



Understanding Sustainability Within the Framework of Ancient Indian Philosophical Concepts

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Abstract

The key objective of the paper is to understand ancient Indian environmental consciousness and notions of selfhood from the vantage point of sustainability and sustainable development. The concepts of the elemental existence, metaphysical self, Karma theory, and the Triguna framework have been discussed in terms of their implications for socially responsible behaviour and a sustainability mindset. Examples from various ancient religious scriptures have been cited to help understand the essence of the Indian value system. The article concludes with a comparison between the Eastern and Western world views and their link with sustainability initiatives. The crux of the paper is the assertion that India has been a 'viksit' land with a progressive and scientific outlook from ancient times.

Keywords: Sustainability, Ancient India, Metaphysical, Elemental existence, Triguna

1. Introduction

Sustainable literally means "that can continue or be continued for a long time." The word is derived from the Latin 'sustinere' (tenere, to hold; sus, up). It is the ability to maintain or support a process or a system – economic, environmental, or social – over time in the pursuit of an improved quality of life. Issues such as fairness in the distribution of resources and opportunities across generations, eradication of gender bias, tolerance of diverse viewpoints



and practices other than one's own, elimination of poverty, preservation and restoration of the ecosystem, natural resource conservation, and building just and peaceful societies are all included under sustainability. In 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission defined sustainability in terms of satisfaction of the needs of the present and at the same time being mindful and considerate of the fact that future generations are able to meet theirs. Need satisfaction can be possible if we have ample social, economic and natural resources. Sustainability is more than just environmental protection. The foundation of sustainability rests upon four pillars:

- (i) Human: Concerned with individuals, their abilities, growth, and responsibilities.
- (ii) Social: Refers to social structures that will safeguard future generations.
- (iii) Economic: The pillar supports sustained economic expansion without putting undue strain on other pillars.
- (iv) Environmental: Concerned with the preservation of natural surroundings and ecosystems.

The four pillars viz., economic, environmental, social, and human are also represented as profits, planet, and people. United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) incorporate all the aforementioned bases of sustainability. Uneven development, ineffective government policies, lack of collaboration, and absence of a "sustainability mindset" are some of the challenges in achieving the sustainable development goals.

Sustainable development is viewed in terms of 'growth with responsibility' other than it being only for profit. Connecting to issues such as extreme weather, climate change, armed conflicts, and inequity across society enables businesses to have a competitive edge. Trends show consumer preference for products upholding sustainability initiatives. According to Bekmagambetova (2020), two-thirds of North Americans prefer eco-friendly brands which shows that the extent to which a brand's identity rests on the pillars of sustainability is a crucial factor in deciding its consumer base.



In sum, both the terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ are used in the context of resources that are consumed before they are replenished, resulting in a threat to humankind. Sustainability is a long term goal defined by the capacity to continue a process over time without running out of resources: human, social, economic, and environmental. The strategies used for advancing civilization while preserving resources for coming generations are together a part of sustainable development (Batra et.al, 2022; Prasad et al., 2022). The methods and approaches to achieving sustainability are the focus of sustainable development.

Cultural influences on behaviour and thought have been a subject of analysis in various research domains (Gergen et al., 1996; Pawlik, 1991). ‘Spirituality’ is at the core of Indian culture and Indian philosophical thought and has had a far-reaching influence both at the indigenous and global levels. Spirituality, as practiced in India, has an action bias over and above cognitive (thinking or thoughts) or value (considering something important) concerns (Bhawuk, 2003). Many researchers have stressed the need to emphasize the cultural determinants of human behaviour. Researchers have urged scholars to replace Western cultural traditions with more inclusive multicultural customs. In comparison to Western psychology, many indigenous psychologies are far more qualified to handle the diverse aspects of behavioural situations, from the individual to the family, community, and the environment at large. Thus, eastern philosophies, particularly the ancient Indian philosophical concepts with their inbuilt collectivistic spirit, are particularly salient in regard to sustainability at multiple levels.

2. Elemental Existence: The Concept of Pancha Tatva

Indian philosophical scriptures such as the Rig Veda and Ramcharitmanas do not view human life in isolation but as intertwined with the universe. This conviction finds evidence in the concept of the ‘Pancha Tatva’ or Panchamahabhutas i.e. the five cardinal elements of life viz. namely Prithivi (earth), Pavan (air), Jal (water), Fire (agni), and Nabh (sky, space or ether) that are building blocks of the human body and also prevail in the universe as outlined in Sankhya philosophy. After death, the human body gets assimilated in the five elements that are the foundation of the cosmos and whose harmonious functioning is responsible for the creation, survival, and sustainability of life systems on earth. Each of these elements has certain



psychological attributes. Ancient Vedic science conceptualizes our physical existence or 'body' as made up of the earth element whose innate nature is to bind things together and hence, it stands for strength, stability, balance, and resilience. Our body contains 70% water which is proportionate to water on the planet and a source of life. Water signifies 'a freely flowing mind'. Fire or 'tejas' is likened to 'intelligence'; a source of energy and light through which we can perceive the world. However, it destroys anything that comes in touch with it. Air is our 'awareness' of our surroundings. Sky accommodates everything and stands for our 'consciousness'. These basic components which overlap, combine and change are manifested in all creation i.e. plants, and humans. From these five elements develops our sense of vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch.

