

A Vedic Approach to Environmental Injustice: An Exploration into the Nature of the Ganga and Interconnected Consciousness

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Abstract

Nature has traditionally been a vital complement of human life in Indian tradition. The sacred river Ganges holds deep spiritual and mythological symbolism and has earned the reverence and worship of Indians for centuries. Now there is a mentality developing in India in which new hierarchies of values are being created and traditional teachings and core ethics are compromised. The current scenario in India speaks of a disconnection from ancient intrinsic values of the interconnected roles of humans and nature. By using the Ganges as a case study this study will explore the shift and renewal of the spiritual essence of the interconnection. In an attempt to understand the shift of values, this study will examine the human-nature relationship given in Vedic philosophy and core values and ethics existing in this interconnectedness. The study will investigate how and why the relationship between human beings and nature has changed, what ethics and values have been undermined, and how the ethics necessary for coexistence can be rediscovered and renewed today.

Keywords: Ganga, Consciousness and Environmental Injustice

The river goddess Ganga speaks in a voice as wise and impactful as her sacred and flowing incarnation. Ganga is representative of an ancient ideology in India for which spirituality is deeply rooted in the natural community and interwoven among culture and tradition. Vedic philosophy celebrates and magnifies how the spiritual essence of life itself lines all earthly beings. The ancient interconnection between people and non-human nature is still very much alive, but as modern desires tend to produce environmental destruction it seems that for many the light of this knowledge has been stubbed out and value systems reorganized.

This study illuminates the potentiality that a spiritual foundation in approaches to development would force an ethical reconsideration. It is by placing humanity as outside of nature that deludes our value systems. Banwari, an author and long-time writer for the newspaper *Jansatta*, attempts to bring a sense of reality forward. He says, "Forest, at one level,

means the world. It includes the whole creation. You are also part of that forest. It is not that you are outside the forest. You can reorder it, but you cannot be outside of it" (Prime, 2002). Reordering the hierarchy is exactly what people are trying to do, yet with an inherent interconnection of the wellbeing of humans and nature, in due time humans will suffer for their negligence to ecological degradation.

Grasping the Vedas

Rivers and mountains have a dual nature. A river is but a form of water, yet it has a distinct body. Mountains appear as a motionless mass, yet their true form is not as such. We cannot know looking at a lifeless shell that it contains a living being. Similarly, within the apparently inanimate rivers and mountains there dwells a hidden consciousness. Rivers and mountains take the forms they wish. (Kalika Purana)

The word Veda innately means knowledge. It is pursuit of the very thing that the compiled texts

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aim to inspire in a determined pupil. Within the compilations is knowledge of principals to live by based on an interconnected web of all forms of life and the potential for harmony rests in the compassionate minds of rational and intelligent beings (Radhakrishnan, 1914). The Vedas set this ancient model to be utilized for a thriving community life and by tracing the roots of Vedic ethics the core streams of valuations appear. They cover principals of knowledge appropriate for every stage of life and were passed on from master to disciple and compiled over several, sometimes thousands, of years¹. Vedic inheritance is unique in that the text “is timeless and authorless, it is worthy of acceptance by all. No one can afford to neglect or deny their value” (Baba, 2002). A Vedic approach to life awakens compassion and recognizes divine potential in all beings.

The key is a connection at the universal level, as an interconnected community in which no being is separate. Humanity, the trees, the rivers, the whole earth is more than family, but each a part of a profound and divine oneness. This fundamental wholeness is understood as an underlying basis for life and one’s humble existence in the world. The Vedas teach that the self-absorbed ego is a sinful expression and the self must be honored exactly how that self honors all other expressions of life. Then emerge highly held values of compassion for the self and the other, for each a being as divine a manifestation as the self, and emerges love of all that is spiritually alive. To maintain this flourishing harmony, a person recognizes the importance of sacrifice and respect for the interwoven lives of man and nature.

Vedic dharma manifests in value systems that regard high thinking, honest action and intention, and individual purity as key characteristics for a strong moral character. By dispelling superficial desires and self-centered inclinations, an inclined pupil may take on an introspective tone in order to deeply explore the levels of consciousness experienced by the Rishis

who compiled the mantras of the Vedas¹. Though each individual is “lit with a divine spark, he is not wholly divine” (Radhakrishnan, 1914). Just as all beings are part of the potentially of oneness, dedicated work must take place for the potentiality to be actualized. In this sense the Vedas teach determination and perseverance. Traditionally, Sages journey to the profoundness of the forest to take on such meditative work and welcome love and fascination of the pure consciousness that surrounds them.

