



Spiritual Ecology In The Light Of Upanishads

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Abstract:

The relationship between the mankind and the environment has always been a matter of dispute as the development of the former is draining the other. The constant degradation of the environment has major consequences in not just the human lives but all the living beings in the world. The rising ecological concerns has been a wake-up call for us to take action to protect not just the human life but the whole world. It is time to change our view of the world as a 'means of survival' to that of 'a sacred place, a Sanctuary'. This is the ecological view which we find in the Upanishads, our sacred scriptures. Upanishads preach that all living and non-living entities are sacred and one. This view of oneness promotes a harmonious and holistic relation between man and nature. Our ancient scriptures speak the divine relation between material and spiritual. This is not just an abstract ideology but can be practiced in physical form. Upanishads have shown many environmental conservation-oriented practices. "annaṁ brahmeti vyajānāt ...", "annaṁ na nindyāt | tad vratam |....", "annaṁ na paricakṣīta | tad vratam |....", these verses of Taittiriya Upanishad remind us the importance of food and seek not to exploit it. There are many instances in Upanishads where all plants and animals are treated as divine and are to be respected and protected. Most of the Upanishads emphasize on the interconnectedness between all beings through the five elements which create and sustain all forms of life and absorb everything after death or decay. This eco-philosophy aims at the avoidance of exploitation of the universe by humans.

Keywords: *Eco-philosophy, Ecological view in Upanishads, Spiritual ecology, Oneness, Interconnectedness of all beings.*

Introduction:

Currently humans are facing ecological crisis. Environmental issues like climate change, global warming, plastic pollution, biodiversity loss are the effects of mankind's urge for development at the cost of nature. The constant degradation of the environment has major consequences in not just the human lives but all the living beings in the world. This has become a major global challenge that needs to be addressed as soon as possible. As a result, efforts are being made to find solution through conferences like UN Climate Change Conference (COP summits), UN Biodiversity conference, World Conference on Sustainability, Energy & Environment.

But scientific solutions are not enough to tackle the problem at hand. It is time to change our view of the world as a 'means of survival' to that of 'a sacred place, a Sanctuary'. We must find the connection between spirituality and ecology for the betterment of the universe. This spiritual ecology presents the significance of interconnectedness of all beings. This is the ecological view found in ancient Indian scriptures, Upanishads.

Upanishads emphasize the oneness of all living and non-living beings. "Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma"¹ in Chandogya Upanishad presents the world as the one Brahman. In Isha Upanishad – "yastu sarvaṇi

bhūtāni ātmanyevānupaśyati | sarvabhūteṣu chātmanāṃ tato na vijugupsate ||” 2 verse perceives the oneness of all beings. This view of oneness promotes a harmonious relation between man and nature. The various practices found in Upanishads help to resolve the ecological crisis.

Methodology

The present ecological crisis is related to the lack of awareness of the nature of creation and selfunderstanding³ . A deep analysis of spiritual ecology in Upanishads can result in finding practical ways to achieve ecological harmony. What is Spiritual Ecology? ‘Spiritual ecology is a field of study and practice that explores the relationship between spirituality, religion, and the environment. It recognizes that our ecological and environmental challenges are not just physical or material in nature but also have deep spiritual and ethical dimensions.’⁴ Scientists and academicians study the relationship between religion and ecology. It encourages the individual to transcend his mind from the physical view to the spiritual view of the world and hence respond to nature with a sense of respect and compassion. We can find different aspects of spiritual ecology in books like ‘Spiritual Ecology: A Quite Revolution’ by Leslie Sponsel, in the collection of essays by various authors in the book ‘Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth’ and in the teachings of the renown philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurthy. Although the definition of the term spiritual ecology varies among scholars, the idea of relating spirituality and nature remains the same. It is inspired from different cultures and traditions from various parts of the planet.

While enquiring about spiritual ecology, the term eco-philosophy was discovered. It is defined as the philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. It inspires several traditions which can contribute to alternative interpretations and thus proposed solutions to environmental issues. This philosophy united with ecology proposes human to be an

intrinsic part of nature and the nature to be a part of human. Thus, pertaining to the oneness of the dual world. Eco-philosophy expresses that the nature has intrinsic value, rather than just its usefulness to humans. The view of the world as a Sanctuary and to heal the world is to heal oneself is the central concept of this philosophy. It gives an insight into the interrelatedness of all living and non-living beings of the world and expresses the need to identify oneself with plants and animals.

