

# A CONTEMPORARY REINTERPRETATION OF ADVAITA-VEDĀNTA IN ORDER TO DEAL WITH ENVIRONMENTAL CACOPHONY

By

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## ABSTRACT

Ecological disharmony and chaos intimidate our very survival. Environmental protection initiatives in the name of *Gau Raksā*, dog sterilization, sanitation of *Gaṅgā* and plastic ban act as temporary solutions to a permanent itch. The only way one can tackle the demons of environmental crisis is by realizing that all is the self. Therefore, when we abuse the environment in any name and form, we eventually harm our very being.

This effort of reinterpreting our age-old philosophies is extremely important in today's time when the biggest threat before human is 'Environment'. Though there is no dualism in human and environment yet the present scenario can be understood by a man suffering from cancer, whose own body is working against him because of the way it has been treated, the junk food that it has been fed with and the chemicals that it has been exposed to. Likewise, the earth shouts and cries for the treatment it has been given and rebels in the name of floods, droughts and other calamities.

This paper will go on to examine the view of *Advaita-Vedānta*, the most popular living **Darśana** of The Indian subcontinent, in relation to environment. The paper will try to reinterpret the timeless philosophy of *Advaita-Vedānta* that can foster compassion and oneness of all living creatures from an ecological perspective and bring about a positive change by replacing hierarchy with the equality of all.

**Keywords:** *Advaita-Vedānta, Non-Dualism, Environmentalism, Ecology, Animal-Cruelty, Environmental-chaos.*

### Advaita Vedanta-The Theory of Non-Dualism

*Advaita Vedānta* is one of the most prominent philosophies that was born and that continues to live in the cradle of the Indian subcontinent. The philosophy that runs in the blood of India is based upon the *Gurū-śīśya Paramparā* with *Jagadguru Ādi Śaṅkarācārya* being the prime advocate of it. *Advaitavād* is a metaphysical system that is based upon idealism and considers the entire cosmos as the absolute self. All apparent dualities emerge due to the effect of *avidyā (Māyā)*. It is only through *jñāna* that one can realize oneself and the entire cosmos as the non-dual, eventual self.

One of the obstacles confronted by many scholars in the case of the classical Vedanta is the idea of how the *Brahman* can be the creator of this universe? The Upanishads repeatedly talk of the *Brahman* being the creator of the universe. *Ādi Śaṅkarācārya* in his *Bhāṣya* on *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* affirms that:

यथोर्णनाभिः सृजते गृह्णते च यथा पृथिव्यामोषधयः संभवन्ति ।  
यथा सतः पुरुषात्केशलोमानि तथाऽक्षरात्संभवतीह विश्वम् ॥

(Just as it is known to all that the spider without any auxiliaries and on its own becomes the cause of the threads that are non-distinct from his own body and he himself dissolves those threads in the very body; just as plants from the medicinal ones to corn and trees grow from the earth and become inseparable and one with it and just as the hair of a man grow non-dual from his body; likewise from the immortal and uncaused originates the phenomenal creation.)

- *Muṇḍaka Upanishad-1.1.7*

Further, *Śaṅkarā* presents the theory of *Satkāryavāda* corresponding to which the effect pre-exists in a cause. Therefore, he proves that *Brahman* is not only the material but is also the efficient cause of the universe. All names and forms that exist as the man, the dog, the tree, the bird and the ant are indeed the apparent manifestations of the cause-*Brahman*. *Ādi Śaṅkarā's* *Guru Govind Bhagavatpāda* uses the example of an earthen pot to prove the non-duality of the world and *Brahman*. In accordance with him 'space', which is non-dual and continuous may appear to be enclosed within the pot without affecting or harming the oneness and non-duality of the space in general. Likewise, the limitless *Brahman* may appear to be enclosed within varied forms and in varied names.

The world in *Advaita Vedānta* is subdivided into *Reality and Apparent appearance (Parmārthik and Vyavhārik)*. The world is considered in *Advaita Vedānta Darśana* as neither real nor unreal. Hence, to say that the *Vyavhārik Jagad* is completely unreal is indeed boiling down to an extremely fallacious analysis. No doubt, that the phenomenal world and its objects have no permanent existence and fall under the limitation of time, space and place yet their existence cannot be completely denied. Therefore, the existence of man, animal, tree or the various forms and names in which *Brahman* appears cannot be denied at an apparent level as well.

