



Research Paper

Spiritual Monism and Cosmo-centric Ethics: A Vedic Perspective

Dr. M.Venkatalakshmi

Assistant Professor

Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning
Ananthapur Campus

Received 10 June, 2021; Revised: 22 June, 2021; Accepted 24 June, 2021 © The author(s) 2021.
Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

Vedas are the most ancient, religious, philosophic and inspired text of the world with an oral tradition. The Vedic text comprising of *Mantra*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Āraṇyaka* and *Upaniṣad* has been treated by the Hindus as the most authentic scriptural authority which has shaped the view of life and way of life of the Hindus by having its impact on the post-Upanishadic writings right from the epic times till today. It has formed the very foundation of Indian culture and spirituality. It has unraveled the mystery of God, creation, life and death. The primal spirituality of the Vedas in its journey from the *Mantras* to *Upaniṣads* has deepened the concept of Being, spiritualized nature and divinized man by its holistic approach to God, man and nature relationship.

Primal Spirituality of the Vedas – Archaic and Axial: According to Karl Jaspers, there has been a “break through” in human consciousness, which he calls it as the axis of history. This took place somewhere around 500B.C and during which time spirituality in its high density and in its essential sense is perceived simultaneously in India, in China and Mediterranean. According to him, it ranged from 800 to 200B.C. Religious practices prior to it can be treated as pre-Axial or Archaic. Keeping this in view a distinction has been made by R. Balasubramanian between axial and pre-axial or archaic with their distinctive features.

Axial Religion:

1. **Rationality**: The spiritual experiences are clarified through intelligible categories.
2. **Spirituality**: The spiritual dimension of man and nature are revealed.
3. **Monism**: Awareness of the primordial Being as one and non dual.
4. **Ethical discipline**: Formulation of different paths leading to same goal.
5. **Salvation** as an individual affair.

Pre-Axial or Archaic religion:

1. **It is ethnic** in character and no name can be attached to it.
2. **Belief in the existence of an supernatural power which controls the world.**
3. **Myths and rituals** play an important role.
4. **Pragmatic** in nature.
5. **Holistic** in nature -- unifying God, man and nature.

According to R. Balasubramanian, if we have to characterize vedic religion on the basis of above salient features of both the periods, then we can say that vedic- religion is both archaic and axial since it fulfills criteria of both the religions on the basis of historicity and content.

Spiritual Monism – the basic characteristic feature of the Vedas; There has been a misconceived notion that there is a gradual development of monism from polytheism via henotheism in the vedic thought when we move from the mantras to the *Upaniṣads*. But an unbiased and careful study of the Vedas reveals that right from the beginning till the end, Vedas stand for essential spiritual monism forming the very core of the Primal Spirituality of the Vedas and polytheism is only apparent. Plurality of names and forms are only the expressions of one reality on the basis of functionality. Right from the *Mantras*, the vedic seers' vision contained essential oneness of divine consciousness representing the most fundamental reality of man and nature. But we cannot deny the fact that the monistic spirituality which has been affirmed in a suggestive way and implicit manner in

the mantras, has been repeatedly emphasized, confirmed and made more explicit in the *Upanishads* by employing dialogues, stories and day-to-day examples in order to make the subtle spiritual truths understandable. 'Many names and forms are only the expressions of the One', forms the very structure of the vedic thought. In essence they are one. To quote a few lines to substantiate this view:

***Indram Mitrām Varuṇam Agniṁ atho Divyah sa Suparno Garutman
Ekam Sad viprā bahudhā vadantyaṅniṁ Yamam Matarisvaran Ahuh.***¹

They speak of Indra, and Varuna, Agni; and there is the Divine, fine-winged Garutmat. The One Existence the wise call by many names as Agni, Yama, Matariswan.

