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## Ecosophy: An Indian Paradigm of Eco-Spirituality

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**Abstract:** The global threat to eco-system is intrinsically connected to a universal crisis in spirituality. There are basically two ways of dealing with the things of nature: (i) taking them as *objects* for humans to possess, develop and consume; (ii) to respect them as the matrix, the *subject*, in and through which humans attain integral well-being. The effective antidote to the malaise facing us today is to develop the second perspective: to look at earth as the mother-base out of which we are born, through which we grow and unto which we return; to relate with plants and animals as members of the one family (*oikia*=home) loved and fed by the mother-earth. Then the author traces the move from ecology and ecosophy, deriving insights from various Indian traditions. Finally the author advocates a critical and creative dialogue between Indian spiritual heritage and modern scientific perceptions. He affirms that science without spirituality can be oppressive, spirituality without science can be elusive.

**Keywords:** Bhagavad Gita, *bhaktimarga*, Buddhism, Ecology, Ecosophy, *jnanamarga*, *karmamarga*, Primal Cultures, Upanishads, Vedas

The well-being of the ecosystem has become a global concern today. The problems related to the ecological crisis are being analysed from various perspectives, political and economic, cultural and geographical. Ultimately it is a problem related to spirituality. The global threat to the eco-system is intrinsically connected to a universal crisis in spirituality. With this I mean that something has gone radically out of gear in the way most people today look at the beings and systems of nature.

There are basically two ways of dealing with the things of nature: (i) taking them as *objects* for humans to possess, develop and

consume; (ii) to respect them as the matrix, the *subject*, in and through which humans attain integral well-being. With the demands of industrial production and technological development the trend to objectify things of nature and exploit them to the maximum has grown beyond control. Human greed has accelerated this process of unbridled consumption. Globalisation has widened the scope of exploiting the natural resources. The principle of the dominant culture of world-capitalism is: produce and consume and be happy! Everything in nature – including human resources – is being converted to objects of analysis and exploitation, consumption and enjoyment. This has drastically alienated human persons from the life-nourishing eco-system and caused a growing sense of meaninglessness in a consumerist way of life. This is the spiritual crisis that affects individuals and cultures today.

The effective antidote to this malaise would be to develop the second perspective: to look at the earth as the mother-base out of which we are born, through which we grow and unto which we return; to relate with plants and animals as members of the one family (*oikia*=home) loved and fed by the mother-earth. Here the things of nature are not just objects to consume but realities to nourish. Our body is earth, and hence the earth is the extended form of our body. When we poison the earth we poison our own bodies; if we nourish the earth, the earth nourishes us. This is the perspective of an earth-bound spirituality. This demands a certain amount of asceticism in dealing with the things of nature, a contemplative outlook on life and a compassionate attitude to all beings. In this article I want to explore how some of the classical sources of India's spiritual heritage inspire us to develop this integral spiritual attitude to nature.

## From Ecology to Ecosophy

Indian sages speak of two faculties of perception: *manah* (mind) and *buddhi* (intuition). *Manasastu para buddhih*, beyond the mind is the buddhi. (Bhag. Gita, 3:42). Mind *objectifies* everything and analyses reality; buddhi enters into reality by uniting it with the perceiving *subject*. Mind explores the structures and qualities of reality and gives rise to knowledge (*vijnana*); buddhi tries to delve into the mystery of reality and attains wisdom (*jnana*); mind pursues the logic of reality, and buddhi intuits the mystique of reality. Mind

speculates on the horizontal level, while buddhi contemplates the depth dimension of reality. Through the mind one is driven to the tremendous diversity of things; through the buddhi one is awakened to the fascinating unity of reality. Mind supplies information while buddhi motivates transformation. Both these faculties are integrated in a harmonious perception of reality. We humans need the development of both these ways of perception.<sup>1</sup>