Liberation in *Advaita-Vedānta* is the highest state of being. However, liberation is interpreted in *Advaita-Vedānta* in a very different sense. The realization of the self as the ultimate principle is said to be the state of liberation in *Advaita-Vedānta*. The dawn of wisdom automatically dispels the darkness of ignorance and it is at this stage that the realized one sees the entire cosmos in the self and the self in the entire cosmos. It must also be noted that the self is never in bondage and there is nothing that can bind it. It is merely due to *Avidyā* that the self appears to be bound. The journey that leads to this wisdom goes through the path of *karma* and *bhakti*. Therefore, morality, ethics, discipline, and devotion cannot be denied or refuted on the path that leads to *jñāna*.

He who is established in the ultimate is said to be a *Jīvanmukta*. Such a being is beyond *karmas*, *bhakti* and he needs to realize nothing more for he exists in the highest reality. Such a being leads the rest of his years in the phenomenal world in the service, welfare, and well-being of all.

### **Ethics In Advaita Vedanta**

Contrary to beliefs, ethics are of immense value in the *Advaita-Vedānta* tradition. However, they are not seen in the same light as seen in other schools. Simply because ethics, names, forms, *Vedas*, *karmas*, *bhakti* become

meaningless at the highest level, it should not be concluded that *Advaita-Vedānta* is an A-ethical system or for that matter, a *Jivanmukta* has the right to behave and function in an unethical manner. *Ādi Śaṅkarācārya* lays stress upon the fact that one realizes the self only when there is purification of the mind and for the same; he suggests a fifteen-fold path of *Rājyoga* mentioned in his classical work *Aprokṣānūbooti* where he talks in detail about-*yama, niyama, ahimsā, mauna, ekānt, āsan, prānāyama* and more. *Bhagavad Gītā* which is one of the basic texts of the *Advaita-Vedānta* tradition declares (*Ch-16,V:1-3*) that ‘those endowed with demonic qualities continue to exist in ignorance and bondage while those who foster the twenty-six divine qualities of *ahimsā, dāna, tyāg, svādhyāya, satya, kṣamā* and more are lead on to a state of *Brahmajñāna*. *Ādi Śaṅkarācārya* further states in his classical work - ***Praśnottar Ratna Mālīka*** that:

- *The most desirable life is that which is dedicated in the welfare and well-being of others (5.1)*
- *The aim of life must be the welfare of all sentient beings (12.1)*
- *The dearest to all living beings is life itself (12.2)*
- *The most cherished duty of a human being should be compassion towards all living creatures and comradeship with virtuous people (16.1)*
- *A man of inferiority is one who is established in evil (18.1)*
- *The one established in compassion and kindness is also praised by the Devas (19)*
- *One should establish oneself on the path of righteousness in order to reap fruits here and hereafter (20.1)*
- *The unconditional mother of all beings is indeed the cow (40.1)*
- *The most heinous is cruelty to any life (42.1)*

Therefore, *Śaṅkarā's* writings are in harmony with individual, environmental, social and cosmic wellness. *Eliot Deutsch* rightly states that:

**“Advaita Vedanta recognizes that fundamentally all life is one. In essence, everything is the ultimate reality and this ultimate reality finds expression in reverence for all.”**

Through implication it can be concluded that at a phenomenal level, the concept of *Brahman* stands for fostering respect, love, regards, universal brotherhood, *Karuṇā, maitri* and the feeling of reverence for all creatures. At the *Vyavhārik* level all names and forms exist as the *Sākār Brahman*. The *Upaniṣads* have a series of references that talk about the oneness of all living creatures. At this juncture, it is important to quote the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and the dialogue between *Yājñavalkya* and his wife *Maitreyī*. The dialogue in a cryptic manner explains what holds value in the phenomenal world and what doesn't. Further, the dialogue can be used in order to infer *Advaita-Vedānta* attitude towards equality of all living and non-living creatures.