The word 'sat' is substituted sometimes with the word 'That' referring to that ultimate reality which is transgendered is found in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* – "Agni is That, Āditya is That, Chandramas is That, Light is That, Brahman is That...."²

The *Atharva Veda* proclaims the same truth in a most emphatic tone:

**To him, who knows this God simply as One,
Neither second nor third nor fourth is He called.
Neither fifth nor sixth nor seventh is He called
Neither eight nor ninth nor tenth is He called
He oversees all, what breaths what breaths not,
To him, goes all conquering power.
He is the One, One Alone. In Him all deities become one Alone.**³

'The existence of "That One in many and many in One" finds its expression in the following lines:

**Such is Thy greatness, O Liberal Lord!
A hundred bodily forms are Thine.
Million in Thy million, or Thou art billion in Thyself.**⁴

The same thought gets expressed in a most profound way in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* – "Sarvam khalvidam Brahma." But the most philosophically sophisticated truth is expressed in the 'Hymn of Creation' declaring the existence of One Absolute Reality alone forming both material and the efficient cause of the world since there is no second. The text reads like this:

**That One breathless, breathed by its own nature. Apart from it there was nothing
whatsoever.....Therefore rose desire in the beginning; desire, the primal seed and germ of mind.....**⁵

The corresponding statements of above lines can be traced in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* which reads: **In the beginning my dear, this was Being alone, one only without a sectioned.....It desired: may I become many, may I grow forth.....**⁶

In fact, the above *śruti* text forms the very basis for Advaita Vedānta.

The identity of individual self with the universal self: The Rīg-vedic hymns declare another grand and sublime truth of jīva's identity with the Absolute on the basis of first hand experience of woman sage like Vāc who declares:

I am the queen of the whole universe, the bestower of all wealth, I am the knower of the truth, the first among the worshipful. The gods have placed in various regions as diverse are my abodes and I exist in various living beings.⁷

The identity of the individual soul with the universal self which are expressed occasionally in the mantras get firmly established in the *Upaniṣads* in a more more convincing way using stories, parables, demonstrations etc. This epoch making grand truth we find in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* where sage Udālaka Aruni repeats the *mahā vākya*, "Tat tvam asi" eleven times to his son Śvetaketu in explaining the meaning and significance of it through many examples. Through the example of banyan seed the sage explains about the emergence of the whole visible universe from one invisible, subtle essence and the identity of the individual

soul with the universal subtle essence. It also establishes the all pervasiveness of this invisible subtle essence through the example of existence of salt in the salt water which not externally visible to us.

Inter-connectedness of Everything with Everything: On the basis of essential oneness, interconnectedness of “one with everything” and “everything with everything” is established in the *Antaryāmi Brāhmaṇa* of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. The text reads like this:

Do you know the thread by which this world, the other world and all beings are held together?..... He who inhabits the earth, but is within it, whom the earth does not know, whose body is this earth, and who controls the earth from within.⁸

The inhabitanancies of that supreme one is further stretched to water, fire, air, sky, ether, moon, sun, stars and all beings of this universe. At the end of it, the text goes like this:

He who inhabits all beings, but is within them, whom no beings know, whose body is all beings, and who controls all beings from within, is the internal ruler, your own self⁹

The above text acted as the source for the Viṣiṣṭādvaita Philosophy of Sri Rāmānujachārya in establishing the inseparable relation between God man, and nature. According to him, God, man and nature are organically connected since cit and acit form the body of God.

.The Madhu Kōnda of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* too brings in the mutual dependence of everything with everything else in the cosmos and thus drives home the interconnectedness of the whole universe. To quote the text:

This Earth is honey to all beings, all beings are honey to this earth. Likewise, the bright, immortal being who is in this earth and the bright. Immortal, corporeal being who is in the body are both honey.¹⁰

The holistic vision :The *Upanisadic* seers were essentially mystics and visionaries. Being holistic in their vision, their metaphysics is all-encompassing Their holistic vision integrates the realms of “here” and “here after”. To them both are divine. This is evident when the *Isa Upaniṣad* declares:

