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Reading the signs of eco-philosophy in *Upanishads*

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Abstract

Today the world facing unprecedented set of ecological issues and it can result in major consequences for everyone's daily life. The ecological issues have been seen as a challenge for human self understanding. So it is high time for the people to re-appraise the ecological wisdom of *Upanishads*. All living beings and non living entities of the universe or the nature itself are sacred. It is the ecological view of *Upanishads*. Most of the *Upanishads* are the full of stories that treat plants and animals as divine. The *Upanishadic* seers believe in the sanctity of life and even trees, rivers and mountains are believed to have souls. These communities carry out this conservation oriented practices not as environmental acts but rather as expressions of dharma. All these signs are shed light on the crucial lesions of eco-philosophy, which is recent addition to the philosophic vocabulary. This new world view emphasizes the unique, precious and sacred nature of our planet. The central concept of eco-philosophy is the world as sanctuary an alternative to world as machine.

Keywords: Ecology, ecological crisis, eco-philosophy, *Upanishads*

Introduction

In present day man is engaged with a new journey, a journey to search ways and means to overcome ecological crisis. As solutions to ecological problems man employed all ways, both scientific and non scientific and man started to realize that scientific solution is not ultimate answer to the problem and crisis is still left untouched. So it is primarily concerned with man's mode of thinking. India is a culturally rich country and land of prayer and worship. The unique characteristic of Indian cultural tradition is that it has contributed immensely to all branches of knowledge whether it is science, politics, economics, art, religion etc. Indian cultural tradition always have provided ideological impetus to environment and maintained a harmonious and holistic relation between man and nature. Feeling of one with the nature is the fundamental message of this tradition. In other words ancient Indian literature speaks about divine relationship between material and spiritual. This ecological view is not limited in abstract concepts but each Indian's day starts with reverence to nature. Eco-philosophy is relatively recent addition to philosophic vocabulary. It is often regarded as identical to environmental ethics. But the scope of eco-philosophy is wider than that of environmental ethics. It is concerned with the relationship of human beings with nature. The aim of eco-philosophy is avoidance of exploitation of the non-human world by the humans. In western world the history of eco-philosophy is not much older than fifty years and it as an academic discipline came into scene in the west during 1970's. In Indian context, eco-philosophy is not a new outcome. If we look our ancient literature we can find that the under currents of eco-philosophy and vivid descriptions of nature. This paper is an attempt to explore the eco-philosophical thought and its currents in the *Upanishads*.

Eco-philosophy

The term eco-philosophy was coined by Arne Naess, the father of deep ecology and he defined the term eco-philosophy as philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. Eco-philosophy is ecological in its broadest sense and it deals with issues pertaining to the future of the earth and dignity of humankind. In fact, one of the main preconditions of the subject is that there is a diversity of standpoints and perspectives within it. The subject works with examining the major environmental and social problems facing us by relating them to their philosophical and

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cultural roots. Eco-philosophy as a subject stresses the need for different standpoints. Eco-philosophy wishes to inspire the drafting of several traditions, which can contribute to alternative interpretations and thus proposed solutions to environmental issues. Eco-philosophy is broadly conceived, as including ecosophy, deep ecology eco-theology, ecology, social ecology and eco-feminism. It unites philosophy and ecology while simultaneously positing that humans are an intrinsic part of, and inseparable from nature. As a union of philosophy and ecology, eco-philosophy can support the growth of a deep ecological philosophy. Deep ecology as an eco-philosophy breaks us out of the anthropocentric boundaries imposed by shallow ecological thought which emphasis concern for the environment only insofar as it addresses ways that humans are affected by nature. The eco-philosophical platform can help guide to realize that the ecological crisis we face cannot be solved by any quick technological fix. It sees humanity as one with nature. The central concept of eco-philosophy is the world as sanctuary this world view emphasizes the unique precious and sacred nature of our planet. The main tenets of eco-philosophy are:-

- ✓ The world is a sanctuary
- ✓ Reverence for life is our guiding value
- ✓ Frugality is a precondition for inner happiness
- ✓ Spirituality and rationality are complementing each other
- ✓ In order to heal the planet, we must heal ourselves

Eco-philosophy arouses in response to the falling of the mechanistic world view and these fallings are evident from violent and selfish attitude of human beings towards the environment and widespread abuse of the environment. Eco-philosophy is philosophy as it should be meaningful, relevant and participatory. It expresses that the idea that the nature has intrinsic value, namely value apart from its usefulness to humans. Eco-philosophy is founded on two basic principles one is scientific insight into the interrelatedness of all systems of life on earth and second component is the need for human self-realization instead of identifying with our egos we would learn to identify with trees animals and plants.

