

# The Vedic Teachings of Ethics and Social Harmony

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## Abstract

The farsighted Vedic seers have proposed a universal roadmap for attaining a meaningful life for all human beings in the past, which illuminates the present and can also guide us to a fruitful future. The ethical principles of Veda promulgate a holistic approach toward the welfare of humanity as a whole, the path leading to the harmony—*saṅgacchadhvaṃ saṃvadadhvaṃ saṃ no manāṃsi jānatām*. Today, world's pioneer institutions come up with concepts like, 'One World' or 'One Sun, One World, One Grid' or 'Only one earth' etc., in order to focus on a framework for facilitating global cooperation, building a global ecosystem to create and nurture a global network of individuals. But such mindful and deliberate ideas which can bring positive change have been reflected in the prescient Vedic concepts like *yatra viśvaṃ bhavatyekaniḍam*. Despite of having such enriched heritage, owing to the ignorance of our great Vedic literature, human beings are unable to create a socially, economically, spiritually healthy society. The present paper will be an effort to provide the significance of Vedic ethical principles in bringing harmony in the world and how those deep rooted and pragmatic ideas are universal for all ages.

## Full paper

The Vedas constitute the first literature that dawn on human beings at the very earliest time man's appearance on this globe. They have remained a guide book of ethical principles and social harmony since the inception of creation. The teachings of the Vedas are equally applicable to all lands and people of all times - past, present and future. In fact, at present the whole world is divided into different religions, races, groups, ideologies and countries by man-made boundaries. But the Vedic knowledge is beyond such limitations. It has transcended all the barriers and united the entire mankind as-- *amṛtasya putrāḥ (Śṛṅvantu viśve amṛtasya putrāḥ)*. 'Modern man flies like a bird in the sky, swims like a fish in waters, but fails to live like a human being on this earth'.

Ethics is important to every society as it plays a critical role in shaping the individual behaviours within a society. Since the dawn of human civilization, men have sought to keep human conduct in check to preserve the peace of society. Ethical principles are established in a society in view of the varied aspects of human life. These principles can be examined in the context of religion, morality, culture and civilization reflected in political conditions. The atheist emphasizes upon material good only; whereas, the theistic theory believes in the supernatural power which rules the universe and puts religions in the centre to shape the human behaviour. Man is a social animal. Therefore, it is essential for him to identify his place in society and fulfill social obligation; so that, he can maintain a harmonious life in society.

Social Harmony is defined as a process of valuing, expressing, and promoting love, trust, admiration, peace, harmony, respect, generosity and equity upon other people in any particular society regardless of their national origin, weight, marital status, ethnicity, colour, gender, race, age and occupation etc. among other aspects.<sup>1</sup> Ethics and Social harmony both the terms are complementary to each other. Hence, it is quite essential for truly being social as being social also means living harmoniously with each other.

Social harmony can be promoted by making people more social for each other. It can be developed personally as well as institutionally. At personal level, it can be developed

by showing empathy, social grouping for friendship, strengthening mutually, bridging gap, acquiring allies etc. At institutional level, it can be achieved basically by following certain family norms, like, caring, equality, honesty, responsibility, integrity etc. Instilling such family values can provide an outlook on life, a way to view the world, righteousness and harmony in all relationship.

The Vedas remain a guide book of ethical principles and social harmony since the inception of creation. The universality of Vedic teachings is applicable to all the human beings irrespective of time, ideologies, religion, races, land or man-made boundaries. The Vedas perceive the entire world as human fraternity for world peace and living together. It advocates culture of peace, i.e., respect for and promotion of equal rights, ending of violence and promotion and practice of non-violence, the developmental and environmental needs of present and future by the various hymns.