The monolog is as follows:

स होवाच, न वा अरे पत्युः कामाय पतिः प्रियो भवति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय पतिः प्रियो भवति । न वा अरे जायायै कामाय जाया प्रिया भवति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय जाया प्रिया भवति । न वा अरे पुत्राणां कामाय पुत्राः प्रिया भवन्ति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय पुत्राः प्रिया भवन्ति । न वा अरे वित्तस्य कामाय वित्तं प्रियं भवति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय वित्तं प्रियं भवति । न वा अरे पशूनां कामाय पशवः प्रिया भवन्ति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय ब्रह्म प्रियं भवति । न वा अरे क्शत्रस्य कामाय क्शत्रं प्रियं भवति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय क्शत्रं प्रियं भवति । न वा अरे लोकानां कामाय लोकाः प्रिया भवन्ति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय लोकाः प्रिया भवन्ति । न वा अरे देवानां कामाय देवाः प्रिया भवन्ति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय देवाः प्रिया भवन्ति । न वा अरे वेदानां कामाय वेदाः प्रिया भवन्ति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय भूतानि प्रियाणि भवन्ति । न वा अरे सर्वस्य कामाय सर्वं प्रियं भवति, आत्मनस्तु कामाय सर्वं प्रियं भवति । आत्मा वा अरे द्रष्टव्यः—श्रोतव्यो मन्तव्यो निदिध्यासितव्यो मैत्रेयि; आत्मनि खल्वरे दृष्टे श्रुते मते विज्ञात इदं सर्वं विदितम् ॥ ६ ॥

(He said, 'It is not for the sake of the husband, my dear that he is loved, but for one's own sake that he is loved. It is not for the sake of the wife, my dear, that she is loved, but for one's own sake that she is loved. It is not for the sake of the sons, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of wealth, my dear that it is loved, but for one's own sake that it is loved. It is not for the sake of the animals, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of the Brāhmaṇa, my dear that he is loved, but for one's own sake that he is loved. It is not for the sake of the Kṣatriya, my dear that he is loved, but for one's own sake that he is loved. It is not for the sake of the worlds, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of the Gods, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of the Vedas, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of the beings, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of all, my dear that all is loved, but for one's own sake that it is loved. The Self, my dear Maitreyī, should be realised—should be heard of, reflected on and meditated upon. When the Self, my dear, is realised by being heard of, reflected on and meditated upon, all this is known.)

When we first read the above-said monolog we come to the conclusion that all sentient beings are merely phenomenon which have no ultimate worth. However, if we contemplate we will arrive at an understanding that if all creatures including human beings hold no value then they qualify to be equal. If we try to see this from a different point of view and say that everything including human beings hold value, then also we will arrive at the same conclusion that all are equal. Further, if we consider *Brahman* to be complete, all-pervasive and omnipresent then also we come to conclude that even momentary names and forms are the *Brahman*, the *annamaya koṣā* is also the *Brahman*. If we negate the waves, we also negate the ocean. If we accept the ocean then we also have to accept the waves. Even though the wave may not be permanent yet its very essence is permanent. If the temporary world is rooted in the permanent *Brahman* than life itself must be lead in reverence in order to realise the very essence of existence and travel from diversity to non-duality. Once we understand that all is equal, it is equality that becomes *dharma* and *dharma* must be upheld even if a few scholars wish to reject the idea of ethics and morals that is for sure an important aspect of *Advaita-Vedanta Darśana*. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* further announces:

अथो अयं वा आत्मा सर्वेषाम् भूतानां लोकः; स यज्जुहोति, यद्यजते, तेन देवानां लोकः। अथ यदनुब्रूते तेन षिणाम्, अथ यत्पितृभ्यो निपृणाति, यत्प्रजामिच्छते, तेन पितृणाम्; अथ यन्मनुष्यान्वासयते, यदेभ्योऽशनं ददाति, तेन मनुष्याणाम्; अथ यत्पशुभ्यस्तृणोदकं विन्दति, तेन पशूनाम्; यदस्य गृहेषु श्वापदा वयास्या पिपीलिकाभ्य उपजीवन्ति, तेन तेषां लोकः; यथा ह वै स्वाय लोकायारिष्टमिच्छेत्, एवं हैवंविदे सर्वाणि भूतान्यरिष्टमिच्छन्ति; तद्वा एतद्विदितम् मीमांसितम् ॥ १६ ॥

