

Eco-philosophy and Environmental Ethical Concerns in the *Upaniṣad*

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ABSTRACT

“More science and technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one”, says Lynn White, an American Historian in one of his lectures titled, *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis* which was later published in the journal *Science* in the year 1967. White’s article ignited debates within academic, theological and environmental circles about the historical, cultural and religious factors that have contributed to humanity’s impact on environment. Human civilisation has made commendable advancements in the field of technology, energy, medicine, agriculture, industry, environment etc, but because of such rapid advancements, the earth’s sustenance and health have also been compromised. The Earth is further prone to severe vulnerability if we do not embrace quick and intensive changes with regard to how we go about our lives. We must therefore begin to ask far-reaching ecological questions of religious traditions to our newfound ecological awareness demands as they are the soul foundation of our existence.

“India is the cradle of those religious traditions to which much environmental philosophy appeals in its struggle to develop a new ethical perspective that might be adequate to the present environmental crisis”, says George Alfred James in his paper titled, *The Construction of India in Some Recent Environmental Philosophy*, published in 1998 in a journal named *Worldviews*. India being the oldest extant civilization of the world, is rich in religious and cultural traditions. Indian cultural tradition stands unique in the sense that it has contributed immensely to all branches of knowledge whether it is science, politics, economics, arts, religion, etc. From the environmental point of view the Indian cultural tradition provides ideological impetus to environment and suggests to maintain a harmonious and holistic relation between man and nature. Environment in Indian thought is treated as a living entity instead of a physical one, where humans are one among many living creatures.

This paper aims to explore the fundamental thought of ancient India particularly Upanishadic ideology from environmental perspective, where human is not at the centre and hence do not have any authority to exploit nature. In the first section, I plan to discuss the emergence of environmental philosophy in the academic discipline and how environmental philosophy is constructed in the Indian context. While in the second section, I aim to explore the concept of nature or *prakriti* in the Upanishadic thought and what does it suggest on the ethical aspects through philosophical dialogues and stories embedded in the select Upanisads. In the third section, I further aim to interpret and develop new ethical perspectives which in turn can provide us better understanding of environment and can help in bringing fruitful changes for the holistic and sustainable development of the planet Earth.

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The post-world war period serves as a significant time for the upsurge of environmental movements at global level. It is believed that the nascent environmental movement began with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962. Carson's book documents the adverse effects of indiscriminate pesticide use on the environment, particularly focusing on the chemical DDT i.e. Dichloro-Diphenyl-Trichloroethane. This book led to greater public awareness and significant changes in policies regarding pesticide use and environmental protection. Carson through her book earnestly called for people to act responsibly and with care as stewards of the living earth, which led to the launch of many environmental movements. It would not be wrong to say that, *Silent Spring* was not the first book to raise awareness about the environment as there were several other books like *Man and Nature* by George Perkins Marsh, *Our Plundered Earth* by Fairfield Osborn, *Road to Survival* by William Vogt, *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold, which discusses sufficiently about environment and its planetary health. But the technique of narration, scientific credibility and media attention made *Silent Spring* one of the most well-received books among the general public. Carson after the publication of the book did face serious criticism from the chemical industry for the content served in her book, but ultimately, her work led to the banning of DDT and other pesticides across the U.S. Following *Silent Spring's* publication, several significant events and influential books shaping environmentalism came into its existence among which one such important event was The Stockholm Conference. A conference was held in Stockholm, Sweden from June 5-16, 1972, which was exactly ten years after the publication of Carson's landmark book. The idea of Stockholm Conference was proposed by Sweden which was experiencing the negative impacts of industrialization like other industrialized nations and thus, felt the need for a coordinated global effort to address these environmental issues. The Stockholm conference is considered as the first global conference on planetary environment. The theme of the conference was 'Only one Earth' and a total of 122 countries participated in the conference including India. This conference is of historic importance because it was the first to address 'Earth's environment' as a subject of concern at a global level which was never discussed before at a such a large scale. It was only after this conference that the countries started to set up ministries concerning environment in their respective countries. Even in India, the federal Department of Environment came into existence in the year 1980, which later turned into the Ministry of Environment and Forest in 1985. The surge of such events concerning planetary health, across the world compelled experts coming from various subject disciplines to come together and ponder over nature and environment as a matter of sincere concern.

