

Thomas Manninezhath CMI

DVK, Bangalore

A VEDANTIC RESPONSE TO THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

At the very outset let us ask two significant questions: Is there an ecological crisis which decisively threatens our existence on earth, this beautiful planet? Should philosophers be concerned with the impending ecological crises which adversely affect our peaceful and authentic co-existence on this earth? I shall briefly discuss these two questions in this paper.

1. Ecological Crises

The situation paper above has made us conscious of living right in the midst of eco-crises. Pollution of nature, depletion of essential resources, the green house effect, the incapacitation of biological systems to take care of themselves, the excessive level of waste and poison beyond nature's capacity of absorption, the eventual destruction of life-supporting systems, the massive destruction of species, the pressure on the peasants to move to marginal lands, the widening gap between the rich and the poor are but a few eco-related problems which can risk our very existence on this earth. Man and his total environment form one single whole in nature. One part cannot alter, move or change without the readjustment of other parts. For this reason, the spider's web is often used as a comparison for explaining the eco-system. All strands of the spider's web are inter-connected in fantastic complexity. One cannot break, remove, add or put a stress upon any strand without necessitating an adjustment throughout the entire web. Unfortunately, the inter-relationship in nature are totally ignored in our market-dominated economic activity and in the consumeristic egoism of the contemporary world.

Modern economy and technological developments, have thus become a threat to the world's eco-system that supports life in the universe. We need to arrest the accelerating threats to the environ-

ment and our life on this planet. Excessive use of fossil fuels subject the globe to severe ecological stress. Industrial waste and its dumping cause health hazards. While constant application of chemical fertilizers have made the soil sterile, extensive use of pesticides has poisoned the soil. Environmental degradation caused by massive pollution of air, water and land threatens our very life on this planet. Industrial nations are the great offenders in this case and developing nations do not seem to have fully realized the implications of this stress.

Philosophers and theologians, scientists and statesmen, religious leaders and concerned people from all other disciplines earnestly discuss the decisive question of the protection of our planet. Human consciousness, therefore, is in the process of becoming more and more aware of environmental ethics and ecology.

2. Philosophical Response

In India philosophy has its origin from the predicamental situation of man, namely, suffering. The Buddhist philosophy of *arya satyas* and the samkhyan analysis of *purusha* and *prakriti* aim at the extermination of suffering. The whole of Indian philosophy can be perceived as a response to the situation of suffering caused by ignorance, selfishness, desire and greed. Philosophy in this sense is not merely an abstract discipline today. It is the task of the philosophers to respond to a situation which has 'poisoned the planet earth' and liberate human beings and nature from the imminent perilous catastrophe.

There are certain bases for philosopher's response to ecological crises. Those bases are central to Indian philosophy and the religious traditions of India.

a. The Earth: A Sacramental Symbol

The earth, according to Indian thought, is sacred and sacramental. It is the epiphany of the Divine and the visible and tangible manifestation of the Supreme. The Scriptures contemplate the earth as beautiful, divine and sacred (*atharva veda*, XII. 1.34; *Svetasvetara Upanishad*, VI. 19; *Bhagavadgita*, VII. 9.). All elements of the earth are sacramental symbols and they convey the sacramental character

of mother earth. The earth in Indian tradition is not only an object of meditation for achieving worldly prosperity but also a means for the realization of the Supreme. There is an intrinsic spiritual worth in everything in the spiritual world and it is the responsibility of humans to cherish and protect nature.

The earth, this beautiful planet of ours, is to be viewed as a subject to be communed with. With its mighty mountains and magnificent rivers, with its starlit sky and sweeping wind, with its blooming trees and chanting birds, nature invites us to enter into communion with the sacred, and experience the divine reflected in this world. This communion with the natural world is of incalculable importance for our social, economic, aesthetic and spiritual survival.

b. Sarvabhutani...

The expression *Sarvabhutani* (all beings) is frequently found in the Indian scriptures, especially in the *Rgveda* (*Purusha Sukta*, X 90). "All beings" emerged from the lowest quarter of the dismembered body of the *purusha*. "All beings" belong to the one and unique being, the *purusha*. As Raimundo Panikkar puts it:

It is neither a merely divine affair, nor a purely human endeavour, nor a blind cosmic process; it is human, divine, and cosmic all in one. That is, it is cosmotheandric. God, man, and the universe are correlates. God without man is nothing, literally "nothing". Man without God is exclusively a "thing", not a person, not a really human being; while the world, the cosmos, without man and God is "any-thing", without consistency and being; it is sheer unexisting chaos. The three are constitutively connected. It is cosmotheandric communion....¹