However, in today's competitive culture and consumerist ethos there is a tendency to develop the mental capacities of analysis at the cost of the intuitive perception of the holistic reality. Even in pursuing the concerns of eco-harmony the socio-political approaches and economic interests seem to take the lead. When we take up the problems of environment from the perspective of science and sociology we tend to objectify nature as a reality out there. We encounter nature within the *I-it* structure and analyse it objectively trying to achieve a conceptual clarity over the problems of the environment. What evolves out of this *mental* process is ecology. It has almost evolved as an autonomous discipline today. It gives clarity of perception, not necessarily commitment to action; it offers information, but not inevitably leading to transformation. "The subject-object mode of thinking is not suitable for the question regarding our dealing with nature."<sup>2</sup>

The Indian sages would demand a contemplative attitude to nature and consequently a holistic approach to the issues of eco-concerns. Through buddhi we experience that we are part of nature, that nature is part of our being. The earth with all that evolves out of that forms our body and hence we resonate with the concerns of the earth. What evolves out of this unitive experience is ecosophy. Ecology is concerned with the logic of the cosmic *oikia*, the rationale of the environment in which we are at home, while ecosophy is alert on the sophia of the *oikia*, the integrity and harmony of the one cosmic home in which we sense a deep bonding with all beings.

## **Sensitivity of Primal Cultures**

Ecosophy is not so much a science as an integral attitude to nature. This is most alive in the primal cultures: among the tribals and aboriginals. In the pre-Aryan Dravidian culture as well as in the

living forms of tribal life today there is a keen sensitivity to the grace and demands of nature. They spontaneously feel with the earth. For them the earth is the life-giving mother, rivers are the veins of the mother earth, forests are the abode of life-giving energies and the trees are the feeding hands of the mother earth. Their rituals take place not in man-made temples but in the God-given groves. Their drums make them dance to the tune of nature. Their festivals are the celebration of the sacred dimension of the earth. Their myths articulate the vital relationship between humans and the cosmic forces. Their life-style resonates with the rhythm of the fertility cycle of the earth. They have a deep insight into the healing power of the natural herbs and on the auspicious moments of the seasons. They are reluctant to codify their perceptions in scriptures because they know that they are dealing with the mystery of life that eludes every written form. Yet they have a perennial wisdom (ecosophy) to convey to the people of today's technological culture: live in harmony with nature!

## **The World-view of the Vedas**

Unlike the primal tribes of India the Vedic people (1200-900 BCE) had a patriarchal world-view. But they could not completely subdue the existing matricentric conception of reality. Their myths and hymns of creation express the basic insight that the entire universe is the body of the Divine. "The Vedas reflect the vibrancy of an encompassing world-view which looks upon all objects in the universe, living and non-living, as being pervaded by the same spiritual power."<sup>3</sup> The Vedic sages contemplated the Divine in the universe, the Vedic poets sang the grandeur of the things of nature, and the Vedic mystics perceived the all-embracing unity of reality. The basic insight in them all is: the entire universe is pervaded and upheld by the power of *Rta*, the endemic stream of cosmic energy of life and harmony.

Before the universe came into being "the ONE breathed without breath, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing else at all." (RV. 10.129.2). Through inner ardour (*tapas*) there emerged a creative impulse within the ONE, a sort of explosion, the birth-pangs of the Divine: the golden Germ (*hiranyagarbha*) was born out of it. Through him and in him the entire universe evolved. He is "the

Lord of creatures, Father of all beings, Father of the earth and of the heavens, God of Gods, pregnant with vital forces; he alone pervades all that has come to birth.” (RV.10.121.8-10). The Vedic sages perceived nature around them as a sacred space vibrant with divine vibrations because “the ONE permeates all things like warp and woof”. (YV. 32.8). The entire universe is like ‘one home’ (*ekaneedam*, YV.32.8), in which all beings are intrinsically inter-related. “The earth is the mother and the waters are the life-giving streams of the mother earth” (AV.12.1.17, RV.10.18.11; 10.189.1, Sat.Brahm. 4.4.3.15; 6.8.2.4.). The sky is the father and the air is the life-giving energy (*prana*) in beings (RV.10.189.1; 10.186.2, AV. 11.4.9). The fire is the primal mediator in every ritual and divine guest in every house, the friend of all.(RV.1.1.; 4.40.5. 3.3.2; 5.24.1; 4.1.3.). The sun as the source of cosmic fire is the spiritual master, the eye of God, who enlightens the universe. (RV.3.62.10; 1.50.10; 7.63.1.). The entire universe is one theophany!