The field of literary studies observed the emergence of "ecocriticism", a term coined by William Rueckert's in his 1978 essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Thomas K. Dean defines eco-criticism as,

“a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories, etc.) that is in some way connected with the human relationship to

the natural world. Eco-criticism is also a response to needs, problems, or crises, depending on one's perception of urgency.”ⁱ (Branch et al. 1994)

Eco-criticism therefore, calls for an interdisciplinary approach which includes historical, theoretical, philosophical, pedagogical, analytical, spiritual, theological etc. One such discipline which branched from eco-criticism is Environmental Philosophy which also came into existence in 1970s. This discipline enables one to pose questions concerning the meaning and value of nature and the natural world, the role of humans and animals within it, and the ethical and aesthetic significance of nature. The umbrella term Environmental Philosophy also inculcates environmental ethics, environmental aesthetics, ecofeminism, environmental hermeneutics and environmental theology.

In 1967, Lynn White Jr., an American historian in his essay *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* makes a critical observation where he states that, “more science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one”ⁱⁱ (White 1967). White’s argument suggests that a deeper, fundamental change in our values, beliefs and attitudes toward nature is necessary. This could be achieved by adopting a new ethical framework or revisiting and reshaping existing religious and philosophical beliefs to foster a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the environment. The impact of White’s essay is significant on the environmentalists, philosophers and religious scholars as it prompted to explore the intersections between science, technology and humanities. White’s essay also led to the growth of eco-theology and eco-spirituality, where religious scholars and spiritual leaders reinterpret traditional beliefs to promote environmental stewardship, environmental ethics and sustainability which would in turn will assist in developing frameworks for environmental protection. White through his essay also urges to “reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man”ⁱⁱⁱ (White 1967). Thus, he asserts that Christianity promotes a human-centred view of the world, which allow humans to exercise domination over nature. This perspective promotes the exploitation of natural resources without considering the intrinsic value of the environment. White’s argument act as a foundational idea which motivates to turn toward Eastern Philosophy or Eastern Religions as it may offer more sustainable and respectful attitudes toward nature.

In 1998, George Alfred James in his paper titled *The Construction of India in Some Recent Environmental Philosophy* argues in favour of India’s significance in the context of environmental philosophy. He suggests that,

“India is the cradle of those religious traditions to which much environmental philosophy appeals in its struggle to develop a new ethical perspective that might be adequate to the present environmental crisis.”^{iv} (James 1988)

According to James the wisdom of Indian thought related to environmental ethics and philosophy has never been explored and presented authentically on its own terms as its relevance operated within orientalist framework. While, John Passmore, an Australian philosopher presents an extremely contrary argument to that of James, where Passmore claims that, Passmore argues that the Western concept of stewardship involves a certain level

of care for nature that is entirely absent in Eastern traditions. He further contends that India's longstanding moral perspective is a contributing factor to environmental issues rather than a solution to them^v (Passmore 1977). Passmore's such observations on Eastern traditions are evidences for falling short a fully respectful and accurate representation due to lingering orientalist perspectives. To counter these views, one can place reliance on the Upanisads. The Upanisads are ancient Indian texts that form the philosophical foundation of Hinduism. The Upanishadic texts, from an environment standpoint emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and the intrinsic value of nature. The Upanisads present a worldview of fostering deep respect for nature and encourages harmonious living with the environment. The Upanisads being a profound source of spiritual knowledge and philosophical concepts have a deep-rooted tradition of environmental ethics which is embedded in Indian thought. A critical examination of Upanishadic texts can challenge the misrepresentations and oversimplifications made by orientalist perspectives, and successfully prove the relevance of these ancient Indian teachings in addressing contemporary environmental challenges.

