

***Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and the Literature of Universal Humanism: A Comparative Study of Vedic and English Thought**

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Vedic principle of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("the entire earth is one family"), outlining it as an ancient Indian ethical construct relevant to the modern world. The study is based on the primary Vedic and Upanishadic literature, such as the *Rigveda*, *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, and the *Maha Upanishad*, and charts the intellectual history of the doctrine, from the earliest hymns of collective harmony to its philosophical crystallization as a universal moral imperative. The paper also compares the tradition with the classic English poetry of Shelley, Arnold, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Hopkins, Ruskin, Donne, Eliot in order to show that the Vedic imperatives of collective well-being, of ecological responsibility, of dietary discipline, and of yogic liberation find compelling parallels in the works of these poets. The paper highlights that the Indian concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is not a local cultural sentiment but a well-founded and universalistic moral approach. This philosophy is an alternative to the individualistic and exploitation-driven ethos of modern times, a need in the moral consciousness of all humanity at a time when the climate crisis, resource conflict, moral decay and civilizational fragmentation are haunting the world.

Keywords: *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, *Vedic philosophy*, *comparative literature*, *ecological ethics*, *moksha* (liberation).

Introduction

Today, as India is celebrating its independence and is on the eve of celebrating the 100th year of its freedom, Indian government has set a unique national goal, that is, a developed India or Viksit India. The country had been under foreign colonial rule almost for the last two centuries with a systematic social, cultural and economic exploitation. That long subjugation was an attempt to put to an end forever-lasting traditions of philosophy that can steer every generation and every era. Amongst these traditions, one that is in danger is the Vedic principle *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which translates as 'the entire earth is like one family.' This doctrine was not of its own making. In this it symbolizes the prolonged reflections and investigations of the sages

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and seers; the first explorers of Indian knowledge and science. They knew that as human civilization progressed in the process of development, it was also advancing towards destruction as well, as various corruptions (vikaras) were brought into it in the process of ‘developing’. Amongst these corruptions is the degradation of the moral and human nature which are the very essence of human culture. Development and the philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, therefore, are inextricably linked with India's commitment to development.

This is a belief shared by the western literary tradition and philosophy. In *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) Percy Bysshe Shelley asserted that poets are “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” and that “the imagination is the moral compass of civilization” (794). Likewise, with *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Matthew Arnold cautioned that the unchecked material progress is a source of “anarchy” which needs to be corrected by culture, or “the best that has been thought and said” (Arnold 5). The notion of a common good in the Vedic tradition thus has a strong parallel to the concern of the western humanist tradition for the self-destructive tendencies of civilization.

Objectives

The aim of this research paper is to further the great philosophical tradition of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," which is a philosophy that humanity today sorely needs to imbibe in its moral consciousness. This paper sees ancient Indian texts in a comparative discourse with the canonized literature of the English language and thus holds that the notion of a ‘shared human family’ is not a local sentiment but a global moral obligation.

There are a number of words used more than once in the context of this passage that warrant further explanation. The words civilization, climate, liberation (moksha), environment, yoga, world (jagat), moral corruption (vikara), rajoguna, triveni and harishankari are all used more than once, and they warrant further explanation.

Research and Discussion

I. Ancient Civilizations, Ecological Knowledge, and the Vedic Synthesis

For the most part, humanity's perception of the natural world has remained relatively unchanged over time. Throughout most of the history of mankind, perception of nature has stayed the same.

The Indus Valley Civilization (c. 3300-1300 BCE) is thought to be most similar to the present day urban society among the three ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Indus Valley. It has been blamed on a variety of factors, one being climate change and the diseases it fostered. The leaders of the later Vedic society seem to have been well acquainted with this disastrous collapse. When their civilization matured, they inserted into their culture elements that have no scientific or technological basis, but rather a value-laden perspective, one that includes yoga, environmentalism, water conservation and ethical religious beliefs. The research results of the sages of the Vedic period were inscribed in scriptures as well as on folk traditions, songs, sayings, worship, festivals and community rituals.

The Veda is the basic scripture used by this civilization. The *Rigveda* is sometimes referred to as the “science Veda” indeed! It’s one of the main passages says: “When there is harmony, this Veda will produce only welfare; when there is conflict, this very science will become the cause of destruction. Let us, remembering our mortality, strive to walk together in harmony” (Rigveda 10.91.4). In other places the Rigveda demands: “All of you move together, speak together; let your minds be as one: Just as the gods in former times lived in union, so may you also live. (Rigveda 10.191.2–4) The injunctions foreshadow what the English Romantic poet William Blake would come to articulate many years later in line 20 of Jerusalem: “I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's.” All that is needed to counter oppression and chaos is a collective imaginative and moral order.