Ranchor Prime writes a beautifully organized book called “Vedic ecology,” addressing many of the current challenges of the modern man coexisting with the natural world. By addressing the current standards of living as a civilization based on the pursuit of material pleasure, Prime bluntly evaluates “the great dilemma of the twenty-first century: whether to follow the road of increasing consumption or to abandon this destructive path and find another way to happiness” (Prime, 2002). The ever-increasing hypes and draws of a modern global culture, constantly blending, speak of consumption and ignorance of one’s surroundings, while also reflecting one’s contribution to the natural world. Many people living in the cities are uncertain of the transition of food from farm to plate, of how the waste and sewage systems are affecting the earth and water, and of how the forests and natural lakes are dwindling to dangerous lows and conditions. The core issue of the degradation of the Ganga is paralleled with a degradation of moral values and ethics, reflecting Vedic cautions from which ethics are clearly intertwined with nature. That connection that humans can have with the natural world is fundamental.

A Spiritual Reality

Ganga’s flowing waters invoke a space in the mind and spirit that is calm and pure. She is without ego and an encouraging mother to all those who worship her. Each person I have

conversed with speaks of the affectionate peacefulness Ganga offers and visits her riverbanks often to honor and connect with her divine presence and physically experience the remarkably relaxing and rejuvenating qualities of her waters. The spiritual quality of Ganga is so powerful that I was corrected during an interview when I referred to Ganga as a river. “Ganga is not a river, she is our Mother,” my interviewee reminded me with a smile². She was not the first to explain this connection; others who live nearby Ganga in Haridwar and Rishikesh daily worship her and lament at the mentalities of some that allow individuals to directly pollute her waters.

For all of the spiritual awareness that noticeably exists in Indian culture, how is Ganga’s degraded and potentially toxic condition possible to such an extreme? And how may the critical condition be reversed? These questions can be looked at in two ways. The first requires a deeper understanding of Gangaji as a divine incarnation of the spiritual realm. After some prodding of this dilemma, two interviewees gave the same example: If there were a glass of water on a table and sugar were mixed in, one would not know that there is sugar in the water just by looking. One would have to utilize one’s senses to realize that there is sugar in the water. Different colors, even mud and grime can be added to this water— still the sugar is there. To be clear, sugar in this analogy represents the powerful, stirring, and healing spiritual element of Ganga, for which its presence is one unaffected by any added material, no matter how disgusting that material is.

The example aids an outsider in understanding how the physical state of the river does not deter some from being near Ganga, even drinking and bathing in her waters. However, there is still the very real danger of Ganga’s physical manifestation. The level of pollution is so extreme that in 2011 the Uttarakhand Environmental and Pollution Control Board classified the quality of the Ganges at the most

disappointing level *D: excessive pollution* (Daftuar, 2011) and a year later the river was specified as the 6th most polluted river in the world (Queen, 2012). Government figures estimate 3 billion liters of sewage is daily released into the waters (Rodgers, 2013) and fecal coliform bacteria levels put the water at risk for even agricultural use, hardly suitable for drinking and bathing (Daftuar, 2011).

The physical form of the river Ganges is simply a lifeline. 10 million people live in the river basin and 400 million people depend on the Ganga for their livelihood³. People are continuing the same familial work and practices of generations; washing clothes, ferrying people across the river, cremations, and agricultural work are all traditional livelihoods that rely on Ganga as a reliable water source and each type of work has experienced challenges based on Ganga’s dirty water, lower water levels, and inappropriate government interventions (Hollick, 2007). The confusion of rules and regulations in regards to the health of Ganga allow pollution to continue and officials to throw their hands in the air in utter neglect.

In exploring the spiritual and physical interpretations and realities, another necessary point of challenging modern reasoning and the modern environmental crisis is purely social. When confronted with these disturbing truths, so many people pass the blame on to another group or institution. Julian Crandall Hollick’s book covers the frustrating passing off of responsibility for the condition of the Ganga by policymakers and the institutions that need to be put in place effectively for the river’s recovery. Hollick’s fieldwork frequently highlights the repetitive utterances, “It’s not my responsibility!” as locals, business owners, and government workers appear ignorant to the reality that their role is not blameless, but vital (Hollick, 2007).

When faced with an inquiry for what must be done about the numerous problems attributing

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to the degradation of the Ganga, many people demand action by the government to educate the masses on environmental issues and the creative spiritual expression of nature, which is taught in India's ancient texts and epics. Through my own investigation, frequently I have heard the words "it's their mentality" when referring to people who contaminate and pollute the river they worship, drink from and bathe in. Can it be the mentality of an ignorant human, whose crime is only that he or she has not received an appropriate education acknowledging the immeasurable value of nature?

Another attributing cause to lack of awareness exists in the social and economic framework; 41.6% are under the poverty line⁴, surviving on less than 20 rupees per day. For the impoverished in India, a shift from living in this world to surviving in society informs a lifestyle in which the health of the natural world may be compromised in a desperate pursuit for basic needs. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that it does not take a lot of resources to protect nature. It takes a compassionate heart and considerate mind to keep from attributing to pollution and, yes, it takes courage to go against a crowd mentality that pollutes and destroys. In support is the Chipko movement: village women literally embraced trees to protect them against felling and to rise against a threat of disturbing the whole ecological balance. The strength of these compassionate and dedicated women proved an example that inspired several other movements all over India and offer a powerful example of experiential education.

