, 2006, p. 48) *Mandukya* Upanishad ascribed that *Prana*, mind, sense organs, *Akasa*, air, fire, water and Earth – all have originated from that supreme being or Brahman (as cited in Ghosh, 2006, p. 48). Hence, it can be observed that different Upanishads repeatedly harp on the idea that no one is separate from one another. Such a realisation of a common origin enables one to identify with others- including plants, animals as well as with members of universe. As a result, unity and brotherhood ought to prevail amidst all members of the nature’s family. So far, we have seen that respect and care for nature associated with anxiety for survival and desire for material affluence have shaped ancient Indian attitude towards nature. But, on the contrary, mainstream European observations about nature has reflected western man’s indomitable and unrestrained lust for

material prosperity and happiness which dictated him to alter the natural processes and has finally made us stand on a critical threshold, where our survival is severely threatened. Deep ecology, it has been observed has emerged as a sharp reaction to the environmental crisis from which the entire planet is suffering. Deep ecology, shows genuine concern, love and reverence for nature which was eventually lost after the fall, and hopes to help us to return from crisis, we are going through.

Section - 2

The term deep ecology is not quite easy to define. Here we may refer to Warwick Fox who distinguished three fundamental features, of this new ecological vision to understand the meaning and true significance of the term (as cited in Landis and Roger, 2001, p. 5).

Firstly, deep ecology refers to the basic inquiry about the multifaceted environmental problems. Deep ecology also critically observes fundamental world views that lay beneath specific attitudes of people towards nature (ibid.).

Secondly, Fox opines that deep ecology is a platform which gives place to all the basic values, to which ideologies of different environmental activists agree. Such values include ascription of intrinsic value, maintaining bio-diversity, enhancement of quality of life rather than promoting material prosperity and try to fulfill the commitments necessary to change values that rest on anthropocentric view of nature (ibid.).

Finally, deep ecology points out that though ecosophies differ from each other since they have originated from separate religious tradition yet, all of these ecosophies share certain simple and common features, which may be taken as constituting the basic features of deep ecology wherein the following features are emphasised upon:

- a) An emphasis on the intrinsic value of nature (bio-centrism or eco-centrism)
- b) A tendency to value all things in nature equally (bio - centric egalitarianism)
- c) A holistic perspective

- d) An affirmation that humans are not separate from nature but they form an inseparable part of nature
- e) An emphasis on inter relationships
- f) An identification of the self with the nature world
- g) An intuitive and sensuous communion with the earth
- h) A spiritual orientation that observes nature as sacred
- i) A humility towards nature in regards to our place in the natural world are knowledge of nature and our ability to manipulate nature responsibly (as cited in Landis and Roger, 2001, p. 6)

Section - 3

A comparative study between the basic spirit of deep ecology and Eastern wisdom shows that the essential purpose behind relating ancient with the modern is to bring out the fact how the predominant Oriental ideologies of ancient Indian seers came close to modern western notion of intrinsic value and inter connectedness, and both converge at certain point when essential question of survival is concerned.

To start with, deep ecology arose as a sharp reaction to combat anthropocentrism, individualism, instrumentalism and pragmatism - all of which generated a deep crisis related to our own existence. The aforesaid ecological vision opposes any idea which upheld that human beings are the natural sovereign of earth and the natural world exist solely to meet human needs. Concern and genuine appreciation for nature was also observed in ancient classical hymns of Aryan culture, particularly in the Vedas and Upanishads. More specifically, Vedic vision about environment was mainly conditioned by fear and anxiety for survival as well as attainment of prosperity and happiness. Natural powers were eulogised since they were thought to contribute to human utility. Here Vedic ideology and deep ecology differ from each other. A particular type of instrumentalism that ensued from pragmatism was present in the Vedic ideology. However, this instrumentalism is essentially different from its spirit from that of European world which advocates arrogance and the spirit of domination over nature. Unlike western thought, Vedic instrumentalism was deeply

associated with an attitude of fear, humility and respect towards nature regardless of its utility for human welfare.

In deep ecology, unlike Vedic thought and philosophy, nature is not seen as a power and a source which maintains all and preserves all. Vedic conception about nature originated to receive benefits from nature. Nevertheless, interdependence between man and nature enjoyed prominence where all member both animals and in animals were considered to be parts of an extended community which indicated presence of a psychological attachment with each other. Such proximity for others prevented ancient Aryans from dominating nature.

Upanishads come much closer to deep ecology, where every object is seen to be the manifestation of the supreme-being. In the Upanishadic philosophy, beneath the apparent diversity, there lies a unity. Belief in such common origin of all being gives birth to a sense of identification between man and nature and evaporates the tendency to use nature for human purposes. Similarly, deep ecology also observes an identification of the Self with the natural world generating a deep intimacy with the earth.

