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COVID-19 Fallout and Indian Philosophical Approach

Dr V.Chandrasekar¹

Abstract

COVID-19 has raised alarms on all dimensions and all nations have realised that the best available way to keep ourselves safe during this pandemic today (when a permanent cure is still not available) is prevention and individual responsibility. The pandemic is so very acute throughout the world that it is not only impacting the physical and societal well-being but also is predicted to erode into the economic safe zone of every man and every country. Each man and every state is concerned and the whole world is now interested in coming together (to cooperate with each other) in their effort to save humanity. As a student of Philosophy, I was interested to know if Philosophy can attempt to stem the tide. Philosophy is understood as ‘love of wisdom’ in the etymological sense. However, philosophy is also understood as a method of reflective thinking and reasoned inquiry that identifies problems and provides solutions to these problems. It is in this respect, I wanted to see if philosophy can help us to understand and safeguard ourselves in this situation. Hence this attempt is made on: the Upaniṣadic understanding of *Brahman and Ātman*, (which can be seen to position man in nature); the suggestions of Buddhism and Jainism in respect of the cosmos; the restraints (*ahimsa* or non-violence, *asteya* or non-stealing, *aparigraha* or non-acceptance of what is not yours *etc* (as found in Yoga and also in *Buddhism and Jainisim*) and cultivation of good practices like *santoṣa* or contentment (*in Yoga*); and a thematic understanding of man’s ‘personality’ from a study of Yoga text that looks into man as one with the cosmos (research area of the author of this paper). The main intention here is to focus on the seeming oneness between man and nature as the Indian philosophical approach to cosmos (representative of **enlightened anthropocentrism. This is very relevant today, when India has opted for a fourth lockdown in a matter of fifty days and aims to suggest means to strengthen self-control and self-empowerment.**

Key words: resource allocation, individual consciousness, universal consciousness, vasudeiva kutumbakam or world as one family, enlightened anthropocentrism, egalitarianism,

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda College (Autonomous) Chennai – 600 004

Introduction

The crisis relating to COVID-19 has certainly opened up large ethical and philosophical questions – be it with respect to the early reactions of the health organisations or the politics involved right from the conduct of sports events or opening businesses etc. Nader Ghothiⁱ points out “...the policies of a government, whether the policies are directly related to health or indirectly impact health, including those of the ministry of health, should be ‘healthy policies’; this means that any government policy should consider the possible impact on the health of people. Also, as it has been shown in other parts of the world, transparency of the government and communication of the information at hand can lead to trust and compliance with regulations such as social distancing”. This suggests a clear demarcation from the government/or state coupled with individual responsibility. There is one more important aspect here that needs intervention from ethics: that is, what will be the situation when there is scarcity of resources? That is when Mario Patrão Nevesⁱⁱ talks of resource allocation that cannot be made on the principles of “first-come, first-served” combined with “high-severity and high-priority”, especially so in such exceptional circumstances where the need is more than the available resource and the prioritization of patients become alarming. This author goes on to say that “from an ethical point of view, it is important to save life and to promote the health and well-being of the largest number of people (utilitarian perspective). So, prioritisation on any of the counts mentioned above is unethical. And, as of now, there seems to no remedy to this except safeguarding oneself. But it is imperative for the states to encourage research on getting the pandemic out of the way of normal citizen. How can philosophy come into picture in such a scenario? The impact of covid-19 on individual health, social health and economy has changed man’s perception on himself and the world from what it was in the recent past. These conditions have definitely changed the way in which man perceives himself and also in the way in which he has to interact with the other man and his environment. In other words, man has to redefine himself in this context. Why is this so? Seen in the context of the non-availability of a cure for this pandemic, health specialists all over the world reiterate only two important steps – namely, precaution and individual responsibility – that emphasises on what man ought to do and ought not to do.

