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The concept of sustainable planet in Vedic civilization

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the problem of causing harm to Nature in the process of what we call civilization. Vedic approach of consumption along with denouncement seems to have been forgotten. We, the humans, I would say, self-acclaimed civilized people seem to be strangulating our planet to death which is in dire contrast from the Vedic approach of mother and progeny relationship between the earth and the people. If humankind is to choose its path deliberately, I believe our deliberations must include a critique of civilization itself. The question implicit is: what have we done poorly or thoughtlessly in the past that we can reverse or at least improve now?

Keyword: Modern civilization, Vedic culture, Mother Nature, ecology, criticism

Introduction

As is very commonly known, civilization in general sense describes the process of a social collective becoming civilized or progressing from a state of nature or savagery to a stage of advancement. There are many possible definitions of the word 'civilization' The word derived from 'civis' implying 'town' or 'city' suggests the minimum definition as 'urban culture'. Besides, there are other facts involved like agriculture, social stratification, division of labour, literature, organized warfare etc. Civilization refers to both a process and a destination. Those whom we call civilized people today are accustomed to an anthropocentric view of the world. Our interest in the environment is utilitarian i.e. environment is of value to us because it is of use to human beings, be it in the form of raw material for our industry or merely as a picnic spot.

Now, the question arises what we have done to our planet in this process of what we call savagery to the advancement. This paper deals with the problem of thoughtless exploitation of nature in the process of civilization. We, the humans, I would say, self-acclaimed civilized people seem to be strangulating our planet to death. As most estimates show, we are moving towards doom. Our oceans are dying, the ozone layer is depleting fast, temperature is soaring, wildlife is shrinking and human population is growing at an alarming rate. Ours is an ecologically unsustainable civilization that is sure to offer sheer trouble to coming generations. Thinking of present trends, what can be supposed our generations are going to inherit: disease, stress, exhausted natural resources, no social life, a pitiable life to sum up.

As a student of Sanskrit, I found opportunity to study the life people lived during Vedic period. As I have observed, and hopefully most of us would agree, this was an era when people worshipped the powers of Nature. The earliest available text, Rigveda describes all Natural powers as gods, and there are hymns in the admiration of fire, water, sky, earth, air, rain, sun and what not. The ancient Aryans were highly religious but their religion was simple. They were impressed by the forces of Nature such as the fire, the sun, the wind, the dawn, the rain and the earth, and worshipped them as the Almighty. Every natural phenomenon was regarded as a separate god whom they adored and prayed for their own well-being and prosperity.

Agni or the fire is the most worshipped deity in the Vedic texts. Agni is termed as friend and relative of man, the giver of good health, prosperity, name and fame. He has been prayed to be bountiful to us like a father is to his son:

Sa nah piteva sūpāyano bhava
Sacasva nah svastaye ^[1].

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Prithvi is praised for her benevolent qualities. She is termed as mother to all human beings and rain god has been adored as father:

mātā bhūmih putroham prithivyāh
parjanya pitā sa u nah pipartu ^[2].

Mother earth has been prayed to provide nutrition to the people:

Sā no bhūmirvisṛjatām mātā putrāya me payah ^[3].
She has been prayed to provide us pleasant stay ^[4].

Great sky and earth have been prayed to nurture and nourish us.⁵ Āpah or waters make the atmosphere refreshing and they contain divinity. They have been prayed to give nutrition to the mankind.⁶ Water in the form of rivers is a life giving phenomenon. We also find prayers to rivers where they have been described as giver of nectar ^[7].

Vāyu or the air is the lord of life and he is well doer of the world ^[8]. The fierce form of Vāyu has been presented as the Marutas. These Marutas are the sons of Rudra, the god of storm and lightning ^[9]. They are lords of storm and destruction ^[10]. They bring about huge storms that shake the earth and heaven ^[11]. But they are not wicked. They work for the welfare of mankind and give people strength to overcome obstacles. They also bring rain ^[12]. They have been prayed to bless us with long life ^[13].