Eco-philosophical Concerns in *Upanishads*

The concept of environmental protection is not a modern phenomenon for Hindu tradition. We can find an extensive literature on eco-philosophical ideas in many of its scriptures. The *Upanishads* indeed occupy a unique place in the development of Indian thought and it is the core of Indian philosophy. The *Upanishads* ranging between 1500 to 600 B.C. appeared in the later *Vedic* age as the final stage in the development of *Vedic* literature consisting of answers to some philosophical questions. 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 nonhuman beings, the adherence to which seems necessary for us to establish and sustain a proper relationship between the nature and us. Most of the *Upanishads* speak about the inexplicable unity of creation and a mysterious interconnectedness of everything to everything else by the consideration of five elements which create nature and sustain all forms life after death or decay and they absorb what was created earlier. This description gives immense information about the secret of human existence and man's

relationship with the nature and it is the reminder of the fact that microcosm of the universe, depending on all the laws working there on. Both man and nature have a frequent and reciprocal influence up on one another which realizes into the smallest particles through water, earth, sun, season, movements of stars, food, soil etc. The *Upanishadic* tradition put forth the view that the world of man, the flora and the fauna, everything is exists only because the elements made of everything is similar. This concept stands for the crucial lesions of eco-philosophy.

The *Upanishads* teaches its followers live a simple life and not to use anything belonging to nature such as soil, coal, or forest at a great rate than can be replenished. For instance, do not destroy birds, fish earthworm, and even bacteria since all these playing vital ecological roles. Once they are annihilated we cannot recreate them. The thinkers of *Upanishads* are also perceived as everything is sacred; they should be treated with respect and compassion because they are parts of *Brahman*. In the *Upanishad*, the ultimate reality is conceived as *Brahman* and *Brahman* itself in the form of manifold particulars, which implies that everything in the nature should get equal respect. In other words, God pervades the whole universe and nature in all its infinite forms and countless modes is nothing but a manifestation of God himself. This is why all beings in the universe are interrelated. There is nothing in nature which is not related to other things. In this sense, the whole world is pervaded by *Brahman* and every manifestation both animate and inanimate contains the spark of the divine. *Upanishadic* seer's perceived divinity in everything that exists in the universe, which in contemporary ecological terms is expressed as everything is related to everything else. There is an essential unity of all existence, no hierarchy among existent beings. This concept of divinity of nature resembles somewhat a form of nature worship which came down from earlier age. The verse in the *Mundakopanishad* establishes that the earth is not only for human beings to enjoy but also for other creatures. Here the *Upanishad* beautifully conveys the idea of live and let live.

The *Upanishads* come immediately after the *Brahmanas*. The sacrifices become indivisible part of the life in the *Brahmana* period. The people used to perform sacrifice to purify the surrounding air and to keep the environment healthy. It helps in keeping way the mosquitoes and other insects, which are harmful to the health of mankind. In the *Kausitiki Upanishad* one can find out the description of the *Agnihotra*. The thinkers of the *Upanishad* were engaged in equating the nature with their own habits. In the *Agnihotra* the oblations are mainly preferred of cow dung, cow's urine, milk etc. At present, we find that modern scientists are thinking interest in the analysis of the gases evolved during *Agnihotra*. They also accept that the *Agnihotra* is one of the means to control the air pollution. This *Agnihotra* is so simple that even common man can practice it easily. In this context, the sayings of Dr. Gopalakishnan, scientists in CSIR is relevant that he pointed out the scientific insight of ancient Indian sages on ecology, astronomy, mathematics, religion etc are not on the basis of dogmatism, instead on the basis of scientific mind and philosophical understanding of nature.