The Vedic aspiration for all to be happy, all to be healthy, all to see what is good and none to suffer came to be known as the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad Peace Invocation* (1.4.14): “May all be happy, may all be free from disease; may all see what is auspicious, may none suffer. It was this verse that gave birth to the ethical seed that made up the *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. This was the aspiration that was captured in the Maha Upanishad: “This is mine, that is another's—such calculations are made by the small-minded. For those of noble character, the entire earth is but one family” (6.71–72). The emphasis on extending moral considerations beyond oneself and one's own tribe is very significant and speaks to John Donne's famous poem “No man is an island” (Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII, 1624). The idea of the atomization of the self, which Donne and the Maha Upanishad both reject, is a concept of the moral reality of interconnections.

II. Diet, Discipline, and the Threefold Nature: From the Gita to Temperance Literature

The three gunas, sattva (purity), rajas (passion), and tamas (inertia), are applied to the world of food and how it affects the mind and body as well. Sattvic foods are juicy, smooth, nourishing, pleasing to the mind and bestow longevity, mental purity, strength, health, happiness and contentment. Rajasic foods cause pain, grief and disease: Excessive bitterness, sourness, saltiness, hotness, pungency, dryness and burning. Diseased, tasteless, putrid and impure foods (tamasic) are the ones that attract people who are stuck in inertia (Bhagavad Gita 17.8-10). The Gita says that the purpose of food is to increase life, purify the mind and strengthen the body.

This nutrition ideology has an amazing parallel in the Victorian temperance and health reform movements. In the book *Unto This Last* (1862), John Ruskin states that the goodness of a people is directly related to the goodness of what they consume: “There is no wealth but Life” (Ruskin 166). Before her, Mary Wollstonecraft has linked discipline of the body with rational moral development in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), arguing that physical and intellectual habits are inextricably linked (Wollstonecraft 84). The Gita's recipe for sattvic living—temperate, pure and life-affirming—predicts these western reformers' belief that ethical living requires a disciplined control of appetite.

The Mahabharata's Anushasan Parva (13.6.1) continues this idea with regard to sleep and waking up: “A man who overindulges in eating or in not eating, who sleeps too much or too little, has no chance to become a yogi.” To control food is to control the vital breath, to control food, to control the mind, to calm the mind, to still the rising of the mental fluctuations (vrittis) is to control food (Atharvaveda 10.2.2). This interlocking system of self-regulation – in which the body and diet are disciplined together as are mind and habit – echoes William Wordsworth's account in *The Prelude* of the formative role of nature and habit in shaping moral consciousness: “Wise passiveness” as an ethical stance (Wordsworth, *Expostulation and Reply*, l. 24).

III. Yoga as Liberation: The Gita, Patanjali, and the Romantic Imagination

The *Vedas* say that the instructions in the *Bhagavad Gita* in regard to yogic practice are both precise and metaphysical. A clean place neither too high nor too low - sacred place, spread kusha, cover with deer skin and then with a soft cloth should be chosen. One has to sit firmly and control the activities of the mind and senses and concentrate at the tip of the nose and practice yoga to purify the heart (6.11–12). The body, neck and head should be raised, the mind not disturbed, not agitated, not afraid, not engaged in sensual delight, one should meditate on

the Supreme (6.13–14). The aim of this practice is liberation (moksha) that is the highest freedom of the human being.

The Yoga Sūtras of Patanjali lay out this path of eight limbs (ashta) based upon the moral observances of all the world's religions, the common moral underpinnings of these eight limbs, known as yamas, or moral restraints (abstinences). Without these virtues Patanjali says, the distortions of the mind (kleshas) hinder liberation. It is based on the Samkhya philosophy which says that the three gunas (sattva, rajas, tamas) are present in all animate and inanimate beings in nature. The liberation takes place when the soul (purusha) gets rid of the materiality of nature (prakriti).

This desire to free oneself from the external through the internal exercises is similar to the Romantic tradition's notion of the imagination as a saving power. The Primary Imagination is described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) as: “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (Coleridge 304). Like the Vedantic tradition, for Coleridge it is not the thinking mind that is the highest human faculty, it is the ability to see the One in the Many. This is similar to the “steady-minded sage” (sthitaprajna) of the Gita who “look[s] upon a clod of earth, a stone, and a piece of gold with equal eyes” (6.8–10); and to John Keats's description of the ideal consciousness as one who is “in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats 43), in his letter on “Negative Capability” (1817).

