

Ecological Thoughts in the Major Upaniṣads

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Abstract

The behavior of human being towards his surrounding natural elements, his attitude, feelings towards them, nature's impact on human life etc. are certain points to be studied so far ecological study is concerned. This human behavior, attitude, feelings etc. become a reason to make balance or imbalance of ecology.

Through the entire thought of Upaniṣads which are revolved around the concept of highest reality, it is necessarily connected with various things around us. Since Upaniṣads are based on the Vedas, the Vedic people were fully associated with the nature. This nature played an important role in the Upaniṣads also. The *Upaniṣadic* seers observed that nature has its own power to control itself. So, we should not destroy its originality. All organs of human body are inter-related with each other. We should maintain a good relation with other social person and should well aware about our natural environment. The *Upaniṣadic* seers were aware about these matters and advised how to maintain the balance of the external world and internal world of human body and how to behave with other persons.

Full Paper

The 'Ecology' can have a simple understanding which deals with a scientific study. But it may not restrict within a limited field of study. It is affiliated to various branches of studies. Many ecologists have defined ecology differently in different words from various angles of study. From all the definitions a common factor is observed that it mainly deals with the study of inter-relationship between man and his surrounding natural elements; rather to say that it is a study between man and his mutual relationships with the nature. The human being is the central being, as human being is regarded as a unique creation of the creator.

The Term 'Ecology'

The behavior of human being towards his surrounding natural elements, his attitude, feelings towards them, nature's impact on human life etc. are certain points to be studied so far ecological study is concerned. This human behavior, attitude, feelings etc. become a reason to make balance or imbalance of ecology. By the moral teaching of Upaniṣads, one can learn how to maintain the relationship with his surrounding natural elements. If we think, we are just a part of a whole universe and we have to share everything rationally with other beings. Our attitudes, feelings and behavior should not be dominating towards others. One should treat the whole world as one family. It is obvious that the relationship of man with nature is much important so far ecological study is concerned. When this relation is a healthy one, the balance between two is well maintained. If this relationship is disturbed, then there happens disharmony. Whatever hazards we are facing today may be in individual level or in global level are the results of this disturbed relationship of man with his surrounding natural elements. Perhaps the superiority complex against the nature and all his surroundings is the root cause of over and misuse of natural resources and potentiality fetching him nothing but severe catastrophe.

The term 'Oikologie' is coined from the Greek word i.e. 'Oikos' (home or house) and 'Logos' (study of). An eminent German ecologist Ernest Haeckel (1866) has defined 'Oikologie' as a science of treating reciprocal relations of organism and external world. Afterward with a little modification the term 'Oikologie' was replaced by the term 'Ecology'. Hence ecology intends to a study of inter-relationship between man and his surrounding natural elements. We do not come across the term ecology directly in our Sanskrit literature but nevertheless the R̥gveda carries the word 'okos' denoting 'shelter'. R̥gveda. i.173.11, ii.19.1, iii.58.6, vii.25.4, abode, home, i.66.3, i.104.5, iv.16.15, v.30.1, iv.764 (comfortable) house, dwelling, place of abiding, abode, home represents to the word

‘ecology’. The Atharvaveda III.2.2 mentions the same term ‘okas’ as a house or place. To quote the *mantra* –

अयमग्निरमूमहद् यानि चित्तानि वो हृदि ।
वि वो धमत्वोकसः प्र वो धमतु सर्वतः ॥

In the same sequence in our later Vedic texts we also come across the term ‘okas’ (n.), means-ease, pleasure, place of abiding, comfort. We find in Nirukta, Yāskācārya mentions that – ‘oka iti nivāsa nāmocyte’ (3.3). Let us have some dictionary words dealing with ‘okas’. ‘uc’ - to make pleasure in, delight, to be suitable, suit, fit. ‘Okas’ (n.) a house, residence, resting place, pleasure, gratification. (The Principal Sanskrit English Dictionary, V.S. Apte). ‘Uc’ - to take pleasure in, delight in, to be suitable, suit, fit. ‘Oka’ (m.), (uc) a house, ‘okas’ (n.), house, dwelling place of abiding, abode, home (A Sanskrit English Dictionary, M. Monier William). ‘Uc’ (p) to take pleasure in, to be suitable. ‘Oka’ (m.) a house, shelter. ‘Okas’ (n.) a house, residence, a resting place (A Concise Sanskrit-English Dictionary, VidyadharVaman Bhide).