Without these elements, nothing can exist. An excess or dearth of any of these elements is detrimental to existence. Inherent in an understanding of elemental existence, which as per the Isha Upanishad is divine, is the wisdom for healthy living (Barik, 2024). Therefore, sustainable use of natural elements consistently advocated in all ancient Indian scriptures has relevance for modern man. The natural equilibrium has got disturbed in the last hundred years because of an exploitation of these energising elements resulting in environmental degradation, violence, selfishness and processes inimical to development. According to Mhamankar (2022), *Ati Sarvatra Varjatey* (Everything in excess is opposed to nature) is the mantra for holistic health and reflects the characteristic of 'restraint' in the Indian culture. Excess of an emotion, overthinking, overuse of technology, overeating or oversleeping is counter to life mechanisms.

3. Indian Concept of the Metaphysical Self: The Pancha Kosha

Indian ancient and medieval texts explain the indigenous concept of self in detail. The very basis of self within the Indian context is metaphysical and is referred to as 'Atman'. The Atman resides within the biological self which acquires a social identity through the caste system as described in the Manusmriti.

According to the Kathopanishad: The body is like a chariot, the intellect the charioteer, the reins of the chariot are the mind, and the horses are symbolic of the sense organs. An indisciplined, unharnessed mind lacking in knowledge and wisdom is unable to control the



sense organs. Therefore, the vicious horses go beyond the control of charioteer. The Atman is conceptualized as the Lord and Master of the chariot.

The concept of 'multiple levels of existence' explained in the 'Taitriya Upanishad' and also in the Yoga tradition says that we exist in the form of multiple layers that are held together by 'prana' or cosmic energy. The five levels of existence are called the 'panch kosha' and are depicted by concentric circles. Every cell has panch koshas and every cell can think.

- (i) The Anatomical level (Annamaya Kosha): This is the basic structure present in all life forms. It is the food sheath and requires food for survival.
- (ii) The Physiological level (Pranamaya Kosha): It is the vital air sheath that gives energy to the body. Air is important for survival of this sheath.
- (iii) The Psychological level (Manomaya Kosha): This is the mental sheath where mind comes alive and the 'manas' starts to think.
- (iv) The Intellectual level (Vigyanamaya Kosha): The intellectual sheath is marked by higher intellect. One starts to ask questions like: Who am I? How can I make the world a better place?
- (v) The Supreme level (Anandamaya Kosha): This is described as the cosmic body of bliss. It is the highest self that is connected to the macrocosm.

The five sheaths can be segregated into the causal body, the gross body and the subtle body. The outer world of empirical occurrences merges with and the inner world of psychic experience. This is perceived as the "scientific" or rationalistic coming together of the divine and the human. According to Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the 'Atman' or God that dwells within man is the same 'Atman' that is reflected in the light of the sun. There is a deep connection between the outside world and man's inner self. Man can discover the Supreme Reality by searching deep within himself. This is essentially a humanistic perspective wherein the universe is understood as identical to the innermost Spirit, the Atman. However, the empirical self is the existential self prone to grief and suffering as well as to change. The True Self is the unchanging Atman that observes the empirical phenomena but is unaffected and undying. The transcendence from an ego-centric self to the divine one represents the microcosm blending with the macrocosm. The awareness of this continuity leads to a sense of



responsibility towards the universe which is a precursor to 'sustainability thinking' central to which is a humanistic approach.

4. The Quality of the Mind: Triguna

The insights for understanding human nature can be derived from various Indian philosophical traditions and scriptures like the Bhagawat Gita which talks of three attributes of the mind viz. Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas together referred to as 'Gunas'. The word 'Guna' implies 'quality' which is thought to be energy or a state of mind. Each of the three gunas is associated with a certain kind of temperament which is a product of both physiological and psychological factors.

