

# Reconceiving the Ecological Wisdoms of Vedānta in Anthropocene: An Eco-aesthetical Perspective

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## Abstract

The paper aims to lay out a critical analysis of eco-aesthetical wisdom of pan-Indian society through the lens of ancient seers whose insights for environment and ecology were shaped in the form of the teachings of *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads*. With the passage of time, the bond between humans and non-humans has largely weakened, and humans have increased exploiting the natural resources without caring for their regeneration. Consequent nature bred hostility is emerging as a bigger crisis in front of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century world that may sooner turn to be, if not taken seriously, an existential crisis for the whole human race. The *Upaniṣads* enlighten us not only with the knowledge of maintaining the relationship between human beings and physical environment but also among various inhabitants of ecology. Therefore, as Deep Ecology proposes, there should be a shift from human at the centre (anthropocentrism) to ecology at the centre (ecocentrism) which very much was existing in Indian society. So, this paper attempts to deal with the global ecological crisis co-opting with the ecological/environmental ideas and attitude of the classical Indian treatises.

**Keywords:** Ecology, Eco-aesthetics, Vedānta, Upaniṣads, Anthropocene, Ecocentrism

## 1. Introduction

The strand for environmental concerns dates back to much earlier than the modern environmental concern kicked off. The realisation of the fact that unwarranted human intervention into atmospheric phenomenon has caused unparalleled climate change that puts the future of the human well-being at stake has deepened this concern at an increased pace (Orr, 2017). The lethal climate change all over the globe brings up the discourse of ecology and biodiversity in all disciplines of scholarship, be it science, engineering, social sciences, humanities or liberal arts. The scholars from each corner of the globe are putting effort to tackle up the climate issues – pollution, loss of biodiversity, habitat destruction etc. In last two decades, it has been observed that the problem is not just scientific but it lies in human perception and their behaviour. Bartholomew I (2003) rightly states:

“We often refer to an environmental crisis, but the real crisis lies not in the environment, but in the human heart. The fundamental problem is to be found not outside but inside ourselves, not in the ecosystem, but in the way we think” (Orr, 2017, p.1).

Therefore, there is a need to understand our attitude to the environment in juxtaposition to the classical Indian scriptures which illustrate the ecological approach of primitive society towards nature and its beauty. Most of the Indian scriptures, though not widely explored, contain environmental treasures – theology, aesthetics and ecological consciousness – which might be helpful to guide the path to a benign environment. Hereupon, keeping in mind the eco-aesthetical theory of scholarship, this paper develops further to analyse the text of *Upaniṣads* to deal with ecological crisis in Anthropocene.

The scholars of environmental studies largely agree to the contention that Asian religions have the potential to counter the notions of anthropocentrism as L. White (1967) identifies religion – particularly Christianity – a major source of anthropocentric dominion (Nelson, 2012). Hinduism, in particular, is one among the various Asian traditions which is considered as an important source of a world-sacralising vision that posits humanity “close to nature” (Nelson, 2012). In ancient Sanskrit texts, particularly courtly poetry and drama, there are numerous passages that manifest aesthetic awareness of natural phenomena. Yet, the contemporary world does not see nature as it is, to be perceived in its totality and valued intrinsically for its pristine beauty and diversity because of the threat involved in reading contemporary concerns of ancient texts, which leads to anachronism, romanticism, or both, remains the same (Nelson, 2012). Contemporary Hindu environmentalisms like other religious environmentalism is a strategic reconfiguration of inherited material, deliberating an “interpretation of tradition rather than a traditional interpretation” (Tomalin, 2009, p.4). Further, Nelson says that there is a need of consideration for the ample source in the Hindu practices that imparts an eco-friendly realignment and rebuilding. But the question remains the same: How eco-aesthetics paves the way for environmental protection and conservation? For this we should look up at contemporary eco-aesthetical discourse of scholarship.