The Term ‘Upaniṣad’

The word Upaniṣad (*upa-ni-√sad-kvip*) is derived from the root ‘sad’, ‘षदलुविशरणगत्यवसानेषु.’ This has three different meanings, and can mean either ‘to sit down’, ‘to destroy’ or ‘to make loose’. The other constituents or prefix of the word are ‘upa’ which means ‘nearness’ and ‘ni’ which means ‘devotedly’ or ‘totally’ and ‘kvip’ is suffix. Thus, the etymological meaning of the word is the knowledge or *vidyā* which, when received from a competent teacher, loosens totally the bondage of world, or surely enables the pupil to attain (i.e. realize) the self, or completely destroys ignorance which is responsible for the deluding appearance of the infinite self as the finite embodied creature. Through the word primarily signifies knowledge, yet by implication it also refers to the book that contain that knowledge. (Nikhilānanda Swami, *The Upaniṣads*, Vol. I, p.11)

Western scholars have tried to determine basic meaning of the term Upaniṣad and related terms from their occurrences. Upaniṣad is derived from *ni-sad*, to sit down (on something), and *upa* - a prefix which adds the meaning “up close to”, with a connotation of “looking up from below”. A traditional Indian interpretation, supported by Deussen, taken this to mean “drawing close to the teacher” and interprets Upaniṣad as a “secret teaching” (a secret formula or way of approaching Brahman) which the teacher communicates to his students while they are sitting close around him. (Deussen, *Philosophy of the Upaniṣads*, pp. 12-13). Oldenburg argued that this should be modified to “a reverential sitting down in which the pious and wise concentrate their thoughts on the highest object of all ponderings, viz. the Ātman or Brahman,” so that an Upaniṣad is “(a mode of) adoration of (Ātman, Brahman).” (Witz. G. Klaus, *The Supreme Wisdom*)

Exploration of Inter Relationship among Natural Elements

Ecology aims at the analysis of inter-relationships between the human beings and other beings surrounded by them which is the most important subject matter of study so far ecological thought is concerned. Of course, the Upaniṣads are concerned more to the metaphysical aspect of the Reality than to its worldly aspect. But it is true, that while dealing with the metaphysical aspect, the Upaniṣads cannot set aside the worldly aspect completely. In the normal life, the existence of our surrounding which forms the very aspect of our life cannot be neglected. The conditions or influences under which a person lives or a thing develops play an important role that cannot be overlooked. Through the entire thought of Upaniṣads which are revolved around the concept of the highest reality, it is necessarily connected with various things around us. The Upaniṣads are based on the Vedas. The human being is fully associated with the nature since Vedic period. This nature played an important role in the Upaniṣads also. In fact, we come across the Upaniṣads where all natural phenomena are inter-related. The essential natural elements are described in the Upaniṣads as the symbol of Brahman or Supreme Power. Due to the search for the nature of Brahman the Vedic seers also explained the activities, nature and creation of the essential natural elements. By this explanation we can see five

gross elements are interrelated with each other and all living beings are depend upon them (five gross element). Living beings also depend upon the food, the sun, the moon. Generally, the living beings are inter-related with each other. One can't live without help or support of others. So, there is an important relationship among all the natural objects. Even the elements of human body are related with each other. There is also an intimate relationship among five sense organs, five kinds of air in human body, limbs, blood, flesh and bone etc. We should maintain this relationship properly. Otherwise the balance of the world and balance of the human body is destroyed. The Vedic seers were aware of this matter. For this very reason they mentioned the relationship in the *mantras* and advised to keep it healthy.

Let quote some *mantras*, where the relationship is explained – The sun, the wind and the fire is the part of the Brahman and they are related with each other that is called *trivṛtkaraṇam*. And the direction, sky, heaven, earth are His parts of body, as stated in the *mantra* of Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad (1.2.3). Translation: ‘He divided Himself into three : fire one third; the sun one third, and the air one third. Thus Prāṇa (viraj) is divided into three. His head is the east, and His arms are that (the north east) and that (the south-east). His hinder part is the west, and His two hip-bones are that (the north-west) and that (the south-west). His sides are the south and the north, His back is heaven, His belly is the intermediate region, and His chest is the earth. Thus He stands from on water. He who knows this stands firm wherever he goes’.