Sattva guna is marked by the 'spiritual quality' and is symbolized by purity and knowledge. The Sattvik man is an epitome of compassion and selflessness and is known for equanimity of mind. The sattvic intellect is able to make the distinction between undutiful and dutiful activity, as well as between desirable and unwanted actions. The person is devoid of doubts and upholds spiritual and divine ideas. Reverence for teachers, nonviolence, kindness, silence, self-control, and moral purity are the motivating factors behind sattvic behaviour

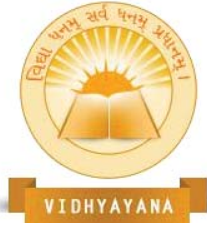
The Rajasik man lives more for personal gain and achievement. Rajas guna is the 'active quality' and action and passion are its defining aspects. The guna is associated with heightened desire, produces greed and restlessness. The Rajasik man hankers after worldly pleasures, is attached to rewards, shuns renunciation and is driven by self interest which results in a distorted picture of right and wrong. Tamas is the 'material quality' and is represented by ignorance and inertia. A Tamasik man is unscrupulous and can adopt any means to achieve his ends. Tamas originates from delusions and hopes, breeds indecision, cynicism, sloth, revengefulness, and stubbornness. One of the limitations of these attributes is attachment to possessions and self-centered tendencies. As indicated by the aforementioned account, the Sattvik quality of mind can be likened to a 'sustainability mindset' which is a pre-requisite for any sustainability initiative.



5. Workplace Spirituality: Lessons from Indian Wisdom

Pardasani et al. (2014) have operationalized workplace spirituality in terms of five dimensions, each of which is rooted in ancient Indian spiritual traditions and closely aligned with SDG 8 viz. Decent Work and Economic Growth:

- (i) **Meaningful Work:** According to Dasgupta (1991), the doctrine of Karma Yoga is central to the Indian philosophy of work. The word ‘Karma’ means action and a corresponding reaction. Desirable work-related behaviours like meaningful work will prove to be rewarding for the doers as per the Karma theory. Meaningful work has 2 facets:
 - a) **Duty orientation:** The Bhagavad Gita advocates that in order to get out of a state of ignorance, individuals should prefer action over inaction and perform their duty with utmost devotion (Krishnan, 2001).
 - b) **Indifference to rewards:** The concept of Nishkam Karma says that deeds should not be performed with an attachment to the fruits or to reinforcement.
- (ii) **Interconnectedness:** There is a mention of Loksangrah in the Bhagavad Gita which literally means “holding the world together”. This social message “stands for the unity of the world and the interconnectedness of society” (Radhakrishnan, 1970, p. 139) which can be possible only if individuals have a sense of belongingness towards each other.
- (iii) **Transcendence of self**
- (iv) **Alignment with organizational values:** According to Bhagavad Gita, a human being has two tendencies – good and bad – referred to as daivi sampat (characteristics of the gods) and asuri sampat (characteristics of the demons). Daivi (divine) actions are fearless, ethical, and modest. The individual manifesting these qualities is high on self-control, low on criticism, and devoid of greed and envy (Desai, 2009). Asuri (demonic) work is marked by lack of conscientiousness, neglect, egoism, and absence of pride in workmanship (Desai, 2009). Organizations instead of the profit motive alone should build a people-centric culture representing divine (daivi) qualities marked by mutual respect, concern for stakeholders, responsibility towards society and value-based business practices (Suresh and Janaki, 2012).



- (v) Holistic growth and development: The dimension resonates with the multilayered existence, i.e. Pancha Koshas that has the potential to evolve into a higher level of existence (Dalal and Misra, 2010).

Thus, the doctrines of Yoga, Loksangrah, Guna theory, Daivi sampat and Pancha Kosha have an application in facilitating the five dimensions of workplace spirituality.

The non-orthodox schools of thought such as Buddhism talk about compassion, mindfulness, and selflessness as qualities necessary for a flourishing world (Kernochnan et al., 2007).

6. Conclusion

With businesses focussing more on commercial viability and a materialistic world order has led to an exploitation and depletion of resources and this has affected the well being of larger populations. The crisis is multidimensional viz. environmental, social, political, economical, technological, cultural and spiritual. In such a scenario there is the need for a philosophical foundation where people understand their oneness with nature. The Vedic civilization discovered the significance of ecological harmony and basic oneness between man and nature. 'Vasudaiva Kutumbakam' meaning 'the whole world is my family' is an outlook grounded in Hindu texts like Maha Upanishad, and a holistic world view propagating cosmological unity, ecological balance and sustainability thereof. The philosophical principle cuts across all the 17 SDGs from poverty alleviation through gender equality, responsible production and consumption to peace, justice and partnerships. The barriers to overcoming the sustainability crisis can be removed by those working in sustainability professions by using their leadership, critical thinking, and negotiation skills. They can create sustainability consciousness and help organizations and communities to thrive by adopting sustainable practices that can help achieve goals of a cleaner environment, more profitable operations, and an egalitarian society.

As opposed to the East, the West thinks in terms of the ways in which nature can serve mankind. This pragmatic viewpoint emanates from a value system propagating self-enhancement, avoiding of suffering, hedonism, and attainment of mastery. On the contrary, central to a modern and progressive outlook in ancient India are the principles of self-transcendence, valuing suffering, eudaimonism, harmony, contentment, and a spiritual and religious mindset (Joshnanloo, 2013).



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