The paper now juxtaposes this suggestion with the editorial of an e-magazine on COVID-19. This editorial highlights a different aspect from the outcome of this pandemic. It cites Albert Camus’ words from *The Plague* that there may be more things to admire in men than to despise in times of pestilence and continues: “This will apply to ourselves as well over the coming months, as each one of us is forced to undertake the Delphic maxim to *know thyself*. We can only hope that when we reflect on this tumultuous time in years to come that we will admire not only the actions of others, but also our own”ⁱⁱⁱ. This is where reference to Indian Philosophy can be made especially its understanding of man in nature/or as part of nature and not the dominant force in nature. The paper here takes clue from the environmentalists who felt the need to replace the anthropocentric view and the non-anthropocentric understanding with what may be termed as *enlightened anthropocentrism*. Enlightened anthropocentrism, it is argued, helps in policy-making that is in line with the acceptance of intrinsic value to the non-human elements in nature^{iv}. **Thus this present paper has attempted to showcase the Indian philosophical approach as an example for this view.** Indian philosophy belongs to a time when man had no idea about the difference between him and nature or the supremacy of his kind over nature. Hence what is attempted

here is a thematic representation of the available facts or inferences of the tradition in the light of the present situation.

In the early 1970's a Norwegian philosopher and climber, Arne Næss introduced a distinction between 'deep' and 'shallow' ecology. It reiterates the place of man in the cosmos and showcases the role of man in this analysis. **"Deep ecology movement"** endorses **"biospheric egalitarianism"**, the view that all living things are alike in having intrinsic value (and being independent of their usefulness to others). This respect for the intrinsic value in everything aims at taking care of every aspect of nature and not to cause unnecessary damage to the flora and fauna. As a result, man realizes that his larger -- ecological Self - deserves respect as well. To respect and to care for his Self is also to respect and to care for the natural environment, of which he is actually a part and with which he should identify. **The uniqueness of Indian Philosophy is its dual role of recognising individuality or personal space alongside emphasis on collectivism.** Two statements from Hindu thought come to the forefront now. They are: (1) *vasudeiva kuṭumpakam* meaning the whole world regarded as one family and (2) *lokāh samastha sukhino bhavantu* meaning let all beings live happily^v. R.P.Mishra, in one of his address on the topic, "Culture, Religion and Environmental Ethics"^{vi}, says that there is a correspondence between the ecological world-view and the world-view of the Hindu thought since both represent the world as a unity – the unity of oneself with one's surroundings. This is well-brought out by the Upaniṣadic term '*brahman*' One other practice of the Indian mind-set is worth mentioning here (before an attempt is made to study the Indian philosophical approach). Everyone will agree that Buddhism and Jainism can be treated as championing the cause of *ahimsa*. The same vigour can be seen in the Hindu thought also that is not pronounced but found in the form of their beliefs and practices. The founder chancellor of the Sri Satha Sai University cites the family of Śiva, his consort Parvati and their two sons Vinayaka and Muruga as suggesting harmonious living with all beings for the Indian family^{vii}. This is at the practical level and the philosophical background will be brought out from now.

Since, one does not find direct reference to nature and man's involvement in the protection of nature (as suggested by the shallow ecological movement), the paper attempts to showcase the different standpoints of Indian philosophical outlook right from the pronouncement of the Upaniṣads down to the systems of philosophy that developed on the basis of Vedas and Upaniṣads (especially, Yoga), on the one hand, and the two heterodox systems – Buddhism and Jainism – on the other hand. In short, this attempt is a suggestion to look at the Indian philosophical outlook on cosmos as the paradigm of the deep ecological movement suggested earlier in the paper. Mention was made earlier of the distinction in ecological movements suggested by the Norwegian philosopher along with two others. **What influenced them into this distinction is the veneration shown by their sherpas to the mountains when they climbed them.** It might have been a new experience to the three of them but the Indian humankind have been taught or have imbibed this attitude through the observance of certain customs or even festivals^{viii}. One need not go deep into that as it might lead one into the observances of Hinduism rather than understanding the Indian philosophical approach. Hence, the paper now begins to understand the various aspects of Indian thought and the possible impact that it can have with respect to an understanding of man and nature. It is enlisted in the following manner:

- (i) the Upaniṣadic understanding of *Brahman and Ātman*, (which can be seen to position man in nature)
- (ii) the suggestions of Buddhism and Jainism in respect of the cosmos

- (iii) the restraints (*ahimsa* or non-violence, *asteya* or non-stealing, *aparigraha* or non-acceptance of what is not yours *etc* (as found in Yoga and also in *Buddhism and Jainism*) and cultivation of good practices like *santoṣa* or contentment (*in Yoga*),
- (iv) a thematic understanding of man's 'personality' from a study of Yoga text that looks into man as one with the cosmos (research area of the author of this paper)

Why is this relevant here? One finds two strands of thought here: (i) the understanding of oneness of man and nature through the pantheistic understanding in some of the Indian philosophical systems and (ii) the holistic understanding of man and nature being part of a superior reality with respect to other systems. **It can be seen in either of these that neither man nor nature is looked at as subservient to the other.** So this paper projects the **seeming oneness between man and nature as the** Indian philosophical approach to cosmos. Of course, the understanding of Buddhism and Jainism with respect to *ahimsa* (non-injury to any creature) will be accepted as directly relevant to understanding man's attitude to nature. However, this should not lead the Indian philosopher or the student of Indian philosophy into a sense of complacency.

Upaniṣads and cosmos:

The central theme of the Upaniṣads is the search for what is true. Going by the fact that the pleasures of the world are transient and finite, the upaniṣadic thinkers lead us to a central reality that is infinite in existence (*sat*), absolute truth (*cit*) and pure delight (*ānanda*). However, this is an objective view. These seers do not stop there. They supplement this objective view with a subjective view also, which they called *Ātman*. Analysis of these two notions, namely, *Brahman and ātman and the oneness of these two* leads to the understanding of oneness of man and nature and hence this view is projected here. The word '*Ātman*' is understood by *Ṛgveda*, first as, breath or vital essence. This term acquired the meaning of self or soul only gradually at a later date. "The Upaniṣads refuse to identify the self with the body, or the series of mental states ... we are obliged to accept the reality of a universal consciousness whichever accompanies the contents of consciousness and persists even when there are no contents. This fundamental identity, which is the presupposition of both self and not-self, is called the *Ātman*..."^{xix} "The word "*Brahman*" means growth, and is suggestive of life, motion and progress..." Dr S.Radhakrishnan says, "*Brahman* is infinite not in the sense that it excludes the finite, but in the sense that it is the ground of all finites. It is eternal not in the sense that it is something beyond all time, as though there were two states temporal and eternal, one of which superseded the other, but that it is the timeless reality of all things in time ... the ultimate reality is not thought or force, or being exclusively, but the living unity of essence and existence, of the ideal and real, of knowledge, love and beauty"^{xi}. The highlight of this position is that it treats all aspects of nature as equal when considered from a higher synthesis. Upaniṣads also describe *brahman* as *aṅoraniyān mahatomahiyān*" meaning, He resides in the smallest of the small and in the biggest of the big. **How relevant is this statement to the present analysis?** It helps us to understand that Indian philosophy does not neglect the world and its objects but only looks for a **holistic view that encompasses humans alongside the other aspects of nature.** The Indian philosophical understanding of the human ego as part of nature comes handy. This view, combined with R.P.Mishra's view on the two major elements in Hinduism: - **compassion towards all living things and a sense of harmony with the environment, leading to the protection and enhancement of the environment**^{xii} clearly brings out the concern of the Upaniṣadic thinker to environment. The next part begins with the known/acknowledged effect of Buddhism and Jainism and then takes up Yoga.