In *Atharvaveda* 12.1.1, the fundamental principles that should guide the seekers of One World Idea are beautifully enunciated. The cementing forces that can sustain the peace of the earth are *Satya*-truth, *Rtam*- the irrevocable and inexorable law, *Dīkṣā*-Vow for the service of the mankind, *Tapas*-living a simple and austere life, *Brahma*-faith in the Universal Divine Power and *Yajña*- Selflessness to the extent of sacrificing One's interests for the Welfare of others.<sup>ii</sup> The world today is surely in need of peace which is eluding its grasp simply because we applaud truth, but practice falsehood, we exhort others to honour the law but, break the self-same law where we are concerned, we preach our fellowmen to take a vow of Service but ourselves we are saturated with selfishness, we admonish others to live an austere life but, we ourselves role on luxury./

It is very true that, war and peace originate in the minds of men. The Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO says that, 'since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that defences of peace must be constructed.' In daily *Agnihotra* a devotee of Vedic culture recites various mantras from Vedas, the burden of the song being *śānti, śānti, śānti*. One of such *mantra* is—

*Aum dyoḥ śāntrir-antarikṣam śāntiḥ|*  
*ṛthivī śāntir-āpaḥ śāntir-ouśadhayaḥ śāntiḥ|*  
*vanaspatayaḥ śāntir-viśve-devāḥ śāntir-brahma śāntiḥ|*  
*sarvam śāntiḥ śāntireva śāntiḥ sā mā śāntir-edhi /*  
*Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ //<sup>iii</sup>*

It is in the heart; it is in the mind that the seed of peace can be grown and cultivated. The Vedic seers could realize it well. The resonance of this thought can be heard in the *Śivasamkalpa-sūkta* of Yajurveda.<sup>iv</sup> The Vedic Ṛṣis carried the fight for peace in the minds of men when they repeated again and again—  
*Tanme manaḥ śivasamkalpamastu.<sup>v</sup>*

The *Sāmmanasya Sūkta* of Atharva Veda talks of Universal harmony of mind. The *sūkta* is entirely devoted to the cultivation of equilibrium in society. It visualizes a social organization in which there is harmony of head and heart among the components of society and there should be no conflict among them-  
*Sahrdayam sāmmanasyam avidveṣam kṛṇomi vaḥ /<sup>vi</sup>*

And, in which men and women live as brothers and sisters-  
*Mā bhrātā bhrātaram dvikṣan mā svasāram uta svasā/<sup>vii</sup>*

It also exhorts the people of the world to love one another as the cow loves her first born—  
*Anyo 'nyam abhaharyata vatsam jātam iva aghnyā.<sup>viii</sup>*

An organized society lives for its members and gets its strength from social harmony and mutual love. Vedic philosophy inspires human being to lead a life of fair-play and equity. Hence, we find such ideas repeatedly in Vedic literature--  
*Samgacchadhavam samvadadhvam sam no manāmsi jānatām...*<sup>ix</sup>

The establishment of a social order based on *Varṇāśrama* is a major contribution of the Vedic sages. The Vedas have laid down a universal and eternal ethical order for human good. The four *Puruṣārthas* viz. *Dharma, Artha, Kāma* and *Mokṣa* are attainable through human body only. This human body is not to be abused or wasted in worldly entanglement.<sup>x</sup> The Vedic literature opens the vistas of human good and humanistic growth. It believes in the fruit of action. The verse- *Dvā suparṇā sayujā sakhāyā samanām vṛkṣam pari śasvajāte.*<sup>xi</sup>--clearly mentions that Ātmā has to accept the fruit of his own action or *karma*. The Veda re-iterates, a cook gets what he cooks.<sup>xii</sup> It tells man to liberate himself from *karmaphala* and for that, Vedas prescribed an ethical code of conduct for internal strength and spiritual development for human beings.

The Vedic culture stresses upon high ethical conduct. It condemns all evil-doings and says that, evil doers can't cross the path of *Ṛt - Rtasya panthām na taranti duṣkṛtaḥ.*<sup>xiii</sup> Only an ethical person can traverse through that divine path which can lead him to enlightenment- *Ṛtasya panthāmanveti sādhu.*<sup>xiv</sup>

The Vedas have declared men as an immortal-son of Almighty. ...- *Amṛtasya-putraḥ.* It talks of brotherhood of man and because there are no distinctions on the basis of birth, all have to work together for the development of the social good.