(Now this self (the ignorant man) is an object of enjoyment to all beings. That he makes oblations in the fire and becomes such an object to the Gods. That he studies the Vedas is how he becomes an object of enjoyment to the Ṛṣis (sages). That he makes offerings to the Manes and desires children is how he becomes such an object to the Manes. That he gives shelter to men as well as food is how he becomes an object of enjoyment to men. That he gives fodder and water to the animals is how he becomes such an object to them. And that beasts and birds, and even the ants,

*feed in his home is how he becomes an object of enjoyment to these. Just as one wishes safety to one's body, so do all beings wish safety to him who knows it as such. This indeed has been known, and discussed.)*

**- Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.16**

According to the above said a human is advised to foster respect, love, and reverence for the entire cosmos instead of exploiting it and writing down his own end.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* forms an important part of the *Prasthānatrayī* and talks of *karma-Bhakti-jñāna*. *Bhagavad Gītā* becomes the phenomenal wave of thought, being and life for environmentalists like *Mahatma Gandhi* and *Padmashree Sunderlal Bahuguna* who initiated the *Chipko movement* during the 1970s. The *Bhagavad Gītā* clearly voices logical equality amongst all living creatures, this becomes evident from the following verses:

विद्या-विनय-सम्पन्ने ब्राह्मणे गवि हस्तिनि ।  
शुनि च एव श्वपाके च पण्डिताः सम-दर्शिनः ॥

*(The wise one sees me with an equal eye in the learned Brahmin, the cow, the elephant, the dog and the outcaste.)*

**-Bhagavad Gītā, Ch-5, V-18**

लभन्ते ब्रह्मनिर्वाणमृषयः क्षीणकल्मषाः ।  
छिन्नद्वैधा यतात्मानः सर्वभूतहिते रताः ॥

*(Those holy persons, whose sins have been purged, whose doubts are annihilated, whose minds are disciplined, and who are devoted to the welfare of all beings, attain God and are liberated from material existence.)*

**-Bhagavad Gītā, Ch-5, V-25**

सर्वभूतस्थमात्मानं सर्वभूतानि चात्मनि ।  
ईक्षते योगयुक्तात्मा सर्वत्र समदर्शनः ॥

*(The true yogis, uniting their consciousness with God, see with equal eye, all living beings in God and God in all living beings.)*

**-Bhagavad Gītā, Ch-6, V-29**

Therefore, the *Bhagavad Gītā* not merely talks of no-duality at the highest level but also speaks of reverence and equality at a phenomenal level. It clearly announces the value of not only *karma*, *bhakti* and *jñāna* but also stresses upon purity of action, submission in devotion, realizing non-dualism through diversity and diversity through non-dualism.

The *Brahmasūtra* is the logical order of the Vedantic teachings. Though the *Brahmasūtra* doesn't speak specifically of ecological concerns yet if one understands the non-duality of the entire cosmos one can infer and learn the lessons of universal well-being and non-duality. However, for the same one has to understand the *Brahmasūtras* from a holistic point of view.

The theory of *karma* which is not only held important in the *Advaita-Vedanta* school of philosophy but also becomes an important part of all other schools of Indian philosophy provides the basis of ethics, morals, and

interconnectedness of the entire universe. It is of utmost importance to realize that *karma* doesn't only work on an individual level but also works on a cosmic level. Therefore, an act of evil done in any part of the world is bound to have an effect universally. Hence, *karma* shapes the world in which we live. Is global warming, extinction of species and acid rains, not the phenomenal world that we have created for ourselves with the dint of our *karma*? No doubt the Karma theory gives us the freedom to act but doesn't acting with freedom also means acting with responsibility towards other creatures, the environment of which we are a part, and towards the whole of the universe?