Buddhism and cosmos:

A major Indian philosophical thought that can be considered here is that of Buddhism. Its analysis of the method to eliminate mental pollution can help man to tackle with environmental pollution also. Environmental pollution is either due to greed of profit, or due to utter foolishness or selfishness while mental pollution favours the selfish ego in place of the whole Self. **Greed and selfishness, along with disregard for others should be removed, says Buddhism.** In the same way, removal of the environmental pollutants alone is not enough if the environment is to be cleaned. Instead, it is more important to get at the source of the pollution, though tedious. It is easy to stop polluting the environment when once the source is known and regulated through legislation and surveillance. The perpetrators should be made to see reason and understand their mistake through enlarging their viewpoint. If this fails, then there must be sterner methods to bring the required result. And Buddhism quickly comes up with such a method when it speaks of the five vows (*pañcasīla*) – abstention from killing living creatures, abstention from falsehood, abstention from stealing, abstention from sexual misconduct and abstaining from intoxicants. All these activities aim at counteracting the pollution of the mind and are intended at guiding transformation. **This transformation results in restoring harmony of one's mind, which can result in harmony between man and nature.** Take for instance, the words of the *Dhammapada* which sums up the Buddhist ethics – “Not to do any evil, to cultivate the good and to purify the mind ...”^{xiii}. The five precepts (*pañcaśīlai*) given by Buddhism helps man to re-energise himself with understanding the one-ness of himself with nature. Ronald Epstein suggests: “when we naturally experience and act out of the fundamental equality with all living beings, we will have restored the ecological harmony to our minds. Our mental ecosystem will function naturally and holistically, and it will generate the wisdom of clear seeing and compassion for all life. That is the basic teaching of the Buddha”^{xiv}. The stand of Buddhism with respect to *nirvāṇa* (or liberation) is another eye-opener in this regard. Buddhist conception of liberation and the liberated person is unique as it does not negate the world even at that level. In fact, Buddha lived in the world amidst his people even after the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. How is this possible? To them, the raft with which one could swim across the flood of misery should be left for others so that they could also use it to redeem themselves. Therefore, Buddha showed that the *arhat* (the liberated) need not run away from the worldly ties but can love the other creatures. He even goes a step further to assert that such love and sympathy for all beings increases with enlightenment.

Jaina understanding of man and cosmos:

The concern of Jainism for environmental ethics is more pronounced than even Hinduism and Buddhism, it can be said. The core of Jaina ethics is the *doctrine of Ahimsa*. In fact, Jainism is known for the extreme lengths that it goes for honouring this doctrine of *ahimsa* (one of the main ingredients of right conduct (*samyag cāritra*) – the third indispensable step for liberation - suggested by Jaina ethics. It is this step that enables us to stop the influx of new *karmas* and also to eradicate the old ones. It consists in control of passions, senses, thought, speech etc. Right conduct, therefore, is described as refraining from actions that are harmful and doing what is good. Jainism prescribes a method that could be followed for having right conduct and that is the taking up of the **five great vows (*pañca-mahāvratā*)**. The *pañca-mahāvratā* comprises of (i) the practice of *ahimsa* - or abstaining from causing injury - Abstinence from injury to life. The Jaina *muni* (or saint) even breathes through a piece of cloth in order not to inhale and destroy any life floating in the air. *Ahimsa*

must be practiced in thought, word and deed^{xv}. (ii) **satyam** - speaking what is true and good and in a pleasant manner. To maintain this vow, one must conquer anger, greed and fear. (iii) **asteyam** - or abstinence from stealing: No doubt, human life requires some wealth. But, depriving another man of his wealth by stealing is deplorable because it deprives the other of an essential condition of life. (iv) **brahmacaryam** - abstinence from carnal pleasure is refraining from *kāma* of any form altogether, either in speech, thought or action and (v) **aparigraha** - abstaining from attachment or giving up attachment for the objects of the senses.. Thus the three gems (*triratna*) suggested by Jaina ethics - Right faith, right knowledge and right conduct - are inseparably bound up and the progress and degeneration of the one react on the other two. A person must harmoniously develop these three.