Everything has its origin from God. The divine nature of the creation reverberates in a number of places in the Indian scriptures. "In the beginning, Atman (self, soul), verily, one only, was here - no other winking thing whatever. He bethought himself: 'Let me now create worlds'. (*Aitareya Upanishad*, I.i.1). "In the beginning, my

1. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience: Mantramanjari* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977), p. 73.

dear, this world was just being (*sat*), one only without a second. To be sure, some people say: "In the beginning this world was just non-being (*asat*), one only, without a second; from that Non-being Being was produced. But verily, my dear, whence could this be? said he. How from Non-being could Being be produced? On the contrary, my dear, in the beginning this world was just Being, one only, without a second". (*Chandogya Upanishad*, VI. ii. 1-2). Although there are those characteristics of the world such as change, insentience, limitation and materiality which make the world different from God, all beings have their origin in God. In the midst of all changing phenomena there is a sacred and divine immutable reality that constitute the essence of all beings.

The invocation of *Isa Upanishad* distinctly discloses the divine nature of the whole cosmos:

*purnamadah purnamidam purnat purnam udacyate
purnasya purnamadaya purnamevavaishyate*

Creation of the universe is from the sacrifice of the First Being (*Rgveda* X.90) and the completed universe is conceived as a living organism, a vast eco-system, in which each one's life is related to the life of the whole.²

c. Monistic vision

Advaita philosophy provides a strong foundation for a creative response to the eco-crisis. Advaitic realization/experience of the unity amidst visible multiplicity is a gradual realization of the true nature of Reality within the self. It is a process whereby one enlarges one's view of the self in such a way that it includes the pluralistic universe, the empirical reality (*vyavaharika satya*), as relative to the One Reality (*ekam sat*). "Verily, this whole world is Brahma. Tranquil, let one worship It as that from which he came forth, as that into which he will be dissolved, as that in which he breathes" *Chandogya Upanisad*, III.14.1).

In the state of nescience (*avidya*) one remains ego-centred and isolated from the wider world and the self, and experiences duality everywhere. When liberated from nescience, the individual self ex-

2. John Hawley & Donna Wuld, eds., *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (Berkeley: Religious Studies Series, 1982), p.169.

periences its identity with the Supreme Self (*ahambrahmasmi*). This *anubhava* fosters a sense of union and a feeling of kinship with other people and other species of beings (*advaita anubhava*). When the self is liberated from avidya, it is widened and deepened; the protection of the phenomenal world is felt and taken care of as protection of our very selves. This is the characteristic feature of man. While referring to the uniqueness of man, Sankara in his *Taittiriya-upanishad-bhasya*³ quotes a passage from the *Aitareya Aranyaka*. (III, ii.3):

The Atman is expanded only in man. He, indeed, is most endowed with intelligence. He gives expression to what is known. He knows what is to come. He knows the visible and the invisible worlds. He perceives the immortal through the mortal...but with the other animals, eating and drinking alone constitute the sphere of their knowledge.

It is man only with his intelligence who can positively respond to a situation which will endanger the human existence on this globe as he is the witness to what is happening today and knows what will happen in the future. The monistic vision therefore encourages people to embrace rather than conquer or control or exploit the visible world.

The Advaita relationship, viewed through a broader perspective of the deepest love and unifying presence of God, when extended to the practical life, becomes a social and cultural force. The life, work and philosophy of Tayumanavar in Tamil tradition⁴ and sree Narayana Guru in Kerala⁵ shall be cited as the examples for wielding the advaitic vision as a powerful weapon to initiate reform, rethinking and renewal in their respective societies. Advaita, as a social force, cannot accept and tolerate any divisive or destructive elements in the world. The advaitic doctrine of essential unity of all existence in and through God is an experience of concern and compassion;

3. Memorial edition vol. VI, p. 71 as quoted in T.M.P Mahadevan, *Invitation to Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Arnold Heinemann publishers, 1974), p. 392.

4. See Thomas Manninezhath, *Harmony of Religions: vedanta siddhanta samarasam of Tayumanavar* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass publishers, 1993).

5. See M.K Sanoo, *Narayana Guru* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1978).

it has implications for renewed relationships with other human beings and a sense of identity with and reverence for and sensitivity to nature.