Thus all the five elements are seen as permeated by the divine life-giving energies. In this sense they are gods (*deva*). The original meaning of the word *deva*(*div*) is to shine through. Powers of nature are translucent media of the divine Light. The humans have the responsibility to nourish these cosmic powers, which in turn will constantly sustain human well-being. Human life evolves within the life-process (*yajna*) of the cosmic powers in the universe. Hence only with a sense of the Sacred could the Vedic people deal with things of nature. Rituals were conducted to keep alive this sense of the Sacred.

Take the case of the Vedic attitude to earth. The earth is looked upon as the universal mother:

Impart to us those vitalizing forces, that come, O Earth,  
from deep within your body, your central point, your navel.  
Purify us wholly.

The Earth is mother, I am son of the Earth.

The rain-giver is my father: may he shower blessing on  
us.

Mother of plants and begetter of all things, firm far-flung  
Earth, sustained by *Rta*,  
compassionate and pleasant is she.

May we ever dwell on her bosom, passing to and fro.  
(AV.12.1.12, 17)

This contemplative attitude to the earth gave a new meaning to human labour. Agriculture was pursued in a spirit of reverence and concern for the well-being of all things, not only of humans. Cultivation is cult, an act of worship, participation in the cosmic liturgy (*yajna*). Human labour does not then render the earth sterile, rather it draws out (*krishi*) the generating energies inherent in her, so that the earth becomes fecund and bears fruit.

Hence the prayer of the farmer:

Whatever I dig up of you, O Earth, may you of that have quick replenishment.

O purifying One, may my thrust never reach right unto your vital points, your heart. (AV.12.1.35)

Human labour is not to be geared by greed (*kama*) but by a concern for universal harmony (*dharma*), for it is participation in the cosmic rhythm of life (*rta*). (RV. 10.117.1-9). When one is engaged in productive labour without caring for the sustenance of the earth, one is a thief. (RV.10.117.6). Vedic contemplation helps one to perceive oneself within the evolutionary process of the divine presence in the universe. Vedic rituals are meant to make humans participate in the cosmic rhythm of life (*yajna chakra*) and make them aware of the responsibility to deal with things of nature with a sense of the Sacred. Hence the concluding prayer of the rituals:

OM peace,

May there be peace unto heaven, unto the sky let there be peace,

Peace unto the waters, peace unto the herbs and trees.

May there be peace unto all gods, and unto Brahman may there be peace,

May there be peace unto all beings,

Peace verily the peace.

May that peace also come to me

OM *santi santi santih*. (Sukla Yajur Veda, 36.17)

## Perception of the Upanishads

Upanishads are the classical source of mystical experience in India. In the contemplative pursuits of the upanishadic sages (900-

400 BCE) there is a relentless quest for the divine Self in all selves: *atmani atmanam pasyan*. However the Atman that one intuitis in the depth of one's being is the same as the Brahman that permeates the entire universe. "Brahman is Atman" (Brih. Up. 2.5.19), "hidden in the heart as well as in the highest heaven" (Tait. Up. 2.1). One has therefore to "perceive the Atman in all beings and all beings in the Atman". (Isa Up. 6), for the entire universe is permeated by the Divine (Isa Up. 1). The universe is the body of the Divine:

Fire is his head, his eyes are the sun and the moon,  
The regions of space are his ears, his speech the revealed  
Vedas,

Air is his life and his heart the world.