Findings

The interplay between spirituality and ecology has gained significant attention in recent years as humanity grapples with the urgent need to address environmental issues. The concept of spiritual ecology is not a modern phenomenon. We can find an extensive literature on this in many ancient scriptures of the Indian culture and philosophical traditions like Buddhism and Hinduism. The Upanishads occupy a unique place in the development of Indian thought and it is the core of Indian philosophy. The philosophical concepts implicit in the Vedic hymns are developed through the Upanishads. The Upanishads represent the profound understanding of early Indian seers to solve the problems of origin, nature and destiny of human beings and of the universe. The whole emphasis of the Upanishadic scriptures is that human beings cannot separate themselves from the nature through the concern for nature by providing a metaphysical union between the human and non-human beings, the adherence to which seems necessary for us to establish and sustain a proper relationship between the nature and us.⁵

According to Upanishads Brahman is the supreme, all-pervading consciousness and the ultimate reality. This Brahman is present in every aspect of the world, as said in the Upanishad – “eko devaḥ sarvabhūteṣu gūḍhaḥ sarvavyāpī sarvabhūtāntarātmā | karmādhyakṣaḥ sarvabhūtādhivāsaḥ sāksī cetā kevalo nirguṇaśca ||” 6 . “agniryathaiko bhuvanaṃ praviṣṭo rūpaṃ rūpaṃ pratirūpo

babhūva | ekastathā sarvabhūtāntarātmā rūpaṁ rūpaṁ pratirūpo bahiśca ||” 7 verse expresses that one Brahman is found in different forms in the world. Before the origin of this world Brahman was the only being, one without the second - “sadeva somyedamagra āsīdekamevādvitīyam |” 8 and from Brahman the whole world is born, lives and absorbed at the end - “yato vā imāni bhūtāni jāyante |yena jātāni jīvanti | yat prayantya abhisamviśanti | tadvijijñāsasva | tad brahmeti |” 9 . “so’kāmāyata |bahu syām prajāyeyeti | sa tapo’tapyata | sa tapastaptvā |idaṁ sarvamasrjata | yadidaṁ kiñca | tat sṛṣṭvā tadevānuprāviśat | tadanupraviśya | sacca tyaccābhavat| niruktaṁ cāniruktaṁ ca | nilayanaṁ cānilayanaṁ ca |vijñānaṁ cāvijñānaṁ ca | satyaṁ cānṛtaṁ ca satyamabhavat |yadidaṁ kiṁ ca|” 10 verse tells that Brahman created the universe and has manifested itself in the form of living and non-living beings. When one realizes that it is oneself, that is, Brahman that we see in the world through different forms and in oneself the whole world exists, then we cannot experience any disgust or hatred towards anything - “yastu sarvāṇi bhūtāni ātmanyevānupaśyati | sarvabhūteṣu chātmānaṁ tato na vijugupsate ||” 11. This sense of oneness not only liberates oneself but also protects the world around from exploitation. This perspective elevates nature to a sacred and divine realm, making it an essential part of one’s sense of purpose for embarking on a spiritual journey.

‘The Upanishads also emphasize the interconnectedness of all living beings and the environment. They teach that the individual self, known as “Atman,” is not separate from Brahman but, in fact, a microcosm of the divine. The interconnectedness of all beings is symbolized in the Upanishads through the idea of “neti-neti,” which means “not this, not that.” It suggests that we should strip away our identification with the superficial and transient aspects of the self and instead recognize the interconnected web of existence. In doing so, we acknowledge our

oneness with nature and all living creatures as equals.’ 12 Here we can see that spiritual ecology is emphasized in Upanishads.

This is not just an abstract ideology but can be practiced in physical form. Upanishads have shown many environmental conservation-oriented practices. “annaṁ brahmeti vyajānāt” 13 , “annaṁ na nindyāt | tad vratam |” 14 , “annaṁ na paricakṣīta | tad vratam |” 15 , these verses of Taittiriya Upanishad remind us the importance of food and seek not to exploit it. In fact, the Upanishad asks to take care of the one who has come to our abode by sharing food with them – “na kañcana vasatau pratyācakṣīta | tad vratam |tasmādyayā kayā ca vidhayā bahvannaṁ prāpnuyāt| arādhyasmā annamityācakṣate |etadvai mukhato’nnaṁ rāddham| mukhato’smā annaṁ rādhyate| etad vā madhyato’naṁ rāddham| madhyato’smā annaṁ rādhyate |” 16

There are many instances in Upanishads where all plants and animals are treated as divine and are to be respected and protected as they are none other than Brahman. In Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, a female seer Gargi says we should meditate upon Sun as Brahman. She points out natural objects of meditation like lightning, space, air, fire, water, sound etc. to be meditated as the supreme Brahman. Meditating on nature helps in demolishing the ego-centric individual identity and transcending one’s awareness to from individual self to higher planes of consciousness and thus resulting in selflessness and equilibrium.

Conclusion

Conservation of the environment requires spiritual ecology which vouches for the unity of whole existence. It is observed that throughout the human history, the empirical sciences and the materialistic philosophies have failed to generate this view of oneness and interconnectedness of all beings. This view of the world as a sacred place and not just a means of survival is found in Upanishads. Though its an ancient thought from ancient scriptures, it still acts as a

remedy to several ecological problems that the modern society is facing today. It is the eternal truth and truth never varies.

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