## 2. Contemporary Eco-aesthetical Discourse

Allen Carlson (2015), a renowned environmental aesthetician, attempts to connect aesthetic appreciation to the preservation and protection of nature that are called ecological aesthetics or, sometimes, eco-aesthetics. For this Carlson brings in Chinese aesthetician Cheng Xiangzhan (2010) who observes that the main issue facing eco-aesthetics is “how to form an ecological aesthetic way (or manner) by letting ecological awareness play a leading role in human aesthetic activity and experience” (Carlson, 2015, p.406). He provides four “keystones,” model which focuses on developing one overarching position that incorporates several resources—human-world unity, ecological facts, aesthetic appreciation, ethical values, biodiversity, ecosystem health—that are important for addressing contemporary environmental issues. Environmental philosopher, Holmes Rolston (2002) puts forth somewhat different thoughts and argues that aesthetic imperatives are not as important as moral imperatives and it is not obligatory that all aesthetic experience have their relations with beauty. To him, possibly ethics is also not mandatorily connected to duty either, but it is certainly nearer to caring both logically and psychologically. And, Eugene Hargrove (1979) reports that environmental ethics historically started with scenic grandeur: ‘The ultimate historical foundations of nature preservation are aesthetic’ (Rolston, 2002, p.127). Rolston further adds that Aesthetic values are considered to be high level but are often given low priority – jobs first, scenery second. At this point, to make aesthetic value of high priority one can adhere to life support arguments of natural resources. For example, think of that the forests observe carbon dioxide and breath out oxygen for human beings, they help in bringing down rain to earth which fetch us water for drinking and irrigating; they control soil erosion; they

provide us foreground for scientific studies. Biodiversity contributes in the field of agricultural, medical and industrial sector. Combination of such arguments about benefits of ecosystems, biodiversity, aesthetic quality of life, and of 'spiritual' arguments will induce enough rationale for conservation and preservation of ecology (Rolston, 2002).

Down the line, Aldo Leopold in his land ethic, connects duty and ethics as follows: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, the stability, and the beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Leopold, 1968, p.224). So, to him, aesthetics could be accountable for duty. But sceptical, Rolston argues, because ecosystem actively transits itself and not at all stable; it is often unanticipated and turbulent. They are a little integrated and not an accumulated whole. And, moreover, Rolston remarks, "beauty is not actually there but in the eye of the beholder. Well, if not exactly in the eye of the beholder, beauty in nature is always relational, arising in the interaction between humans and their world" (Rolston, 2002, p.130). Rolston explains, when humans arrive, they ignite beauty as aesthetic flares up relatively with the presence of the subject-generator. Therefore, it is the nature-human relationship that one wishes to appreciate and conserve in a way. Rolston reinstates that the attributes of beauty are already present there objectively in nature before humans come close to them, but the value that we as human attribute is subjective. That is, nature keeps its aesthetic properties objectively, and when subjective experience of beholder come in its close contact it gets ignited.

In addition, Cheng proclaims the Chinese notion that 'nature is the eternal source of all beauty, or is the model for all human attempts to achieve beauty' (Cheng, 2010, p.786). He asserts that this notion breaks out the theory of relationship between the human and the nonhuman. He put forwards that it is our understanding of ecology that connects aesthetic appreciation of natural phenomena; in another sense, it is our connectedness with the wide range of lives on the planet that should be appreciated. He suggests that to experience a thing both ecologically and aesthetically requires a fundamental knowledge of ecology and ecological awareness; in addition to this, an aesthetic attitude toward surrounding and a specific kind of concentration. Therefore, he feels that wherever we live, it is possible to achieve an "ecological aesthetic experience" in our daily lives. Further, he believes that this is the idealistic goal of eco-aesthetics (Cheng, 2010). Considering the above arguments, we might recon eco-aesthetics an essential link between eco-aesthetic and eco-ethics for spreading ecological awareness among people.

### 3. Eco-aesthetical Consciousness in the *Upaniṣadic Teachings*

Indian classics such as the *Upaniṣads*, as Murali Sivaramkrishnan (2017) affirms, have abundance of ecological consciousness which encode a pan-Indian vision of the aesthetic dimensions of the environment. Further, having analysed the historical fact, he says that throughout the history people continually have tried to reconstruct nature and the environment which has moulded our attitude towards nature accordingly. He suggests that we have to look into the way our perception of nature has been transformed. We have to also figure out when and where human beings have completely been identified with non-human world. For this, he advises, we have to dig into classical Indian literature, especially Sanskrit literature, as such literature also illustrates where environmental aesthetics can be stepped in.