**That is full (Brahman); This is full(the world of plurality).
Extract the full from the full ; full remains**¹¹

All the Hindu ethical principles have their grounding on the spiritual truths discovered by the seers. It is clear when the *Īsa Upaniṣad* reads: *Īsa vāsyam idam savam yatkinca jagtyam jagat. Tena tyaktena bhunjitha mā gridhah kasya svid dhanam*. The *Upaniṣads* cover all the three dimensions of Philosophy -- anthropo-centric, cosmo-centric and theo-centric. It is most anthropo-centric when it identifies the essential nature of man with the ultimate. No other philosophy in the world ever declared, “Tat tvam asi”, (That Thou Art). It is the most theo-centric when it declares “ekam eva advithiyam Brahma”, (Brahman is one only without a second), “sarvam khalu idam Brahma”(truly all this is Brahman). It is most cosmo-centric when it attaches divinity and perfection to this world. In one word, the *upanishadic* approach is anthro-cosmo-theocentric. It unifies man, God and nature. The basic teachings of the *Upaniṣads* is that Brahman/Ātman is the source of the manifest world and it is immanent in all beings. Hence, it proclaims the basic truth that humans are essentially divine and so also nature. In the absence of this truth man is victim to existential predicaments which implies absence of harmony of spirit mind and body in the personal level and harmony with other individuals and nature at large in the transpersonal level. Absence of harmony is suffering and root cause of all problems. Sri Aurobindo rightly says, “All problems of existence are essentially are problems of harmony. This problem of harmony is due to perception of an unsolved discord and the instinct for an undiscovered agreement and unity”. The *Upaniṣads* provide us with true knowledge of unity and harmony on the basis of immanence of one divine spirit in the whole of creation.

Cosmoc-centric Ethics : The unitive vision of the seers right from the mantras to the *Upaniṣads*, has been the ground in formulating a holistic ethics in Hinduism. By visualizing one divine principle as connecting principle of the entire universe, the vedic seers extended their love, reverence and kindness to the whole of creation – sentient and insentient. As a result, we come across vedic hymns with universal love: “May I look up on all beings with the eye of a friend, may I look one another with the eye of a friend.” The *Sānthi mantra* too is an expression of fine sentiment with a prayer for universal peace

**Let there be peace in the space; let there be peace in the sky;
Let there be peace in the on the earth; let there be peace in the
waters;
Let there be peace in the plants; let there be peace in all gods;
Let there be peace in Brahman; let be peace in everything and
Let such peace be with every one us.¹²**

In order to bring all round peace and harmony, the vedic sages treated all aspects of nature with love reverence and kindness. Addressing water as mother the vedic seer thus prays, “Let our mother water purify us” . He addresses air as father brother and friend.

He prays air to blow with all its sweetness and medicinal qualities. The vedic seer adores earth as the divine mother. In the *Atharva Veda* we find *Bhūmi-sūkta* devoted to the mother earth. In a most sensitive tone he expresses his adoration towards the mother earth:

Whatever I dig up of you, O earth! May of that have quick replacement. O purifying one! May my thrust never reach right unto your vital point, your heart.¹³

To the plant in the same tone the sage thus prays, “I will not destroy your roots. You live long and spread with hundred sprouts”

In the recent years when ecological and environmental awareness has become a great subject matter of discussion and when everybody is talking about environmental development and balancing shattered ecosystem, a glance into vedic wisdom reveals the truth that environmental ethics was a part of vedic view of life which is as old as 5000B.C. The vedic mind with its far reaching and subtle insight and vision could see the interconnection between human and nature. A feeling of love and reverence towards nature as a whole forms an important aspect of Hindu culture. “Live and let live” has been the fundamental principle of Hindu dharma. Hindu religio-philosophic tradition provides valuable insight in understanding the sacredness of the earth and its complex pattern. Eco-spirituality is embedded in the Hindu tradition. It tries to understand the whole cosmos as the creative blessing of God, and man as the trustee, the caretaker, by feeling the presence of God in His minutest form with all His glory and power.