Today, education is a means for one primary goal of getting a good job. By conforming to a curriculum that focuses on this as the one real value, the goal of education is shifted away from an ideal of exploring the essential role of the individual in the web of life and teaching principals for a just and thriving life. In a world where success and survival in a material and competitive market is the priority, the curriculum

hardly lends ear to critical environmental awareness or developing the self and inner workings of consciousness. A preoccupation with the self that is so pervasive in modern competitive society has been understood as a step away from the essential spirituality of life. Ecological ignorance and selfishness threaten the whole community, including the naturally predisposed self, and blaming others and institutions is effectively a copout that never forgets.

A Polluted Mind

"When man starts worrying only for personal happiness, then he does not care at all for others. Such a man becomes extremely selfish and makes others unhappy also" (Acharya, 2010).

A fearless exploration into the individual person and consciousness is necessary not only to understand how Vedic ethics were lost but also how to go about cultivating and re-discovering the opposite as selflessness. The selfish person is driven by shallow desire and exploits others ignorantly, perpetuating exploitation, inequality and injustice. In this world in which all lives are closely linked, selfishness generates competition and a market for exploitation. Exploitative behavior undermines Vedic ethics for which truth and compassion are essential and puts pressure on all beings of the community.

In the confusion of domination, identity is inevitably confused also. Several interviewees agree that identity, when defined as the things a person connects with and values, which in turn come to shape the person emotionally, spiritually, and consciously, absolutely connects with and reflects the state of nature. But are people ready to embrace sacrifice, courage, dedication and compassion? Identity depends on who is seeing¹, and when that person has become swept up in all the superficialities of modern life, it could be said that India is suffering from an identity crisis as real as the peril of the environment.

Living the Vedas

“One who is undisturbed by the flow of desires, as the ocean is unmoved by the incessant flow of rivers, finds peace”

(Bhagavad Gita, 2.70).

While selfishness tears one farther away from spiritual understanding, introspection and self-purification align the individual with the entire community and therefore collective oneness. Understanding interconnection and the value of self-contemplation is vital for alleviating current damage in the collective relationship between humans and the sacred Ganga and for re-discovering an ethical backbone as a culture. In fact, these are the very lessons that the spiritual essence of Ganga teaches as a symbol of purity and continuous, dynamic energy, but her physical manifestation lives as inheritor of filth as ignorance grows. Yes, Ganga is a powerful link to divinity, but look at her waters! People need to start asking important questions. By deepening the level of thinking, such superficial threats as trash and pollution are understood as careless, ignorant, and even vindictive to the mind of a true nature-lover.

There tends to be a feeling of awe in nature, whether it be an isolated forest or a winding river. One way in which this is understood is *vana vaibhara*, which translates roughly to “forest splendor” or “riches of the forest” (Prime, 2002). People tend to experience a deep sense of community and belonging while in nature and it may be a feeling difficult to verbally describe or explain. However, in that true moment of connection between human and nature, all self-serving desires fall away and there is only this moment being lived. An interviewee made the profound comment that nature is without an ego. A tree has none, nor does a river— only consciousness. Her perusing is that a natural being invokes that same space without an ego in the being of the man or woman, allowing for a very real and truly Vedic connection.

Conclusion and Way Forward

Ganga at a glance reflects something very different from the essence of the spirit that pervades her. Without a close look, one may miss out on her divine element entirely. The degrading quality of Ganga’s waters is evidence of how pervasive this superficiality of attention has become, paralleled in the very way one sees oneself. Through the course of this study, a blunt and unnerving truth reveals how such a shallowness of thought undermines Vedic knowledge and pervades communities. Reestablishing Vedic values through a timeless route that utilizes self-work, contemplation and compassion unearths the knowledge necessary to impact value systems.

The current paradigm and environmental crises reflect a state of disillusionment and forgetting of man from his and her natural relatives. In an industrialized world, people are more disconnected from the vast dimensions of the forest; they are living in cities, spending money, and involved in a new and unique public sphere. Greed, the fast pace of life, and superficiality seem to reappear as key contributors of a shift away from Vedic ethics in the process of transition. Some great thinkers have suggested that the most profound message of Vedic knowledge is the value of a simple life (Prime, 2002). A western paradigm, Ranchor Prime explains, is built off of a lifestyle of high living and simple thinking, but what is needed is a lifestyle guided by a deeper spiritual ethic, simpler living and high thinking.

Passionate individuals deepen their level of consciousness and recognize the value of deep thinking and consideration in every aspect of life, while also arguing that this work has a pervading effect. Consciousness is the source for spiritual connection in all beings, and by purifying the human consciousness to levels that engage Vedic values, the collectivity of consciousness can be understood as a source for human connection— something for which social change thoroughly

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relies. In accessing this profound place in the self, this hierarchy which society has molded falls away. To inspire a shift in values, one must be inspired oneself. Inspiration is infectious, communicable, and catching; it is the source of human creativity and of Ganga's divine influence.

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