Out of his feet the earth is born,

Indeed he is the Self of all beings. (Mund. Up. 2.1.4)

The Upanishads constantly invite us to contemplate the Divine in every bit of reality as the *antaryami* (inner controller):

"He who dwells in the earth, who is within the earth, yet whom the earth does not know, whose body is the earth, who controls the earth from within..., He is your Atma, the *antaryami*, the immortal One." (Brih. Up. 3.7.3.)

In the Upanishadic world-view God is not the Creator Lord seated above, but is deeply immanent in the world, "as oil in the seed, as butter in the curd, as water in the well-springs, as fire in the fire-sticks" (Swet. Up. 1.16).

God is the beginning, the middle and the end of all beings:

"That from which beings are born, that by which they live, that into which they finally merge, that is Brahman." (Tait. Up. 3.1.).

Such a contemplative perception is possible only if one has inner freedom: freedom from greed (*kama*) and selfishness (*ahamkara*). Hence the injunction: "renounce and enjoy!" (Isa Up. 1). By transcending the limiting ego-sense one enters into a transcendental consciousness in which one experiences the Divine as the Ground of being, as the life-breath of all (*pranah*), and as the ultimate subject of everything. With this one deals with things of nature with equanimity (*samadarsana*, Brih. Up. 4.3.21), with a compassionate

heart (*daya*, Brih. Up. 5.2) and concern for the well-being of all (*dharmā* Tait. Up. 1.11).

## Vision of the Bhagavad Gita

The Gita offers an integrated vision of reality and shows the three-fold path (*marga*) through which the seeker develops an integral way of life. Each path has an ecological dimension.<sup>4</sup>

On the *jñanamarga* one develops a contemplative vision of reality: “one perceives the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self”. (6:29). The entire universe is seen as one theophany (11:16). The earth is the body of the Lord (15:13). He is seated at the heart of all beings. (18:61). He is their primal source (15:4), nourishing abode (9:4), and ultimate goal (10:20). God is the Light within human heart (13:18) and in all luminous bodies (15:12). It is the divine presence that makes the earth fertile, the water refreshing, the fire effulgent and the breath life-giving (7:8-9). The entire universe is like a tree that grows from the divine seed absorbing the divine sap of life (7:10, 15:1). With this sense of the Sacred one deals with the things of nature with inner freedom (*nish-kama*, 2:71) and equanimity (*samādarsana*, 6:29).

On the *bhaktimarga* one experiences the love of the divine Lord communicated through the things of nature. “One sees the Lord present in all beings and all beings in the Lord.” (6:30). There is an intense experience of God’s love: “This is the deepest mystery: I love you intensely, you are extremely dear to me.” (18:64-65). In response one surrenders oneself totally to the divine Lord taking complete refuge in him (18:62, 65-66). This self-surrender takes place in harmony with nature that is now perceived as the temple of the Lord. “Worship me as being present in all beings,” (6:31). “Worship me with the perception that I am the source of all beings.” (10:8). Gita extols this cosmic devotion as supreme bhakti (*parabhakti*, 18:54). The ethical consequence of this bhakti is a compassionate attitude to all beings (12.13), for one sees “reflections of oneself in all other beings” (6:32).

On the *karmamarga* one encounters God active in all beings and in the process of evolution. The entire universe is seen as a dynamic process held in movement by the divine Atman (*yajna*,



3:15). God is incessantly active to sustain the well-being of the world (9:22, 3:24). He is the underlying source of life (7:9) and creativity (18:46). All things are inter-related in this process of divine activity (3:14-15). God is also involved in bringing about *dharma* in human history (4:7). Human work done without greed (3:9) and in surrender to God (9:27) is participation in the divine *yajna* and *dharma*. Work is worship (18:46). One is here motivated to work for the welfare of the world (*lokasamgraha*, 3:25) and the good of all beings (12:4)