The modern-day *Advaita-Vedānta* stays true to its classical message of the entire universe being one family. The great sage Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa said, “*Jitra Jīva Tatra Śiva* (all living beings are divine)”. The word ‘Jīva’ must not merely be restricted to human beings and should extend to every creature just as the name Śiva must not be restricted to the form of Lord Śambhu instead it denotes Lord Nārāyaṇa, Ādi Śakti, The Guru, Lord Gaṇeśa and at a highest level, it denotes the Brahman. Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa further states that “being kind to all living sentient beings is not enough, it is important to serve them while seeing in them the ultimate Śiva”. Swāmī Vivekānanda also announces that “*Jīva is Śiva*”, which means that every *Jīva* from an ant that crawls to the dog that barks on the streets are indeed the *Divine* that we seek. Therefore, even the practical Vedānta of Swami Vivekananda is not opposed to ethics and universal compassion because the world of names and forms where diversity exists is rooted in non-dualism that is evident only to those who develop a vision to see beyond names and forms.

### **Conclusion**

As in case of all other ancient philosophical systems, *Advaita-Vedānta* doesn't directly talk of environmental issues. However, it gives a holistic view of the same that holds value on a general level and also on an individual level. Therefore, if seen through the lenses of implication, *Advaita-Vedānta* stands favourable even in case of environmental harmony.

Often an allegation that is faced by those who follow the *Advaita* philosophy and tradition is that ‘they are concerned about their own behavior in regards to the self rather than their behavior towards others and this makes them highly individualistic’. No doubt, an individual who is walking on the path of non-duality inculcates amicability, love and compassion not for the sake of anyone else but only for the sake of the self. But at a state when a being is established in love, wisdom and truth there is no other left for he himself becomes the tree, the deity, the dog, the cosmos and the Brahman. The aim of a seeker who chooses to walk on the path of *ahiṃsā*, *dāna karuṇā* or ethics is not only for the sake of walking on the path of *Dharma* but is also for the sake of breaking free from the shackles of ignorance. Hence, following non-injury, reverence and non-dual equality of all lives only takes the seeker at a higher level of being. This is certainly not a selfish or individualistic view because as the individual rises higher on an individual level he also rises above names forms and distinctions. An individual who rises in consciousness also rises in the perception of material beings and objects. Only when individualism leads to a feeling of domination in terms of environment or otherwise can it pose to be a threat, which is the case today. However, a seeker on the path of *Advaita* rises above material greed of domination for the sake of spiritual enlightenment. Yet another concern raised by various scholars is the interpretation of various *Samskṛta* words. If an individual limits the meaning of the word ‘*Jīva*’ to merely the human species, it is an extremely fallacious understanding of it. *Jīva* is not only a living entity but is also understood as the all-pervasive *ātman* that exists in every creature just as the *ākāś* exists in every pot. *Jīva* is also referred to as the planet Guru in Astrology. Ayurveda Śāstra classifies *jīva* as ‘that which exists in beings that come out of semen, egg, seed, sweat and root’. Words and texts must also be interpreted in accordance to time, place and situation so that they may be of assistance to us and their value is retained. Consider the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the message of The *Bhagavad Gītā* was not only of value thousands of years ago but even today stands valuable. For a student, for an animal and environmental activist, for a wife, a teacher the interpretation of the

*Bhagavad Gītā* changes in accordance to one's state of mind, time and place without losing out on its value. Therefore, it is advised that those who are working for the welfare of the environment must turn towards *Advaita-Vedānta* for guidance and assistance. It is the responsibility and duty of every philosopher that he/she reinterprets the age old philosophies to suit the needs of the current times. Those philosophical systems that have not been able to relieve the societies of their basic problems have perished away. If the philosophers fail to reestablish the values of our age old philosophies to the current times, soon these philosophies will perish. The greatest challenge before philosophers, scientists, academicians and humans is the problem of environmental disharmony. *Advaita-Vedānta* is not merely a philosophy but is a thought process of an Indian mind. The unity of all existence is the foundation of reverence that *Advaita-Vedānta* hands over as a gift to be cherished. *Advaita-Vedānta* discards any sort of hierarchy and divisions. If one is able to realise his own duties, responsibilities and his own worth in the scheme of cosmos, he surely will be in harmony with *Dharma* and *Dharma* will automatically take care of not only environmental disharmony but all other issues that arise out of ignorance.

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