Quite akin to Vedic and Upanishadic thought where everything was considered 'sacred' by virtue of its own nature, deep ecology also puts emphasis on the intrinsic value of nature. Ascription of intrinsic worth to nature inspires the spirit of care and protection in both cultures oriental and occidental, for example, Vedic and upanishadic ideology and deep Ecology, and discourages exploitation of nature.

Moreover, compared to the Vedic thought, Upanishadic ideology about nature was holistic in its outlook which helped one to transcend an alienated state of existence and identify oneself with others. Such identification resulted in developing a tendency to value all entities with equal worth. This attitude of ascribing equal weightage to all things in nature and treat them with considerable significance is also a prominent feature of deep ecology.

Deep ecology, we have seen originated from deep questioning of causes responsible for earth's environmental crisis and have take a political position, where protection and preservation of mother Earth has become one of the significant goal of environmental

movement. On the other hand, although Vedas and Upanishads did not adopt any concrete political position and lacked a systematic, well organised environmental programme, still the urge to respect the earth and her natural resources was considered to be a 'duty' of an individual and was adopted as a policy of state administration in the later periods of history.

The ancient seers of India in their serene depth of mind realized that man should not interfere with the order and process of nature and should not claim any dominion over nature. Such an ideology rested on an affirmation that humans are not separate from nature and they form an integral and inseparable part of nature. This positive vision of inseparability was best reflected in the Vedic theory of cosmology where the constitution of the natural world could be traced back to the five natural elements. These five elements, namely air, water, fire, earth and sky are literally said to constitute the natural world, as well as one's physical body. Thus, the relation between body and cosmos was articulated in the *Rg-Veda* and the *Brihadaryanaka* Upanishad. Such an intimate relation between the body and nature revealed that the world cannot be separated from human body. This aforesaid theory of cosmology advocate a sense of deep intimacy between nature and the physical body which is an essential mark of human identity.

Unlike the aforesaid cosmological doctrines, deep ecology does not advocate any theory of cosmology. Still, it cannot be denied that deep ecology which emerged as a reaction to the present environmental crisis, earnestly tries to renew our love and reverence for nature, emphasising, development of intimacy with nature.

The later Vedic culture, particularly the Ayurveda, reflects profound knowledge of bio-diversity, put stress on inter-relationship between living species and the environment, gave prescriptions to take proper care towards flora and fauna and announced several punishment if anybody transgressed the ecological principle. Such an attitude was invariably, one of mutual respect (cited in Prasad, 2009, pp. 460-465). Deep ecology, a phenomena of recent times also value all things in nature and at a practical level and in a more sophisticated way, prescribes the use of renewable energy resources, protection of wilderness, recycling,

application of appropriate technology – all of which would enrich quality of life on earth.

Moreover, Vedic philosophy which displayed mutual respect, reciprocity and care for other subjects of nature, developed several rituals which reinforced the symbiotic relation between mankind and nature. Upanishadic thinking, however freed itself from the ritualistic mode of worship and a tendency to ascribe value to all things in nature became prominent in the Upanishads. Deep ecology also value rituals and ceremony, although such ritualistic mode of worship is not central to deep ecological thoughts.

The aforesaid study reveals that both deep ecology and hymns of Vedas and Upanishada come close to each other when they advocate kinship with nature. But, unfortunately Aryan culture suffered from certain inherent defects – which included the practice of sacrificing animals, primarily aimed to satisfy natural forces, but later turned to be an inextricable part of the aforesaid cultural tradition, which undermined the spirit of inter-dependence, love and care towards the entire nature. Secondly, classification of the entire society into separate classes based on *varna* which offered one particular class privilege to exploit others, stand opposed to the notion of egalitarianism, propounded by deep ecology.

In spite of the aforesaid shortcomings, Vedic and Upanishadic ideology, come close to deep ecology when both advocate interdependence and try to develop symbiotic relationship, propagate inter connectedness and try to develop respect and reverence for nature along with the urge to identify oneself with other beings of nature. However it cannot be denied that the two differ in time and cultural milieu in which they emerged. Deep ecology, originated from deep questioning of Earth's environmental crisis and has tried in a more systematic and comprehensive manner to end exploitation of nature by humans. This deepened crisis, which has led to the origin of deep ecology, was not so much prominent in ancient Indian although it was moved by a different sort of existential crisis. Ancient seers foresaw many problems, which has consequently emerged due to everlasting and unlimited greed which knows no restraints. Quite similar to deep ecology, ancient ecological thinking was profoundly philosophical in its perspective. Inherent and intrinsic

purposiveness, which ascribed moral value to every entity of this earth was endorsed by ancient ecological thought and is supported by deep ecology to save the planet from the abyss of extinction. Philosophical import of both deep ecology and that of Vedic and Upanishad thought should be re-considered, and a definite environmental programme relating both ancient classical wisdom and deep ecology must be chalked out, to guide us, amidst this deepened crisis.

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