A special consequence of pursuing the three-fold *marga* is concern for the harmony of nature. What brings about harmony is *yajna*. *Yajna* is work done without greed and in surrender to the Divine. (5:10). *Yajna* is that which binds all beings in the one process of life. Work done in the spirit of *yajna* keeps therefore the eco-harmony alive. (4:23) The instruction of the Gita (3:9-13) could be paraphrased as follows:

Any work done except in the sense of *yajna* means bondage to work. Therefore work is to be done without attachment to the ego. The Creator Lord gave birth to creatures together with *yajna* and said: it is through *yajna* that you should prosper. You should protect the life-giving powers of nature, and they in turn will protect you. Thus nourishing mutually you shall attain the ultimate well-being. Fostered by your *yajna*, nature will supply you what you need. If however you consume the gifts of nature without giving anything in return you are a thief. You are freed from your sins only if you eat only what is left over after protecting nature. If on the other hand you cook food only for yourself, you are eating sin.

Gita invites the seekers to enter upon a way of life that protects the sources of life in nature and thus promotes the integral well-being of all. Gita does not justify a life of inaction, nor does it advocate hectic works done with greedy consumerism. (2:47). The entire message of the Gita may be summarised in one phrase: be united with the divine Ground and get engaged in your works (*yogastah kuru karmani*, 2:48).

## **Ethics of Buddhism**

Buddha taught a way of life that leads to universal harmony (*dhamma*), which embraces not only the human world but the entire

realm of beings. Confronted with the question of the cause of suffering he came to the realization that everything is transient (*anicca*) and non-autonomous (*anatta*). In this ontic flux of reality all beings are interconnected, in this evolutionary process all things are interwoven: everything is in everything else. Reality evolves through the interpenetration of relationships (Lotussutra). Bliss comes when one lets things go in this flux of reality. Instead, with greed (*trishna*) when one tends to hold on to something in possession, one disturbs the process of reality and causes suffering. Hence Buddha called attachment as the root cause of all suffering.

The way to bliss in life is to deal with things of nature with an inner freedom from possessiveness (*alobha*). Freedom comes from the right perception (*panna*) expressed in the four basic Truths. The free person lives a life of universal love consisting of compassion (*karuna*), friendliness (*metta*), sympathy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekha*) towards all beings. On the eightfold path towards liberation (*nirwana*) Buddha mentions right livelihood (*samma ajiva*): earn your livelihood without in any way bringing harm to others (*ahimsa*) including trees and animals. “As a mother would be affectionate towards her only child, so too you should be kind towards all creatures: everywhere and everyone” (Khuddakapatha Mettasutta). Compassion is the cardinal virtue in the Buddhist ethics. A person endowed with compassion does not look at other beings as separate entities but as parts of his/her own being which is in constant becoming. Compassion is therefore the response to the realisation that everything is related to everything else in a universal flux. “Loving-kindness and compassion are the two cornerstones on which the whole edifice of Buddhism stands. Harming or destroying any being from the highest to the lowest, from a human to the tiniest insect, must at all cost be avoided.”<sup>5</sup> A contemplative awareness of the dynamic unity of all beings leading to a compassionate concern for the good of all beings is the core of the Buddhist ecosophy.

## **Symbols of Epics and Puranas**

Puranas contain the classical myths which have somehow their origin in the collective sub-conscious of the people. More than rational arguments and mystical insights they articulate the primal sense of the people. Mythical images have therefore a complex

symbolic significance which has to be discerned in relation to the ever present moment. Brahmapurana (1.37) offers a myth of creation: Brahma born of itself (*swayambhuh*) created the chaotic waters first and deposited its seed in them. From this was *Narayana* born, out of whose navel all things began to evolve. Narasimhapurana describes the Divine as the root out of which like a tree the entire cosmos unfolds. According the Bhagavatapurana (1.3.1) the Creator Lord expanded himself in the universal form of the *Purusha* through which the primal elements were formed. The Devibhagavatam (3.4.41) describes how *Devi*, the primordial divine Mother, creates the universe out of her own body as a spider weaves its web. *Sakti*, the creative feminine energy, operates at the core of all realities (Kalikapurana, 22.10)