In Chāndogyopaniṣad, we can see the same concept about *trivṛtkaraṇam* and more clear explanation about it. Let us quote the *mantra* of Chāndogyopaniṣad (6.3.3). translation.: ‘That Deity, having thought: “Let Me make each of these three tripartite,’ entered into these three deities by means of the living self and developed names and forms’.

The process of the *trivṛtkaraṇam* is as follows : It took half of the original fire and added to it one fourth of water and one fourth of earth, and thus created gross fire. Likewise, It added to half of the original water, one fourth each of fire and earth and created gross water. It added to half of the original earth, one fourth each of fire and water, and created gross earth. Thus fire, water and earth came to acquire their separate names and serve special purpose among them. So they are inter-related with each other.

This relationship is explained in a *mantra* of Chāndogyopaniṣad-(6.4.1).Translation: ‘The red colour of (gross) fire is the colour of (the original) fire; the white colour of (gross) fire is the colour of (the original water; the black colour of (gross) fire is the colour (of the original) earth’.In the creation process of the world according to the Upaniṣads stated that, the “sky was born from the Ātman; from Ākāśa, Air; from air, fire; from fire, water; from water, earth; from earth, herbs; from herbs, food; from food, man” (Tait.Up. 2.1.3). So, all natural objects are inter-related among them. After all the man is the essence of food and good food depends upon the sufficient rain. The *mantra* of Chāndogyopaniṣad (7.10.1) mentions so – ‘When there is good rain, living creatures rejoice in the thought that food will become abundant’.

Again the relationship between Prāṇa and the body as stated in the *mantra* of Taittirīyopaniṣad (3.7)- ‘ The Prāṇa is, verily, food; the body is the eater of food. The body rests on the Prāṇa; the Prāṇa rests on the body. Thus the food rests on food. So, the Prāṇa dwelling in the body and supports the body. Thus the body is the food and Prāṇa is the eater.

The relationship between water and fire is described in a *mantra* of Taittirīyopaniṣad- (3.8) .Its Translation : ‘The water is, verily food; fire is the eater. Fire rests on water and water rests on fire. Thus food rests on food. So, the water that one drinks is digested by the fire in the stomach as the lightning is present in a rain-cloud.’

The relation between earth and sky is given in the verses of the Taittirīyopaniṣad (3.9),which describe: ‘Let him (the knower of Brahman) make food plentiful; that is the vow. The earth is verily, food; the Ākāśa is the eater. The Ākāśa rests on the earth and the earth rests on the Ākāśa. Thus food rests on food. He who knows this resting of food on food in established; he becomes a possessor of food and an eater of food. He becomes great in offspring and cattle and in spiritual radiance, and great in fame. So, the earth abides in the Ākāśa, which lies both above and below it. Thus who know about the importance of food and regard on it, he achieves those aforesaid qualities. Hence we should know that relation and the importance of food’.

In the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad (3.6.1), we can see as the answer of the question of Gārgī, Yājñavalkya said about the relationship among the natural beings. The verses explain,:" Then Gārgī, the daughter

of Vāchaknu, questioned him. “Yājñavalkya”, said she, if all this is pervaded by water, by what, pray, is water pervaded?” By air. O, Gārgī “By what ‘pray’ is air pervaded?” “By the sun. O, Gārgī”, “By what is the sky pervaded?” “By the world of the Gandharvas, O, Gārgī”, “By the world of the Gandharvas, pervaded?” By the world of the sun, “By what is the world of the sun, O, Gārgī.” Pervaded?” “By the world of the moon O, Gārgī.” “By what is the world of the moon pervaded?” “By the world of the stars, O, Gārgī.”

The verses of Chāndogyopaniṣad (7.12.1) describe the relation among the sky, the sun, the stars, the fire and the lightning and the usefulness of the sky for others. Translation.: “For in the Ākāśa exit both the sun and the moon, lightning, stars and fire. It is through the Ākāśa that a person calls (another); it is through the Ākāśa that the other hears; it is through the Ākāśa that the person hears back. In the Ākāśa we rejoice (when we are together), and in the Ākāśa we rejoice not (when we are separated). In the Ākāśa everything is born, and toward the Ākāśa all things grow. Meditate upon the Ākāśa. So the sun, the moon lightning, stars are the different from of fire and they exit in the Ākāśa. When one person speaks with another, the sound of his voice travels through the Ākāśa. Because the sound is the quality of Ākāśa”.