Human habitations all through the ages spread along the river banks and in close proximity to water resources. Forest has natural growth along with the river belt. It is that the forest that provided shelter for people. The sages of ancient India lived in their hermitage in the forest, meditated on the problems of mankind and presented the essence of their research to the society in the form of *Upanishads*. The ancient

Indian sages believed that doing harm to the trees was an offence against the forest spirits and deities. In *Brahadarnyaka Upanishad* identifies trees as being the hairs on the cosmic sacrificial horse from which came the entire world, and the *Svetasveatara Upanishad* celebrates the God who pervades everything, but who is identified specifically as the God who abides in all beings and natural elements, including trees. Although no description of tree worship is found in the early *Upanishads*, all of these texts agree that there are no sharp ontological boundary separating trees, humans, or any other kind of being. Later *Upanishads* especially in *Bilva Upanishad*, elude tree worship directly. To *Bilva Upanishad* the *Bilva* tree is nothing but the form of Lord *Siva*. It is clear that *Upanishads* give expression to the idea that all beings are interconnected.

In the *Taittiriya Upanishad* certain norms were prescribed for human beings to keep the environment clean. One should not cause urine and stool in water, should not spit in water; and should not take bath without cloths. The *Isavasya Upanishad* has revealed the secrets of existence of life on earth and the importance of every organism for mutual survival. The universe along with its creatures belongs to the lord. No creation is superior to any other. Human beings should not be above nature. *Isavasya Upanishad* uttered thousands of years ago is true and have become even more relevant today as the modern human civilization armed by the technological weapon, made arrogant of his scientific knowledge and compelled by the ever increasing greed for material achievement is systematically encroaching into the living rights of all other life forms on earth by using, misusing, exploiting the finite and sacred natural resources of earth.

The above descriptions reveals that the *Upanishadic* people are very careful observers of the internal and external properties of plants and they warned against deforestation and cutting of trees. Ancient people's worship of trees and plants are based on several factors of utility and not only a religious ground. Thus the environment did not pose any problem earlier because man did not interfere with the forces of nature and worshiped nature as real benefactor and life sustainer. Whatever ecological problem was there in those days of nature friendly age was caused by nature itself. Man was a silent spectator; he had neither the inclination nor the tools and will to destroy the forces of nature. But now people have changed their views. The highly materialistic and consumerist approach of man has endangered the health of our ecological balance. The existing ecological in balance is the behavioral patterns, attitudes, and thought process of man. The modern man thinks that he is above the nature's laws. Man used science and technology to discover the ways and methods to govern the nature. Instead of love and care towards nature man destroyed old bond of tradition between man and nature.

Conclusion

The ecological crisis today is great that it calls for a new paradigm, a fundamental change in our thought, perceptions and values. So it is the high time to turn to our ancient literature. The *Upanishadic* literature provides eco-philosophical ideas based on cultural values which care for all natural entities. Our great seers foresaw the dangers of environmental crisis even when there is no chaos. They prescribed certain rules for the protection of environment in relation with religious faith and practices. In contrast to this, the present day society has an antagonistic attitude towards the nature. The resources of earth are replenishing fast and science and technology stands helplessly to refill the

resources. So this situation is a chance to reappraise our traditional philosophical and cultural attitude towards the environment. So the primary duty of all Indians is to re-discover and re-acquire the lost wisdom of ancient India. It does not mean that we should go back to *Upanishadic* period or we should spread the religious tenets. But it is an urgent need to reorient our mental makeup towards nature. As a rational being it is the responsibility of man to protect the earth and provide good environmental condition for himself and innumerable other species evolved on this earth. A small efforts made by each individual at his or her own place will have pronounced effect on the global level. It is aptly said think globally act locally. Among the Hindu scriptures, *Upanishads* have vital role which provide enough resources concerning environment. In conclusion, I would like to remind Dr Abdul Kalam's words: 'ancient India was a knowledge society that contributed a great deal to civilization. We need to recover the status and become a knowledge power. Spirituality must integrate with education. We should ignite our dormant inner energy and let it guide our lives. The radiance of such minds embarked on constructive endeavor will bring peace, prosperity, and bliss to the nation'.

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