—*ajyeṣṭhāso akanīṣṭhāsa ete sam bhrātaro vāvṛdhaḥ saubhagāya.*<sup>xv</sup>

The laws of the individual, society and the state are somewhat similar. The individual and society have integral relation and naturally the individual should submit himself to the service of the society. All of us should develop fraternity and respect for each other's friendship. Violence for selfish ends is prohibited so that we may develop affection without bitterness and jealousies. The Yajurveda 36.18 says that, 'let me see in all human beings my genuine friends. Let's all develop friendship and a friendly perspective:  
*Mitrasya mā cakṣuṣā sarvāṇi bhūtāni samīkṣantām. Mitrasyāham cakṣuṣā sarvāṇi bhūtāni samīkṣe. Mitrasya cakṣuṣā samīkṣāmahe.*

The Atharvaveda cherishes the good and welfare of human beings and animals including cows- *Svasti gobhyo jagate puruṣebhyaḥ.*<sup>xvi</sup> Again, in Atharvaveda 19.62.1, it is said—*priyam sarvasya paśyata uta śudra utārye.* That means, think of the good of all, no matter he is a *śudra* or *Ārya*.

The *Saumanasya sukta* of Atharvaveda which is considered as precious heritage in Vedic literature is meant to develop equity, cordiality and harmony in the family. The family is the nucleus unit of the society. The prayer says, 'Let everybody be sweet to all. All think alike. Each one has sympathy for the other. Cordiality should always be there so that there should no conflict in the society. The state be progressive and attain success and the plenty. This message of affection and cordiality has special reference in the modern age riven with strife.'<sup>xvii</sup>

The root to most of our troubles is the disruption of peace and harmony between one aspects of our life to another. Earlier people knew how to live in peace and harmony with nature and other animals, but with the realization of power and greed, it was us who harmed their harmonized relation with the environment. This change in the way of living is not at all desirable because the effects of ruining the harmony and peace in the ecosystem will have to be faced by us. Hence, people must always realize that a little kindness, compassion and self-perseverance can restore the sense of humanity in one and resolve all

issues regarding peace and harmony in our life. Atharvaveda proclaims that people can prosper by praying together for good will. <sup>xviii</sup> In Ṛgveda, we find a good number of statements which expresses the feeling of human good.

- *Pumāna pumāsaṃ pari pātu viśvataḥ.*<sup>xix</sup>  
‘Man should help and protect people of his own species.’
- *Bhūrīni bhadrā naryeṣu bāhuṣu.*
- ‘The arms of brave people protect human welfare and have capacity to serve the society.’<sup>xx</sup>
- *Indrāya...nare naryāya nṛtamāya nṛṇām.*<sup>xxi</sup>  
‘The Indra is a leader and he leads people on the path of righteousness. He does good to men and he is the best among them all’.
- *Nṛṇām naryo nṛtamaḥ.*<sup>xxii</sup>  
‘Just as friends help each other, so you be helpful to al.’
- *Maryā manuṣebhyo hitā.*<sup>xxiii</sup>  
‘The best man helps his fellowmen. Here, the term ‘marya’ in the Vedas mean good doer of mankind.

The teaching of public good has been conveyed through the terms like, *narya* and *marya*. According to Ṛgveda, the *Ṛṣi* is one who does good to populace- *Ṛṣiḥ sa yo manurhitah.*<sup>xxiv</sup> Gentlemanliness or *mṛdubhavanā* posits man at the highest seat or divinity. The Vedic mantras, like, ‘*ā no bhadrāḥ kratavo yantu...*<sup>xxv</sup>, ‘*Bhadraṃ karṇebhiḥ śṛṇuyāma devāḥ...*<sup>xxvi</sup> *Viśvāni deva savitar duriṭāni parāsuva...*<sup>xxvii</sup> etc. are ample proofs, that shows good and auspicious feeling of gentleness.

Ethics that promote ecological prosperity and incorporates solutions for resolving the environmental crisis, acts toward shared success, actively fulfils individual responsibility, and ways to end historical prejudices. The Vedic seers could realise it in the past. The *Bhumisūkta* or *Prthivīsukta* of Atharvaveda for the first time in annals of human literature declares ‘Earth’ as the mother and calls himself as the ‘Son.’<sup>xxviii</sup> The hymn displays love the motherland and prays to mother earth in its diverse forms with gratitude. It is the eternal source of energy for human. It has been called the *Viśvambhara*- feeder of the universe.<sup>xxix</sup> The earth is the same for all and teaches equal treatment to all. Repeated prayers have been offered to the Earth to provide security, grant longevity, shower prosperity and give water, cow, milk and medicines.