Now we describe the inter-relationship between man and the fire by the verses of Br.Up. (5.9.1), “This fire which is within a man and digests food that is eaten is Vaiśvānara. Its sound is that which one hears by stopping the ears. When a man is about to leave the body, he hears this sound no more”. So, the fire (*Vaiśvānara*) helps to the man for digesting the food mentions the Chāndogyopaniṣad (5.9.1). translation : “Thus in the fifth liberation water comes to be called man. The fetus enclosed in the membrane, having lain inside for ten or nine months, or more or less, is born. Hence, a man is born from fire and when he is dead, he returns into fire’.

Let us quote the stanza to explain this matter from hāndogyopaniṣad (5.9.2). Translation : “Having been born, he lives whatever the length of his life may be. When he is dead, they carry him to the fire (of the funeral pyre) whence he came, whence he arose. Again we can see this thought described in the same Upaniṣad (5.10.1-7) ‘ after death air, sun, moon, lightning are helping him to go his destination and sky, air, smoke, mist, cloud, rain-water are helping him to reborn.”

The Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad mentions this thought in detail (5.10.1). Translation : “When a man departs from this world, he reaches the air. The air opens for him as wide as the whole of a chariot wheel. So this (opening) he ascends and reaches the Sun. The sun opens therefore him as wide as whole of lambara. By this (opening) he ascends and reaches the moon. The moon opens there for him as wide as the whole of a drum. By this (opening) he ascends and reaches a world free from grief and cold. There he dwells for endless years”.

From the Upaniṣadic view we know that when the liquid liberation (faith) offered in the fire of heaven, creates an aqueous body through which one can experience pleasures in the world of the moon. Householders (both ritualistic and philanthropists) acquire such bodies. When their bodies are offered in the funeral pyre, the offering prizes heaven in an aqueous form enclosing the soul, and gradually reaches the world of the Moon, where it creates the aqueous body (Chāndogyopaniṣad-5.10.5) Translation: “Having dwelt there (in the lunar world) till their (good) works are consumed, they return again the same way they came. They first reach the *Ākāśa* and from the *Ākāśa* the air. Having become air, they become smoke, having become smoke, they become mist.

The Chāndogyopaniṣad-5.10.6 describes thus- “ Having become mist, they become cloud having become cloud, they fall as rain water .Then they are born as rice and barely, herbs and trees sesames and beams. The once the exit is most difficult, for whoever (capable of begetting children) eats that food and injects semen, they become like unto him”.

The Chāndogyopaniṣad- 5.10.7 describes further, “ Those whose conduct here (on earth) has been good will quickly attain some good birth as Brāhmin, birth as *Kṣatriya* a or birth as a *Vaiśya*. But those whose conduct here has been evil will quickly attain some evil birth -birth as a dog, birth as pig, or birth as a Chaṇḍāla.” The secret of all *upāsana* lies in this *sandhi* or mind point. *Upāsana* being essentially a function of the *buddhi* or Prāṇa, its success depends on rightly grasping the central point from which radiate the infinite stream of consciousness.

In the discussion of meditation on the *Udgītha* there are some explanation about inter relationships between earth and all beings, water and all beings, *vāk* and *ṛk*, Sun and Prāṇa etc. Again earth, fire, sky, sun and heaven are the symbol of five-fold *Sāman*. A verse from the Chāndogyopaniṣad (1.3.7)

says about *Udgītha* , “ ‘*ut*’ is heaven’, ‘*gī*’ the mid-region and ‘*tha*’ the earth. ‘*ut*’ is the sun, ‘*gī*’ the air and ‘*tha*’ fire. ‘*ut*’ is the Sāmaveda, ‘*gī*’ the Yajurveda, and ‘*tha*’ the Ṛgveda. [To him who thus meditates] speech yields milk and milk is speech. He who knows this and meditates on the letter of the *Udgītha* becomes the possessor of food and the earth of food.” Chāndogyopaniṣad (1.6.2-3) has explained about this in another way -“: The mid-region is the Ṛg and the air is the Sāman. This Sāman (i.e. the air) rests on that Ṛg (i.e. the mid-region). Thereafter the Sāman is sung, resting on that Ṛg, ‘*Sā*’ is the mid-region, ‘*ama*’ is the air; thus they (the mid-region and the air) are designed as *Sāma*.” Heaven is the Ṛg and the sun is the Sāman. This Sāman (i.e. the sun) rests on that Ṛk (i.e. heaven). Therefore the Sāman is sung, resting on the Ṛg, *sā* is heaven, *ama* is the sun; thus they (heaven and the sun) are designated as *Sāma*”.