Yoga and cosmos:

The next area to be discussed is Yoga philosophy and its relation to ecology. Yes, reference is made to the first limb of the *aṣṭāṅga yoga* (eight limbs of yogic practice) – *yama* (restraint). Before attempting to train man into the yogic practices of meditation and contemplation, Yoga calls for restraint of certain tendencies. They are: (1) *ahimsa* – abstaining from causing injury to other living beings, (2) *satya* – abstaining from falsehood, (3) *asteya* – non-stealing (4) *Brahmacarya* – control of sensual desires and (5) *aparigraha* – non-acceptance of unnecessary gifts. One can also add *santoṣa* meaning contentment – a component of the second limb of Yoga (*niyama*) that advocates cultivation of good habits (*niyama*). While practice of the five *yamas* can prevent man from abuse of nature, the aspect of contentment (*niyama*) will ensure balance between man’s attitude and ecology. This paper now introduces another area that revolves around Yoga psychology, which was taken up for study by the author of the paper for research earlier. The conclusion of the research resulted in thematically presenting the idea of personality in yoga in the light of the contribution from analytical psychology^{xvi}. Carl Jung, in delineating the process of individuation, talks of restructuring of ego and identifies that centre as SELF. This study helps **one to characterize personality in terms of equality and indifference, by integrating and transcending the economic, biological and socio-political views**. Modern psychologists like Abraham Maslow, Karen Horney, Carl Rogers (following Jung), have recognized that deficiency-motivation and pressure from the environment alone were not responsible for driving the individual to seek remedies. For instance, Maslow^{xvii} identified growth-motivation, i.e., the motivation for self-improvement (usually termed self-actualization or self-transcendence) directed by certain goals and purposes from within. He talks of a theory of motivation, especially, a need-based framework of human motivation. This can be characterized in the following diagram, often called “Maslow’s hierarchy of needs or needs pyramid”^{xviii}.



Thus, he developed a hierarchy of needs. That is, human beings are first motivated by the need for oxygen, water, sex etc. When this is fulfilled, comes the need for safety and security where one looks for protection and stability. Social needs comes next wherein the need for love and belongingness arises (looking for affectionate relationships). Esteem needs can be understood at two levels – need for respect from others and the need for self-respect. It includes feelings as confidence. However, the last level (depicted at the top of the pyramid) is something different and Maslow calls that level as **self-actualization** arising out of “**growth-motivation**” or “**Being needs**” or “**B-needs**” (as against **D-needs represented by the other four needs – physiological, safety, social and esteem needs**). They involve the continuous desire to fulfil potentials, that is, to becoming the most complete personality. Maslow used a qualitative method called **biographical analysis** to identify such persons^{xix}.

In this respect, it can be maintained that the understanding of personality in Yoga truly satisfies the need of the personality theorists on account of its comprehensiveness. Its metaphysics points out that the nature of man is definitely other than what he normally believes himself to be on the basis of identification with a particular body and mind. nor is it what others believe one to be but what one actually is. **Yoga also recognizes this complex when it talks of transformation of the empirical consciousness to (or becoming one with) universal consciousness.** Therefore, it can be concluded that Yoga talks about man as MAN at the ontological level and not merely psychologizing in the negative sense (i.e., understanding man in terms of his appearance and in terms of behaviour-patterns). This enables one to characterize personality in terms of equality and indifference, by integrating and transcending the economic, biological and socio-political views. Rogelio P. Bayod^{xx} says: “In the psycho-spiritual world, we speak of two dimensions of a person: the core and the periphery. The core constitutes the being of a person. ...The core is the “being” while the periphery is in the “doing” or the “having” domain. We are told that the most important of the two is the core because this is the being of the person. But the periphery is also important although in a lesser degree. Taken properly, the periphery adds flavour to the core. Just like a gift that is wrapped beautifully, a wrapper makes the gift so attractive externally but wrappers are not the real gifts. Gabriel Marcel said that man is an incarnate subjectivity. For his, man is a body but he is more than his body. Man also, is a spirit”.