The earliest observations of nature in Indian thought can be traced back to the textual traditions of the *Vedas*. The *Vedas* propagate "life-affirming and earthly naturalism"^{vi} (Baidur 2015) meaning, they celebrate and respect all life forms, they value Earth and its natural environment, rely on naturalistic explanations, maintain a deep connection to the natural world, and encourage ethical behaviours that support the flourishing of life and the health of the Earth. Thus, in Indian traditions, well-being of the planet and its inhabitants is prioritized, and revered relationship with nature is established. The Vedic hymn, particularly the *Rgveda* (*Songs of Knowledge*) demonstrate a close connection between the believer and their surroundings, fostering a feeling of kinship with the spirit present in everything^{vii} (Macdonell 22). The *Upanisads*, are the simplified texts which carry forward the teachings of the *Vedas*. The *Upanisads* are often addressed as *Vedanta*, or concluding portion of the *Vedas*. The *Upanisads* are speculative and expresses intellectual system of belief that nature is engaged with spiritual and moral terms. One noteworthy concept found in the Upanishadic tradition is that of "the substantive oneness of all creations"^{viii} (Baidur 2015). This perspective is often associated with environmental ethics where no hierarchy exists between planet and its inhabitants but in fact spiritual and respectful attitude is endorsed in order to foster sustainable living. There are several other ethical concepts which could be derived from the vantage point of environment through the Upanishadic texts. Before diving into pulling out the conceptual threads that fits the environmental ethical and philosophical concerns, it is important to note that time and again the usage of the word 'nature' has carried and developed several historical and cultural meanings of the western tradition. Therefore, the idea of using the same word to convey the meaning and concepts of Indian tradition is not relevant as both the Western and Eastern traditions has separate understanding of nature and environment. In several Indian languages, the sanskritised word for 'nature' is often equated with 'prakṛti'. However, translating 'prakṛti' back to 'nature' may fail to capture accurately the intended meaning. That is because nature in Indian Philosophy is reflective of the broader Indian philosophical understanding as it views nature as sacred, interconnected, and integral to spiritual and ethical living. 'Prakṛti' as nature in the Indian context refers to the sense of being, the origin and force responsible for the creation of things, however, the word 'nature' on the other hand signifies the sense of an extra-human world. On looking closely, one can

trace the dualistic mode of thought embedded in the word 'nature' which creates alienation from the natural world, while the term 'prakṛti' exclusively talks about monism which is considered by scholars as a more ecologically friendly mode of thought. To explain further prakṛti is that which precedes and is that which is in its own form. Prakṛti has the innate power of transformation and manifestation as it refers to the material cause and is also the producer of effects. A significant aspect of the concept of prakṛti is its oneness as the source of evolution of its variants. This concept of oneness is deep-seated in the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta which offers to achieve unity as the ecological demand while cancelling the possibility of hierarchical dualism.

Advaita Vedānta is a school of Hindu philosophy and Hindu Sadhana which is also the path of a spiritual discipline and experience. The term Advaita in Advaita Vedānta means non-dualism i.e., which has no duality and non-dualism can also be equated with monism which attributes to oneness or singleness. Literally, Vedānta means the end of the Veda, *vedasya antah*, the conclusion as well as the goal of the Vedas. The *Upaniṣad*, however are the concluding portion of the Vedas and chronologically come at the end of the Vedic period. The Advaita of Sāṅkara believes that the entire universe is nothing but consciousness and this consciousness, is non-dual Brahmā which is ultimately real.

It holds great importance in Hinduism that nature has always been seen and experienced as a representation of Brahmā, the divine and all-encompassing existence that exists both within and beyond everything. Brahmā is the fundamental essence of the universe, permeating it entirely; it is present in all things, and all things exist within Brahmā. Brahmā serves as the origin of the universe, supporting its existence, and eventually, the universe returns to Brahmā. This means that everything we perceive, sense and encounter is imbued with the divine presence. But, over the ages human consciousness has simply forgotten its true identity (Self or *Ātman*) that is non-different from Brahmā or the Supreme. The Upanishadic śloka mentioned in the tenth section of chapter six of *Chandogya Upaniṣad* which runs as,

“tat tvam asi, śvetaketo, iti; bhūya eva mā, bhagavān, vijñāpayatv iti; tathā, saumya, iti hovāca” i.e., “That which is the subtle essence, this whole world has for its self. That is the true. That is the self. That art thou, śvetaketu. ‘Please, Venerable Sir, instruct me still further.’ ‘So be it, my dear,’ said he”^{ix} (Radhakrishnan 2022).