IV. Environmental Ethics: Trees, Water, and Sacred Ecology

When it comes to environmental stewardship, this is not new to Indian culture, but a result of the oldest writings of its people. Medicinal plants, therefore, are called ‘mothers’ in the Yajurveda and trees are likened to protectors of the world, giving the ‘breath of life’ (oxygen) and counteracting the negative forces (12.77). The Agni Purana advises: “A person who wants his lineage to grow, wealth to increase and happiness to come should not cut trees that bear flowers and fruits.” The village settlement patterns, which were codified in folk songs, included mango trees in the orchards, neem at the doorways, peepal at the edge of the pond and bamboo groves to delineate boundaries.

Triveni (the three trees of peepal, banyan and neem) and harishankari (peepal, banyan and pakad) were further sanctified by folk traditions as very meritorious practices, believed to be seats of divine energy and ancestors' abodes. Tulsi (holy basil) worship and planting hold

importance not only religiously, but also scientifically as it is a powerful air purifier and medicinal herb.

This forms a deep ecological awareness, which is similar to the nature poetry of the Romantic writers, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Wordsworth described nature as a moral teacher in his poem Tintern Abbey (1798): “Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her” (ll. 122–23). In “Pied Beauty” (1877), Gerard Manley Hopkins extolled the Creator's gift in the variety of the natural world, yet in “Binsey Poplars” (1879) he expressed his anguish at the loss of the trees, an emotion that anticipates the modern environmental movement: “O if we but knew what we do / When we delve or hew” (ll. 9–10). The Vedic sages and Hopkins saw not only ecological devastation but moral and spiritual destruction as well.

Water is also honored in the Rigveda: “O Heaven and Earth, you give water to good men of good deeds; give us also good water” (6.70). It also states: “Water has nectar in it, water has medicinal properties in it, so the purity and cleanliness of water needs to be maintained” (1.23.24). The Yajurveda tells the king, “O king, do not kill the water of thy kingdom nor plants, take such measures that water and plants are always present to us (6.22). The importance of water was so great that a person's vow sworn with water or peepal branch was true.

Those sacred and healthful attributes of the water are characteristic of the Vedic worldview and it is similar to the Romantic tradition of the English language, which had a high regard for rivers and water bodies. Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1816) figures “the sacred river” Alph as a source of creative and spiritual power. The latter American rather than British writers of John Muir, though, carried this reverence into environmental activism; Muir writes that “in God's wildness lies the hope of the world” (317). One of the best arguments in favour of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* as a universal ethical system is the cross-cultural convergence over the three aspects of water that are essential to life, sacred, and worth protecting.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The facts presented in this paper clearly indicate that the current crisis of the world is a serious and serious challenge: It's a crisis of individualism, a crisis of consumption, a crisis of exploitation, a crisis of morality, a crisis of the over-exploitation of nature, a crisis of the plunder of the global, a crisis of the misuse of science and technology, and a crisis of the retreat of the youth into isolation. As this paper has demonstrated, the answer to the problem lies in

that philosophy of the *Maha Upanishad*, the vision of the whole world as one family, striving for the common good of all.

In *The Waste Land* (1922), T. S. Eliot described a spiritual wasteland in the post-World War 1 West, a diagnosis of a disorienting civilization from its ties with the tradition, the nature, and the communal life. His closing lines shift: at least, to the wisdom of the East: “Shantih shantih shantih” – the Vedic peace chant (434). The move of a western modernist to Sanskrit at the very juncture of the highest crisis in a civilization is itself evidence to the world of the Indians philosophical tradition's global relevance. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus also claims that “the question of philosophy is, ‘Why not suicide?’”—why go on living when the world is devoid of transcendent meaning (Camus 3). *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* gives single answer: All lives are connected to all other lives and so there is no irreducible family of being.

Climate emergency, pandemic vulnerability, resource wars, and the failure of multilateral institutions are all hallmarks of the present global atmosphere, and a perfect context for this philosophy. India's developed vision based on a principle of “the earth is one family” is not a throwback to the past but a very serious ethical statement for the twenty-first century. In a sense, as the *Rigveda* proclaimed ages ago, “Let us, remembering our mortality, strive to walk together in harmony” (10.91.4).

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