In Skolimowski’s terminology, it can be said that the vedic mind was an embodiment of “reverential thinking”. The great sages of India practiced in ample measure the “yoga of empathy” a feeling of oneness with whole nature. Skolimowski suggests that we must learn to create a methodology of participation for solving ecological crisis. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the “the yoga of participation” was the one of the oldest yogas that the Hindus practiced. The Vedas and the Vedānta, which form the foundation of Hindu culture and spirituality, are ecologically rich. Ecological spirituality is very basic to Hindu Philosophy culture and religion. Vedic seers were so divinely overwhelmed with nature’s beauty and bounty, grace and grandeur, love and service that a sense of adoration gratitude, love and reverence sprang forth from their innermost being. Every aspect of nature was divinely personified. To the vedic mind, nature is not just dead matter but a living divinity. The vedic seers addressed different aspects of nature as father brother sister, friend kinsman and above all as divine mother. They felt their relation so intimately that they realized that they can win over her by love and reverence and not by force. So exploitation and domination over nature was out of question.

Truly, solution to all problems lies in realizing the truth that God, man and nature are inseparably connected and directing all our actions accordingly. This paves the way for harmonious living with perfect balance. There is discord and unrest basically because we are ignorant of the fundamental truth of essential oneness. The outer harmony is just the reflection of inner harmony on the basis of spiritual oneness. In understanding this essential oneness that the world of plurality carries value. All the ethical principles find their justification only because of this essential oneness in the apparent pluralistic world. Paul Deussen holds the *mahāvākya* ‘*Tat tvam asi*’ as the supreme moral maxim. He thus observes:

“Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself” is the requirement of the Bible; but on what ground does this demand to be based since feeling is in myself alone and not in another? Because the Veda here adds in an explanation – thy neighbor in truth is thy very self and what is different from him is mere illusion.¹⁴

The same idea can be further extended to the objective world on the basis of the vedantic statement “*sarvam khalu idam Brahma*”—not only I am Brahman but also everything else. This Brahman as the interconnecting principle of man and nature at large. This gives a scope for cosmocentric ethics where our morality is not just confined only to humans but the five elements, flora and fauna. The vedic seers’ vision of oneness influenced the subsequent writings and teachings of venerable sages, saints, and law givers which shaped the way of life of the people of this land. In this context it is worth quoting a passage from the *Yoga Vasīṣṭha*:

O Rama! Beings of all species are your brothers, as there no being who is unconnected with you. We are like the branches of the same tree or like limbs, organs and cells of the same body and thus we are interconnected with each other.¹⁵

This kind of organic relation between God man and nature finds its total expression in Viśiṣṭādwaiṭha Philosophy of Rāmānuja which is founded upon Antaryāmi Brāhmaṇa and Madhu Kānda of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. According to him, both cit(individual souls) and acit(praṇi) are inseparably and organically connected and they form the body of God and hence it is our prior commitment to remain responsible for the wellbeing of the attributive body of God. Because of the organic inter-relatedness, harm or happiness to any entity has a reciprocal negative impact on the other entities. If I cause harm to any part of the organism of this body, I am bound to be affected in effect, for I am organically related to them. Unjust violence made by humans to earth and all that belong to earth, is irreconcilable in the Divine body paradigm of Rāmānuja. Violence to earth is an act of sacrilege and desecration.

The vedic culture engaged in the relationship of mutual respect caring for earth and its fellow beings as alive and self conscious as human beings Their relationships were reflected and perpetuated by religious beliefs, ceremonial rights and religious duties. So the religio-cultural heritage remained ecologically functional for centuries. Due to lapse of time though the Hindu practices lost their peripheral beliefs, the central beliefs remained undamaged having its eco-dimension.

Vedic Ecology and some prominent models of Western Environmental Ethics: There are three models of Western environmental ethics – **Land ethics, Deep Ecology and Eco-Feminism**. Aldo Leopold, the exponent of Land Ethics defines right as “**A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it is otherwise.**” He holds that a biotic community have value in themselves as well as or despite any value they have for humans. In his classical essay, “The Land Ethics,” he observes: **This ethics simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soil, water, plants and animals, or collectively the land. He leads humans to be to the plain members of the country rather than its conquerors.**

In Leopold’s thought for the first time in the Western thought we find paradigm shift of right and wrongs. Prior to Leopold morality was confined only to humans. For the first time the ethical judgment is extended to the realm of land, the community as a whole and all that is in the land.— water, soil, animals, plants and all others.