This particular shloka signifies the fundamental fact of all existence and destroys ignorance regarding one's true identity. The attainment of individual self can further assist in deemphasizing the radical duality which exists between human beings and their environment. In Advaita Vedānta, the ultimate aim of life is the realization of the non-dual nature of the ultimate reality. In this context, one of the śloka from *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* states,

“aham vṛkṣasya rivā, kīrtiḥ pṛṣṭham girer iva, ūrdhva pavitro vājinīva, svamṛtam asmi, draviṇam savarcasam, sumedhā amṛtokṣaḥ, iti triśaṅkor vedānuvacanam” i.e., “I am the mover of the tree; my fame is like a mountain's peak. The exalted one making (me) pure, as the sun, I am the immortal one. I am a shining treasure, wise, immortal, indestructible. Such is Trisanku's recitation on the Veda-knowledge”^x (Radhakrishnan 2022).

The phrase "I am the mover of the tree" denotes a deep and divine connection with nature. It also reminds that the self is not separate from the natural world by establishing the connection between tree, mountain's peak, sun and an immortal one. This promotes the notion of interconnectedness and fosters a sense of responsibility and care for the environment. Comparing one's fame to a mountain's peak and purity to the sun indicates the recognition of nature's grandeur and purity. It emphasizes the importance of natural elements and their role in spiritual and physical well-being. Thus, the statement mentioned above propagates the idea of the self-realisation by experiencing and relating oneself to the natural elements. Self-realisation, according to the Upanishadic thought refers to the realization of one's true nature as *Ātman* (the individual soul) and its unity with *Brahmā* (the ultimate reality). This realization suggests transcending ego of the self and becoming one with the Brahman. Furthermore, the concept of Self-realization is believed to inspire the concept of "deep ecology", a term coined by a Norwegian Philosopher, Arne Naess. Deep Ecology is supposedly an important and popular concept in Environmental Philosophy where Naees, put the question of self-realisation at the centre of environmental philosophy. According to him, the responsibility of saving earth from a catastrophe lies on each and every individual, and it can only come through realising Self. As, it is through realising self that correction in human behaviour can be expected, which in turn will make humans more sensitive and responsible towards nature.

Another concept that could be retrieved from *Īśa Upaniṣad* is to see each and everything enveloped with divine entity. The *Īśa Upaniṣad* begins with the śloka –

“Īśā vāsyam idaṃ sarvaṃ yatkiñca jagatyām jagat tena tyaktena bhuñjīthā, mā ḡrdhaḥ kasyasvid dhanam” i.e., “(Know that) all this, whatever moves in this moving world, is enveloped by God. Therefore, find your enjoyment in renunciation; do not covet what belongs to others”^{xi} (Radhakrishnana 2022).

This particular śloka is motivated towards seeing everything enveloped with divine consciousness. To be aware of the divinity of this world one must be aware of its essential self because through realising self a proper understanding about the relational world can be developed. According to Jagatguru Shri Adi Shankaracharya, self cannot be known without doing rightful actions or karma. Karma here means *laukika* karma and *shastriya* karma. Laukika karma signifies daily actions which are not prescribed in the *Vedas* i.e., eating, sleeping etc, whereas *shastriya* karmas are those which are prescribed in the *Vedas*. So, one must rightfully do their karma and proceed towards self-attainment. By attaining self, the sense of authority over materialistic aspects of the world is destroyed after which one can easily get rid of the desire for accumulating more. Hence, the divorce between nature, its materialistic aspects and its inhabitants is nullified. It is only then that the concept of unity and identity behind multiplicity can be celebrated by engulfing all of it in divine consciousness. Furthermore, the sixth verse of *Isa Upaniṣad* –

“yas tu sarvāṇi bhūtāni ātmany evānupaśyati sarvabhūteṣu cātmanāṃ tato na vijugupsate” i.e., “he who sees all beings in his own self and his own self in all beings, he does not feel any revulsion by reason of such a view”^{xii} (Radhakrishnan,2022).

It is believed that the root of all conflict is ‘difference’. In literature and social sciences, the concept of binaries is well discussed like ‘self and other’, ‘nature and man’, ‘self and ego-self’, etc., such concepts drive attention towards identity crisis and exploitative nature connotated within these words. The above-mentioned *Upaniṣad* underlines the difference between separation and distinction. Instead of believing in hard core separations we must practice into believing that nature of other existing entities is distinct but not different or separate from each other. Such practices will help in elevating the consciousness and allow us to put Brahma in the domain of self which will further push us into having spiritual experiences.