Conclusion

So, what are the takeaways from this analysis? One can find in the Indian philosophical outlook that there was a concept of non-interference with the development of natural processes. In fact, Indian philosophical outlook on oneness of all living things stand testimony to its reaction to environment. It is revealed in the care shown by the Indian philosophical systems in not allowing over-exploitation of that living thing which is as perfect as one’s own. **Thus, it can be concluded that a non-violent and a non-interfering attitude towards nature, animals and fellow beings is the essence of all systems of Indian philosophy (though not pronounced). The highlight of this attitude of Indian philosophical systems is *enlightened anthropocentrism* and it gains relevance after more than forty days of lockdown throughout the world. Every state or government is beginning to come out of lockdown with the message that it’s now up to the individuals to carry forward their life with the strictness that was practiced during the lockdown. In this context, self-control and self-empowerment are suggested to be the guiding spirit for man. This paper aims to suggest ways of improving these two.**

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- ⁱⁱ Maria Patrão Neves, PhD, Professor, Universidade dos Açores, Ponta Delgada, Portugal, “Ethical , Implications of Rationing and Rationalisation”, Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics, vol.30 (4) May 2020 downloaded on 14-05-2020
- ⁱⁱⁱ New Philosopher – Downloaded by me on 14-04-2020 from <https://www.newphilosopher.com/articles/covid-19/> posted on 21st March 2020
- ^{iv} The theoretical burden on the non-anthropocentric theory to show that the non-human elements of environment has intrinsic value (cf. Norton 1991, de Shalit 1994, Light and Katz 1996) is more pronounced than in the enlightened anthropocentric view.
- ^v The organisation that has nurtured me in the social and spiritual level, reformulated this statement as “samastha lokāh sukhino bhavantu” – let peace reign in all worlds
- ^{vi} Delivered during the national symposium on Environmental Ethics, organised by the Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF) with assistance from Ministry of Environment and Forests, UGC, UNESCO and Indian Council for Social Science.
- ^{vii} With respect to the animals sported along with each of them – snake with Śiva, lion with Parvati, mouse with Ganapati and peacock with Muruga.
- ^{viii} Many or even, all festivals can be seen to be a projection of this attitude – examples of it is seen in the Sankaranthi festival or ganesh festival, or saraswathi pooja during the 9-day dassera festival etc.
- ^{ix} Radhakrishnan, S, Indian Philosophy vol 1., p.159
- ^x Refer to the song by poet Bharati – ‘ethilum ingu iruppaan avan yaaro; Yenakkul avan iruppaan arivaayo” to explain Brahman
- ^{xi} Radhakrishnan, S, Ibid., p.173
- ^{xii} Mishra R. P, ed., Environmental Ethics: A Dialogue of Cultures, p. 92
- ^{xiii} Rune Johansson, The Pshychology of Nirvana, p.11 as quoted by Padmasiri de Silva in An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology, p. 1
- ^{xiv} Inner Ecology: Buddhist Ethics and Practice, downloaded from <http://online.sfsu.edu/rone/Buddhism/Inner%20Ecology.htm> in 2008.
- ^{xv} That is why the Jaians practice extreme caution in walking, speaking, or even answering calls of nature.
- ^{xvi} in an earlier research, titled “Towards and Understanding of Personality in Classical Yoga in the light of Carl Jung’s Analytical Psychology,
- ^{xvii} A 1943 article in Psychological review and his work Toward a Psychology of Being
- ^{xviii} <https://www.managementstudyguide.com/maslows-hierarchy-needs-theory.htm> downloaded on 15-05-2020
- ^{xix} The names include Albert Einstein, Benedict Spinoza, William James and others. It also included 12 unnamed personalities who were alive at the time when Maslow conducted his research.
- ^{xx} Rogelio P. Bayod, “Recognitive and redistributive claims in COVID-19 Outbreak” in Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics, vol.30 (4) May 2020 downloaded on 14-05-2020

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