Deep Ecology which is another model started with Arne Naess stresses on the following characteristics;

- Emphasis on the intrinsic value of nature.
- Attaching equal value to all things.
- Focus on the whole of earth itself with its eco system rather than on individual organism.
- Emphasis on interrelationship.
- Identification with the natural world.
- Intuitive and sensuous communion with nature.
- Spiritual orientation that sees nature as sacred.
- Humility towards nature and manipulating nature in a responsible way.
- Celebration of wilderness.

Eco-feminism theory rests on the axioms of deep ecology and structure of feminist thought. Feminism connotes that which offers woman liberation from oppressive thought and oppressive social structure. Its ethics aims at eradication of systems of exploitation against woman, animals or the earth. On the whole it is against the

exploitation of nature as a whole. It seeks to recognize the interconnectedness of all life and manifest this in action

After having an overview of the ecological movements it clear to us that ecological awareness in the West took shape during 20th century after world being the victim of ecological hazards .The basic principles of **Land Ethics, Deep Ecology** and **Eco-Feminism** are already embedded in the cosmo-centric ethics of the Vedas having its foundation on the interconnectedness of creation based upon the oneness of spirit of which the matter is only a vesture. Just as the invisible thread links and keeps the garland as a whole, even so ,one divine consciousness ,the universal principle runs immanently through the whole manifest world. Realizing this essential oneness and acting with a sense of identity whether human or non-human, is the mark of true education . *Advaita drsti* is the panacea for all suffering.

Primal Spirituality of the Vedas which is most altruistic, catholic and holistic, can be the remedy for all the existential predicaments. The ecological crisis of the post modernity is truly due to lack of spiritual dimension in relation to cit and acit. The Vedic Spirituality can provide solution to the triple tragedies which the world facing today—the tragedy of humans standing isolated from God and the world the tragedy of nature remaining isolated from humans and God and also the tragedy of God being kept away from humans and the world.

Sri Aurobindo, the great admirer of vedic culture and spirituality and who tried to unravel the secret of the Vedas, holds that vedic civilization is integral in its nature where the Aryans saw God not only as the universal transcendental self of all things, but also as an immanent self in all. Sri Aurobindo in glorifying the integral nature of the philosophical ideals of the Vedic seers, he thus observes:

They reached His singleness aloof from phenomena. They saw Him in every one of His million manifestation in phenomena, God in Himself ,God in man , God in nature were the “ ideas” which the life expressed. Their civilization was therefore many-sided and complete and their ethical and intellectual ideals are perfect and permanent than those of any other nation.....humanity, pity, chivalry ,unselfishness, philanthropy, love and sacrifice for all living things, the sense of divinity in man were fully developed in India at a time when in all the rest of the world they were either non-existent or existent in the most feeble beginnings. And they were developed because the Aryan ṛshis had been able to discover the truth of the eternal and gave to the nation the vision of the eternal in all things and feeling of His presence in themselves and in all around them¹⁶

REFERENCES

- [1]. Rig Veda, III,54.17.
- [2]. Ibid.32.1.
- [3]. Atharva Veda,XIII.
- [4]. IbidXIII.4.
- [5]. Rig Veda,10.129.
- [6]. Chāndogya Upaniṣad,6.2.1-3.
- [7]. Rig-veda,X.125.
- [8]. BṛhādranyakaUpaniṣad,III. 7 .23.
- [9]. Ibid.16.
- [10]. Ibid.II.V.I.
- [11]. Īśa Upaniṣad, invocation.
- [12]. Sukla Yajur-veda,36.17.
- [13]. Bhūmi –sūktam.
- [14]. Deussen,Philosophy of the Upanisads.
- [15]. Yoga Vaṣiṭha.
- [16]. Sri Aurobindo, The Supplement, Centenary Volume, Sri Aurobindo Ashram,Pondicherry,p.203—204.