Again we lookout (watch) an interesting interrelationship among sense organs of human body, five kinds of air of human body and five gross and other natural elements as the worship of Agnihotra at the time of eat. Let us quote some mantras for more explanation. The same Upniṣad (5.19.1-2) states, “Therefore the food that comes first should be offered as an oblation. The first oblation that he (i.e. the eater) offers, he should offer, saying : “*Svāhā to the Prāṇa !*” Then the *Prāṇa* is satisfied. The *Prāṇa* being satisfied, the eye is satisfied. The eye being satisfied, the sun is satisfied. The sun being satisfied, heaven is satisfied. Heaven being satisfied, whatever in under heaven and under the sun is satisfied. They being satisfied (i.e. the eater or sacrificer) is satisfied with offspring, cattle, food, brightness (of the body), and the light of Brahman.”

Now, that which is the second oblation should be offered with (the words) ‘I offer this to *Vyāna (Vyānāyāsvāhā)*.’ Thereby is *Vyāna* satisfied. The *Vyāna* being satisfied, the ear is satisfied. The ear being satisfied, the moon is satisfied. The moon being satisfied, the quarters are satisfied. The quarters being satisfied, whatever is under the quarters and under the moon is satisfied. They being satisfied, the eater is satisfied with offspring, cattle, food, brightness (of the body), and the light of Brahman. (Ch. Up.5.20.1)

The third oblation that he offers, he should offer, saying: “*svāhā to the Apāna!*” Then the *Apāna* is satisfied. (Ch. Up.5.21.1) The *Apāna* being satisfied, speech (i.e. the tongue) is satisfied. Speech being satisfied, fire is satisfied. Fire being satisfied, the earth is satisfied. The earth being satisfied, what is under the earth and under fire is satisfied. They being satisfied, the eater is satisfied with offspring, cattle, food, brightness (of the body), and the light of Brahman. (Ch. Up.5.21.2)

The fourth oblation that he offers, he should offer, saying: “*Svāhā to the Samāna*” Then the *Samāna* is satisfied. (Ch. Up.5.22.1) The *Samāna* being satisfied, the mind is satisfied. The mind being satisfied, the rain god is satisfied. The rain-god being satisfied, the lightning is satisfied. The lightning being satisfied, what is under the lightning and under the rain-god is satisfied. They being satisfied, the eater is satisfied with offspring, cattle, food, brightness (of the body) and the light of Brahman. (Ch. Up.5.22.2)

The fifth oblation that he offers, he should offer, saying: “*Svāhā to the Udāna !*” Then the *Udāna* is satisfied. (Ch.Up.5.23.1). The *Udāna* being satisfied, the skin is satisfied. The skin being satisfied, the air is satisfied. The air being satisfied, the Ākāśa is satisfied. The Ākāśa being satisfied, what is under the air and under the Ākāśa is satisfied. They being satisfied, the eater is satisfied with offspring, cattle, food, brightness (of the body), and the light of Brahman (Ch. Up.5.23.2). So, the *Prāṇa*, eye, sun and heaven; *Vyāna*, ear, moon and quarters; *Apāna*, speech, fire and earth; *Samāna*, mind, rain-god and lightning; *Udāna*, skin, air and Ākāśa are inter-related with each other and they have mutual relationships among them. Here we also can watch that who, they are interrelated, they are produced from eachother according to the Upaniṣads and Vedāntic philosophy also.

Conclusion

Therefore, the Upaniṣads indicate an interrelationship between man and nature, and the various cosmic forces which control them. The external and internal elements of human body and natural elements are the parts of Brahman and they are related with each-other as the limbs of human body are related among them. Again all living beings are inter-related with the different forms of the Sun. Human body is also inter-related with five gross elements and all natural elements are different forms of Brahman. After all if this relation is healthy and well-maintained the balance of the world will be good and strong. So, we should also be aware about this relation process and never hamper

this. Then our life will be peaceful. From all the narratives and explanations regarding this creation it may be understood that this entire universe has been created from the Self or Brahman. Before explanation of this universe all the materials were existing. In the Upaniṣads where the description of non-existing before creation may be found there the non-existent means unexpanded existence. From this unexpanded existence this material world is produced. The unexpanded existence is Brahman; the whole of the world is created from it, exists in it and dissolves in it. So, all the natural beings of the world are inter-related with each other.

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