The unitive view of advaita philosophy can provide the basis for an environmental ethic. The philosophy of Brahman supplies the one essential ingredient of an environmentally sound ethic, namely, reverence for nature. The idea that all beings are separate only apparently and ultimately Atman (the true self) is one with Brahman gives Hinduism a "cosmic" outlook on life. It is "cosmic" in the sense that the nature of the self in Hinduism includes all lesser forms of existence. The universe, though it appears to be merely material, is actually the universal consciousness itself. This doctrine provides the philosophic basis for the Indian veneration of the natural world, and it constrains us to conclude that the Indian tradition has an ecological conscience.⁶

d. Sarira-sariri bhava

The visistadvaita of Ramanuja has given us a solid philosophical foundation for the care and protection of the Universe. According to Ramanuja, Brahman is *sariri* and the entire cosmos is *sarira*. Brahman, the Supreme Self, is conceived as ensouling the cosmos. Brahman is the soul which gives life to its body, the world. The world according to Ramanuja is only a mode of the Supreme and by virtue of being a mode of the Self, a material body is a definite thing or substance (*padartha*). This means any material substance has intelligible and substantial reality as long as it is a mode of the self. The *sarira-sariri bhava* of Ramanuja explains in detail that this entire created universe (*prapancha*) of intelligent and material entities has being (*sat*) as its material cause, its instrumental cause, and its support (*adhara*) (*vedartha samagraha*, 18).⁷ In the *Gita-bhasya* (X. 20) Ramanuja says: "In the heart of all beings who constitute my body, I am seated as their self (*atma*) for to be the 'Self' means that I am entirely their support (*adhara*), controller (*niyanta*) and owner (*sesi*). Everything in the created universe has

6. S. Cromwell Crawford, *The Evolution of Hindu Ethical Ideals* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1982), pp. 149-50.

7. As found in John B. Carman, *The Theology of Ramanuja* (Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1981), p. 124.

originated from God and has its abiding in Him. The *prapancha* is His body. He pervades the universe as its Inner Controller (*antaryamin*)" (*Gita bhasya*, VII. 12).

The whole created universe is enveloped by the Lord: *Isavasyam idam sarvam* (Isa Up. 1.1). The entire universe is to be considered as clothed, covered or inhabited by the Lord. Brahman is the transcendental substratum for everything that we see. This transcendental unity, underlying everything in the phenomenal world, is the one stable Spirit inhabiting and governing the universe. The entire visible universe should be seen as the dwelling place of the Divine. He dwells in it as oil dwells in the oil-seed, as butter in cream, as water in ground water source or fire in firewood (*Svet. Up.* 1.1.15). A close study of the *sarira-sariri bhava* will make us aware of the sacredness of the world, and each part of it can be considered as a revelation of the Divine itself.

e. Ahimsa

Ahimsa is the negative of *himsa*, a noun formed from the verb *hims*, which is derived from the root *han*, meaning to 'kill', injure', 'destroy', as well as 'commit an act of violence'. *Ahimsa*, therefore, is the deliberate disavowal of *himsa* (killing, injuring, destroying and any act of violence). The *Chandogya Upanishad* used *ahimsa* (harmlessness) as one of the virtues, together with other virtues like austerity, alms-giving, truthfulness (III. xvii. 4). The concluding verse of this great upanishad is on the attainment of the Brahma-world and the one who attains this blissful state is *ahimsan sarvabhutani* - he who is harmless toward all beings (*Ch. Up.* VIII. XV. 1). Both Buddhism and Jainism esteemed *ahimsa* as an integral part of their moral philosophy. One of the earliest teachings of Buddha on *ahimsa* is said to be found in the *Samannaphala-Suttam*, II. v. 45: "A monk, refusing to harm any creature, moves about as a compassionate man, with sympathy for the well-being of all species".⁸ *Ahimsa* occupies the foremost place in Jainism, and Mahaveera insisted on the literal following of it from every Jain. Religious scriptures and various philosophies of India have highlighted the paramount role of *ahimsa* for the preservation of dharma. The core of this great ideal is

8. As quoted in John G. Arapura, "Ahimsa in Basic Hindu Scriptures with Reference to Cosmo-Ethics", *Journal of Dharma*. XVI, 3 (July-Sept. 1981), p. 200.

reverence for all forms of life, which is the basis of a cosmo-ethics. The principle of *ahimsa* deserves the earnest attention of thinkers today when man's 'violence' towards nature has become a serious threat to humanity and the planet. *Ahimsa* emphasizes the community of all beings. Essentially and intrinsically, all beings are related, and to do violence to another is, in some sense, to do violence to oneself.

Conclusion

It was an attempt to highlight certain Indian religious and philosophical insights, which, I feel, are relevant for our discussion on the ecological crisis. An indepth study on the above thoughts will provide a potent basis for our critical and creative response to the ecological crisis. To exist is to co-exist. The network of the relations is now being experienced by humankind on the global and collective level. Through science man has entered into a deeper relation with nature, discovering not only the structures of the universe, but also ways of tapping its power. Unless we are prudent and conscious of the serious consequences of the ruthless exploitation of our planet, humanity cannot escape the emerging global catastrophic situation.