In a couple *ṛcās* from Ṛgveda, the term *madhu* has been used repeatedly—*madhuvāta ṛtāyate madhuḥsaranti sindhavaḥ...*<sup>xxx</sup>, where the ecstatic words of vedic seers which come from their deep spiritual realization wish for happiness and harmony in universe. Although, *madhu* means honey; but, here according to Sayana, *madhu* signifies sweetness or pleasant.<sup>xxxi</sup> The earth and all her creatures have a pleasant, loving, reciprocal relationship that is based on unity.

Ethics act as a self-governing system to keep human self-interest and the goal of society at equilibrium. Ethical norms are ever changing because it is contextual and affected by culture, technology, religion and politics. What is ethical in one country may not be ethical in another. The human race is today hopelessly divided by artificial barriers. The spiritual oneness of human beings based on love, harmony, tolerance, compassion and universal brotherhood are being forgotten. Hatred, intolerance, bigotry and violence seem to have overtaken us. Swami Vivekananda said: “It is our own attitude which makes the world what it is for us. Our thoughts make things beautiful; our thoughts make things ugly. Believe in this world—that there is meaning behind everything. Everything in the world is good, is holy and beautiful.”

This is the situation we face today: the earth has become an increasingly small planet where everyone’s actions affect everyone else. But, from the study of the topic it reveals that, the knowledge of the Vedas always stand there as a guide book to humanity since its

inception. Vedic religion is not merely a blessing, but, it presents a definite philosophy, ethics, social order and administration for human welfare and for world peace. In Vedic literature, the path of universal development of human beings is clearly exhibited. That path of harmony is being worth to be equally followed by all the mankind irrespective of time and land. Vedic people were truly social. They could not only understand their own needs and priorities, but also respecting the same of others too. Therefore, they were progressive enough to attain social harmony.

### References:

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- <sup>i</sup> Manisha Sharma, Global Journal of HUMAN-SOCIAL SCIENCE: C, Sociology & Culture Volume 15 Issue 6 Version 1.0 Year 2015.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Satyam̐ bṛhat ṛtam ugram dīkṣā tapo brahma yajñah pṛthivīm dhārayanti.* Atharvaveda 12.1.1.
- <sup>iii</sup> Yajurveda.
- <sup>iv</sup> Śukla-Yajurveda 40<sup>th</sup> Chapter.
- <sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>vi</sup> Atharvaveda 3.30.1.
- <sup>vii</sup> Atharvaveda 3.30.3.
- <sup>viii</sup> Atharvaveda 3.30.1.
- <sup>ix</sup> Ṛgveda 10.192.2
- <sup>x</sup> *Utkrāmātaḥ puruṣamāvapathā mṛtyoḥ ṣaḍvośamavamuñcamānaḥ/  
Udyānam te puruṣa nāvayānam jīvātum te dakṣatāti kṛṇomi//* Atharvaveda 8.1.4-6
- <sup>xi</sup> Ṛgveda 1.164.20
- <sup>xii</sup> *Ā yo dharmāni prathamah̐ sasāda tato vapūm̐ṣi kṛiṇuṣe purūṇi/  
Dhāsyuryoni prathama ā viveśā yo vācamanuditām̐ ciketa//* Atharvaveda 5.1.2
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ṛgveda 9.13.6
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ṛgveda 1.124.3
- <sup>xv</sup> Ṛgveda 5.60.5
- <sup>xvi</sup> Atharvaveda 1.3.1.4
- <sup>xvii</sup> Dr. Krishnalal: *Vedic Sangrah*, p.189 ; and Atharvaveda 3.30.1-7
- <sup>xviii</sup> Tatkr̥mo brahma vo gṛhe sañjānam̐ puruṣebhyaḥ. Atharvaveda 3.30
- <sup>xix</sup> Ṛgveda 6.75.14.
- <sup>xx</sup> Ṛgveda 1.166.10
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ṛgveda 4.25.4
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ṛgveda 10.29.1
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Ṛgveda 5.53.3
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ṛgveda 10.26.5
- <sup>xxv</sup> Ṛgveda 1.89.1
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Ṛgveda 1.89.8
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Yajurveda 30.3
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Atharvaveda 12.1.12
- <sup>xxix</sup> *Vaiśvānaram̐ bibhratī bhūmirgnim.* Atharvaveda 12.1.6
- <sup>xxx</sup> Ṛgveda 1.90.6-8
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *Madhu mādhyapetam...* Sāyanabhāṣya 1.90.6