Considering Vedic civilization, Radhakrishnan (2006) writes that the Vedic people would worship the natural phenomena and celestial bodies as deities like *Agni* (fire), *Ap* (water), *Vāyu* (wind), *Maruts* (storm winds), *Soma* (moon), *Dyaus* (sky), *Pr̥thivī* (earth), *Uṣas* (dawn) etc. in hope of their blessing to uphold the natural or celestial phenomena regularly. Deifying natural phenomena in form of their association to various gods such as Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa, Pūṣana,

Aditi, Rudra was common eco-religious practices of the society (Radhakrishnan, 2006). *Pūṣana* is known as the protector of travellers. He knows all the paths and guides the shepherd tribes (Radhakrishnan, 2006). *Varuṇa* is the god of law and order. He protects the moral order on the earth and punishes the wrongdoers or lawbreakers. He regulates the seasons and the course of the sun (Radhakrishnan, 2006). *Indra* is considered as the supreme god and god of all phenomena of the world (Radhakrishnan, 2006). *Agni* is the considered as the messenger to god. He is the mediator between men and gods. He has three forms: The Sun as celestial fire, lightning as atmospheric fire and the earthly fire in home or altar (Radhakrishnan, 2006). *Mitra* is the god of light who takes away darkness and ignorance. He is considered as the protector of righteousness, truth and justice (Radhakrishnan, 2006). Furthermore, Radhakrishnan says that all gods were given importance to maintain the conception of *ṛta* or order in this world. The word *ṛta* stands for law or sacred custom or divine truth. Also, it is believed that there are some *ṛṇa* (debts) to Gods and to the spirit of deceased bodies etc. Therefore, one should perform different rites like *yagñā* to be freed from such *ṛṇa* of gods and *śrāddha* to be freed from the *ṛṇa* of spirits of the deceased bodies. During *śrāddha*, a Hindu ritual performed by members of the deceased family, one gives water to the trees and plants, and food to the birds and animals around his abode. This is an epitome of mutual love and caring that primitive society adhered to maintain the cosmic order among ecosystem.

Supporting the aesthetic relevance of day to day life, Allen Carlson (2018) asserts that Environmental aesthetics includes not only natural environment but also human and human-influenced ones such as aesthetics of everyday life and activities. Evidently, the *Upaniṣads* enlighten us not only with the knowledge of maintaining the relationship between human beings and physical environment but also among various inhabitants of ecology. Accordingly, Lance E. Nelson (2003) writes, in *Vedānta* the creation of the universe prefigures as to be formed of divine elements. In *Upaniṣads*, the core topic of concern is – *brahman*, the one ultimate being which transcends and is primal to the Vedic pantheon (Nelson, 2003). Further, Nelson adds, the *Upaniṣads* proclaim, Brahman is not the one who created this universe but the one who becomes it: ‘May I become many!’ (ChaU. 6.2.3; TaiU. 2.6.1); ‘All this, verily, is brahman’ (ChaU. 3.14.1). Later, Nelson states, these concepts developed as the principle of *advaita* (nondualism) in different schools of theology. In Hindu principle of *advaita* (nondualism), the world is impartible with ultimate reality, same as the true spiritual self (*ātman*) of all beings. With this doctrine of *Vedānta*, he says, Hinduism reveres numerous entities of nature and considers them sacred. S. C. Crawford (1982) contends that this ‘unitive view’ of the *Upaniṣads* adheres ‘veneration of the natural world’ (Nelson, 2003). Also, E. Deutsch (1970) perceives an ‘emanationist’ theory of creation in this Hindu sentiment, the logical corollary in which “fundamentally all life is one” and everything in nature has ‘intrinsic spiritual worth’ (Nelson, 2003). Deutsch further argues that this perception “finds its natural expression in a reverence for all living things” (Nelson, 2003). Likewise, Sivaramkrishnana writes that the *Upaniṣada* preaches us to find our relish in renunciation for nothing belongs to us and forbids us to grab belongings of others. Here, he believes, that we get the sublime essence of ecological wisdom (Sivaramkrishnana, 2017).