In the age of perpetual environmental crisis, the search for solution must begin from within. Indian philosophical traditions have always tried to address questions concerning ‘self’ hence, it has a lot to offer to the world in terms of planetary health which in turn would be helpful in carving out the concepts for sustainable future. Deep Ecology, as mentioned above is a one such concept which argues for self-realisation and further underlines the importance of understanding Self, as it is deeply connected with nature and is a part of nature. Naess’ philosophy of life aimed for ecological wisdom and harmony, and stressed on the concept of self-realisation i.e., extension of oneself and realisation of oneself in everything. This yet again, reminds us of the ideas incorporated in the *Upaniṣad* and which sort of establishes connection of Naess philosophy to the Indian Philosophy. Naess himself confirms about his attraction to the understanding of Self found in Hindu Advaita Vedanta. Although, Naess draws his sense of self-realisation from various sources like, Eric Fromm, Sigmund Freud, William James, Baruch Spinoza, Mohandas Gandhi and J.S. Mill but we can very well trace his idea of self-realisation in the *Upaniṣad*, which in turn is analogous to Naess’ idea of Deep Ecology. Also, it becomes important to note that Naess gave eight foundational principles under his concept of deep ecology which do not completely align with the Indian philosophical aspects. However, reflection of some principles could be seen in *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, in a famous conversation of Yājñavalkya with Maitreyī on the absolute Self. It is mentioned that as Yājñavalkya was renouncing the stage of the *gṛhastha* and planning to enter into the *vānaprastha*, he thought of making materialistic settlement between Maitreyī (his second wife) and Kātyāyanī (his first wife). During this, Maitreyī asks Yājñavalkya, “yan nu ma iyam, bhagoh, sarvā pṛthivī vittena pūrṇā syāt, katham tenāmṛtā syām iti” i.e., “If, indeed, Venerable Sir, this whole earth filled with wealth were mine, would I be immortal through that?”^{xiii} (Radhakrishnan 2022). This intriguing question was brilliantly answered by Yājñavalkya where he explicates the meaning of Self and says,

“ātmā va are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyah: maitreyi ātmano vā are darśanena śravaṇena matyā vijñānenedam sarvaṁ viditam” i.e., “O Maitreyī, it is the Self that should be seen, heard of, reflected on and meditated upon. Verily, by the seeing of, by the hearing of, by the thinking of, by the understanding of Self, all is known”^{xiv} (Radhakrishnan, 2022). Through this conversation one could deduce that Yājñavalkya refers to knowing Self as “ātmā jñanā” which holds profound influence in Indian Philosophy. Rooted in Indian spiritual tradition, ātmā jñanā emphasizes the journey of understanding one’s true nature and realising the interconnectedness of all living beings. Radhakrishnan in his *The Principal*

Upaniṣad also provides a commentary at the end of the conversation which mentions the idea that all objects of the world, earthly possessions, romantic delights, provide opportunities for the realisation of the Self. This is reflective of the second tenet of Naess' Deep Ecology where he says that richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realisation of its values. In the context of Deep Ecology, Self-realisation encompasses the awareness of one's interconnectedness with nature but also the recognition of inherent value and rights of all living entities. Indian Philosophy, with its emphasis on self-realisation and the unity of all life, provides a profound framework for understanding and embracing the core principles of Deep Ecology. It promotes a holistic worldview where humans are not separate from nature but are an integral part of the intricate web of life, fostering a deep sense of responsibility and reverence for the natural world.

According to some scholars and environmental enthusiasts it is believed that today's ecological crisis is a consequence of a spiritual crisis. Swami Vivekananda, a prominent Hindu monk, philosopher and spiritual leader also called for the practical application of the highest teachings of Vedānta. Through his discourses and writings, he emphasized the notion of enveloping everything with a divine presence, truly perceiving God in all things. He also asserted that the entire world is imbued with the divine essence. This profound truth from the *Upaniṣad* has the potential to awaken humanity from the self-centred slumber. It is undeniable that the primary cause of all environmental disasters is greed and selfishness, which drive individuals to hoard resources with clenched fists. To effectively combat greed and selfishness, we must put into practice the Upanishadic message of unity, which emphasizes the importance of recognising the interconnectedness of all life, advocating for a mindset where we embrace the divinity within everything, ultimately leading to more harmonious and sustainable existence.

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