Varuṇa, the god of waters is also the god of moral law. Varuṇa is the ruler of the earth and sky and he has been prayed to protect his people ^[14]. He has been prayed to be kind towards his people ^[15]. He has also been prayed to lead us to the path of good and bless us with long life ^[16].

Rudra is the god of storm and lightning, and his favour has been asked upon. He wields the lightning bolt and bow and arrow and sends down lightning which brings fear to people as well as animals ^[17]. Rudra is frequently depicted as a terrifying character. In contrast, Rudra also possesses milder characteristics such as ability to heal as he provides medicines ^[18].

Parjanya is the lord of rain. He brings down rain and makes plants grow ^[19]. Being controller of lightning and thunder, he is feared by all life forms ^[20].

Sūrya is the lord of light and power. He keeps darkness at bay with the light radiating from him. He has been called the soul of the world ^[21]. He destroys diseases and thus gives good health to people ^[22]. Soma representing vegetation is the god of inspiration. He gives prosperity, joy and bliss and rids people of diseases ^[23].

All these, and many more are in fact natural powers established as gods in Vedic culture so that people out of reverence as well as awe, may avoid causing harm to them. In the present day scenario of unparalleled harm being caused to Nature in the name of civilizational development, adopting as well as practicing Vedic culture is the need of the hour, where the earth is our mother and sky father, rivers our sisters, and the sun our friend.

The basics of our ancient Vedic culture when practised in spirit can make us truly civilized where we'll treat this planet just like our mother depending on it for our life and sustenance and taking proper and meticulous care of it at the same time. This discussion, I think, calls for re-examination of the very definition of development and progress or what we call civilization today. Recently, I have been witnessing large scale felling of trees in the name of broadening road under

char dhām yātrā project in my home state, Uttarakhand. It literally brings tears to eyes to see the mass killing of our own beneficiaries just in the name of what we call development. Shouldn't this be called reverse development that is killing our very source of existence? Hasn't our definition of civilization fetched us far away from the rituals of our ancestors for whom trees were a presiding deity? The Vedas describe mostly primitive life that sustained on great spiritual values. Material pleasures were almost non-existent and people seemed to be so much in harmony with Nature that their life was self-sufficient. Compared to the present day world where we live in constant fear of disease, crime, accidents, socio-political unrest, economic instability, and most importantly the fear of highly destructive wars that technology has leashed upon humanity, the so called primitive people feared from only one force, and it was the power of Nature. This fear from Nature kept them free from all other fears and instability from that era of Nature worship, we have entered the time where we seem to have conquered Nature, and here lies the root to all criticism of modern civilization that has enslaved us to the mean tendency of causing harm to mother Nature. Living in harmony with Nature has been replaced by constant conflict with Nature, and this conflict has ripped off all the glory attached with civilization. How could we be called civilized when we are bent upon to destroy our very source of sustenance?

A comparative study of modern civilization and Vedic culture led me to the conclusion that what we call civilization today has widely been achieved at the cost of extensive loss to our ecology, our own beneficiary i.e. Mother Nature. Vedic approach of consumption along with sacrifice ^[24] seems to have been discarded. The modern approach is in dire contrast with the Vedic approach of mother and progeny relationship between the earth and the people who live on it.

Since our present civilization is ecologically unsustainable in its present form, it's inevitable that our descendants will be living in scarcity of natural resources. If humankind is to choose its path deliberately, I believe our deliberations must include a critique of civilization itself. The question implicit in such a critique is: what have we done poorly or thoughtlessly in the past that we can reverse or at least improve now. Following the Vedic practice of reverence to Nature poses an answer to this question, like Gandhi ji also exhorted that civilization is not about technology and material comforts. On the contrary, he insisted, true civilization is that which shows us the path of duty and anchors our life to a higher purpose ^[25].

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