Epics are the dramatic presentation of the cultural ethos of a people. They contain historical and mythical elements clothed in magnificent literary forms. In the conversation between Yudhishtira and Bhishma the origin of the cosmos is discussed: God created the *Purusha* as particle of himself and from it evolved the entire cosmos with all its diversities. Cosmos is therefore the visible form (*virat purusha*) of the invisible Brahman: earth is the flesh, sea is the blood, mountains are his bones, rivers are his nerves, air is his breath, fire is his energy, the four directions are his arms, sun and moon are his eyes. (Mahabharata, Mokshaparava, 182.1-3).

The main insight here is that we are living not just in a material ambience but in a divine space. All realities are like parts of the one cosmic body of the Divine. This insight is powerfully articulated in the central icons. *Nataraja* of the Saivite tradition is a symbolic representation of the divine vibration in the atom and in the galaxies as well, the dance of life in every living cell and in every drop of rain water as well; it is the dramatic articulation of the integral unity of life and death, creation and dissolution, light and darkness, male and female in the ongoing unfolding of the universe. The entire cosmos is a divine dance. *Anantasayana* of the Vaishnavite tradition depicts God as the ultimate subject of all life and evolution. With the divine breath emerges the lotus, the womb of creation out of his navel, and this lotus gives rise to the entire cosmos.

Several customs and festivals of popular religiosity make people aware of the sacredness of the environment. Deepavali, Mahasivaratri, Onam, Pongal and Kumbhamela convey the message of the unity of all beings within the Divine.

Myths about the concern of the divine Lord to protect the earth and uphold universal harmony are made alive during such festivals. Earth and water, fire and light, dance and music become symbols which carry this message to the life of the millions. In the folklore and local stories devotion to mother earth and compassion to animals and plants are extolled. All these contribute to create an eco-consciousness in the masses.

### **From Ecosophy to Eco-concern**

Ecosophy as emerging from these sources is the awareness of the constitutive interrelatedness between human beings, things of nature and the Divine. It is the consciousness that we humans live and move and have our being in a sacred ambience. It gives us the realization of the universal symbiosis: all beings are bound together in a cosmic-divine web. The universe is a theophany. In this realization human labour is no more a manipulation of the powers of the universe or exploitation of the resources of nature, but a creative involvement that brings the inherent potentialities of nature to full blossoming. Human creativity is endowed with a “passionate concern to bring about the welfare of all beings”. (Bhag. Gita, 12.4)

Ecosophy is basically a contemplative attitude to reality. But this alone is not enough to ensure the protection of the environment. Though the Indian spiritual heritage offers such a sublime vision of human bonding to nature, somehow it could not withstand the onslaught of modern technological civilization. Today India is a country that struggles with acute problems related ecological degradation. Our forests are devastated, water resources are depleted, rivers are contaminated, air-space is polluted: our earth is dying! To face this ecological crisis we need to develop a world-view that is spiritually nourished by the ecosophy of our heritage and at the same time well integrated with an effective civic sense. A contemplative view of nature can turn to be a romantic past-time if it is not related to social sensitivity. Perceiving the divine presence

in nature can become a flight from reality if it does not resonate with the struggles of life. The intuitive consciousness of the sacredness of nature has therefore to be enriched by the courage to analyse the problems and seek effective solutions. It is here that eco-sophy has to be integrated to eco-logy. The insights of *buddhi* and the reflections of the mind have to be intertwined. Ecosophy with its mystical insights and ecology with its scientific perspectives can nourish each other in the formation of an integrated Indian approach to the challenges of promoting eco-harmony. An uncritical glorification of the golden Vedic age is not a solution to modern problems, nor can a total trust in the analytical methods of science and technology be helpful. A critical and creative dialogue between Indian spiritual heritage and modern scientific perceptions is the call of the hour. Science without spirituality can be oppressive, spirituality without science can be elusive.

## Notes

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