Radhakrishnan (2006) enlightens us that in *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, the four orders of a society have been conceived namely the *Brāhmaṇa*, the *Kṣatriya*, the *Vaiśya* and the *Śūdra* consequently. Commenting on *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, Śaṅkarāchārya quotes (*Manu*) that a person is treated *Brāhmaṇa* only if he is friendly to all and provide aspiration to human beings to attain the position of *Brāhmaṇahood*: *sarveṣu btūtesu abhaya-pradaḥ*. A *Brāhmaṇa* makes human beings free from all kinds of fear (Radhakrishnan, 2006). This, Malcom Miles affirms, is an eco-aesthetical position when he states:

“seeing the world as mere object implies its exploitation; seeing it, or feeling it, as a mirror of the self, which is more or less an ecological position, may imply a sense of caring and living in relation to rather than exerting power over world...” (Malcom Miles, 2014, p.10).

In the *Upaniṣads*, it has also been said that the self is the world of all beings and *Brahman* is the self in each of us. In fact, as long one wishes non-injury and safety for his own world, so far, all beings wish non-injury for him. This, in fact, is well known and examined (Radhakrishnan, 2006). Furthermore, the reliance over other beings and interdependence of each other among various entities of ecology has been brought out as said in Fifth *Brāhmaṇa* of *Brhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, ‘the earth and all living beings are mutually dependent, even as bees and honey are. The bees make honey and the honey supports the bees – *parasparam upakāraka-bhāve phalitām āha* (Radhakrishnan, 2006, p.172). Therefore, as Deep Ecology proposes, there should be a shift from anthropocentrism i.e. human at the centre to ecocentrism i.e. ecology at the centre which was once existed in this part of the world.

Radhakrishnan (2006) explains that chapter Fifth, the second *Brāhmaṇa* of *Brhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, illustrates the significance of life in which it is said that *Prajā-pati* once articulated the syllable *da* to gods, men and demons, his threefold offspring, and enquired of them if they knew the meaning of the syllable. The gods replied in affirmation and said that it meant ‘*dāmyata*’ that is ‘control yourselves’. Then, he agreed so because he knew that gods are intended to be naturally unruly, and that is why they were asked to practise self-control – *adāntā yūyam svabhāvataḥ ato dāntā bhavate* (Radhakrishnan, 2006, p.290). The same question is asked to men and they also replied in affirmation saying that it meant ‘*datta*’, ‘give’. Then, he agreed on that too because men are said to be naturally greedy and that is why they were suggested to donate their wealth to the best of their capability – *svabhāvato lubdhā yūyam, ato yathāśaktya samvibhajata* (Radhakrishnan, 2006, p.290). At last, when same question was asked to demons, they replied that it meant ‘*dayadhavam*’ means ‘be compassionate’ and they were asked to be compassionate and share love because the demons are naturally cruel, and nasty for others – *krūrā yūyam himsādīparāḥ, atro dayadhavam prāṇiṣu dayāṁ kurute* (Radhakrishnan, 2006, p.290). Therefore, Radhakrishnan advises that one should practise the same self-control, giving and compassion. He adds, these three practices cater us to spread goodness even if we find ourselves in the world of evil. The practices of these goodness will protect, promote and boost up the values of our life.

On the other hand, *Aitareya Upaniṣad* tells us that earth, air, ether, water and light are the five basic elements of the universe – “*imāni pañcamahābhūtāni pṛthivī vāyuh ākāśaḥ āpyotīṣi*” (Ait.U.3.3). It means that any imbalance/disharmony among these five elements affect the lives of living creatures. The bodies of all living beings are composition of these five elements and at the end of their lives they would be decomposed into these elements only (Radhakrishnan, 2006).

#### 4. Conclusion

To say in conclusion, having considered the discourse of Eco-aesthetics which made us understand how eco-aesthetics is helpful in establishing the connection between aesthetics and ethics; and having discussed the eco-aesthetical dimension of the *Upaniṣads*, we came to know the importance of various constituents of this universe and their roles in a balanced ecosystem in which any disruption would ruin the beauty of ecology. From living creatures to non-living entities, earth to sky, mountains to water bodies, day to night, crops to herbs, each and every constituent of this ecosystem makes their contribution to sustain our lives and make this entire universe beautiful to dwell on. What the modern theory of ‘ecocentrism’ as Deep Ecology

proposes has been very much present in the *Upaniṣads* in the core of the idea of *Advaita* (nondualism) which sees all others as reflection of the self. Thus, this article brings into light the ecological dimensions of *Vedānta* for the people to imbibe the ecological Upaniṣadic teachings in this age of Anthropocene to reorient themselves towards Symbiocene.

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