



Environment and Development- A Perspective Based on the Gita Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the fundamental reasons behind the adverse impact of rapid material progress of man on himself and his environment are traced to the very roots of the phenomenal Universe in the light of the eternal message Of the Bhagavat Gita, which is lauded as the storehouse of Divine Wisdom and practical guidance to steer us out of any spatio-temporal trouble in a smooth and successful manner. It is shown that the Gita sees the environment and the living beings as “siblings”, both taking their origin from the Lord and existing in a mutual dependence scenario. However, the development paradigm followed at present in the era of scientific and technological progress envisages Nature as something to be exploited for human progress, and thus runs counter to the Gita vision, resulting it the kind of turbulences, disasters and degradations that we now see around us,

KEYWORDS: *Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goals, Bhagavad Gita, Prakriti, Environment.*

Introduction

The bifurcation of all existence into a perceiving subject and a perceived object is a peculiar but common experience of all creatures including humans. The organic interrelationship obtaining between the subject and the object has never been ignored to such an extent as has been done in the context of man's greedy exploitation of Nature during the 20th century for material progress. The concept of an environment external to the physical body of man (or of human society) being a milch-cow for acquiring comforts and conveniences through the manufacture of goods and gadgets is an artifact of erroneous perception on our part because, in reality, man and his environment together make up one whole which is the cosmic existence, supremely non-dual and governed by the infallible and inexorable, eternal principle of action and reaction (*Karma* and *Karma-phala*) among its parts. Whenever any finite part of this non-dual existence arrogates itself to the position of an enjoyer at the expense of another, there follow grave repercussions to correct the erroneous perception of the



individuality or the finitude, which separated itself from the other or from the rest of the whole existence for a selfish purpose.

For this reason, all so-called advancements of the 20th century have depleted resources to a large extent and have injured the biosphere considerably which, in its turn, has reacted back on us in the form of various environmental concerns and crises starting from soil pollution to space pollution, from pesticides to space junks, from acid rains to global climate change.

The urge for economic prosperity and political hegemony has been so powerful with the developed western nations that it has blinded them to the intimate organic relationship that exists between them and the so-called less-developed countries. The oneness of humanity and the environment is conveniently and readily forgotten by the developed nations when it comes to exploitation of natural resources and dumping of hazardous wastes in the backyard of the less developed ones. Economic exploitation of the less-developed ones in the guise of various developmental aids in various sectors through the formation and utilisation of various world fora such as the UNO, the IMF and the WB as the handmaids has been played to perfection in the last sixty years by these western nations, giving very little breathing space to the former in terms of even a temporary relief from the ever-widening debt-trap. The problems are so complicated and so hugely diversified in nature that we have to seek a master solution in the form of a complete overhauling of our notions of development and of the overall meaning of human existence here on this planet Earth. No amount of piecemeal approach or patch-up policy with a lackadaisical attitude (but seemingly very serious on the face of it) in the guise of flowery phrases like 'sustainable development' is going to help us in the long run as long as we do not probe deep into the meaning of existence and of the purpose of life here.

To what end is all progress? Is our definition of man and environment in any sense complete when we talk of progress or development? Answers to such questions cannot be had in the scientific literature nor through any technological research but, have to be found within our own being, within ourselves, by a sincere search after the Truth of existence. If we are not prepared for this yet, then we have to prepare ourselves through inner development for this, rather than striving for any outer accumulation of luxuries and conveniences. This we have to clearly understand and act accordingly.

The 'Bhagavad Gita' or 'the Song Divine' presents before humanity of all times the ultimate understanding of man, the Universe and of God including that of their inter-relationship in a very lucid and compelling manner that immediately resonates with the inner being of man irrespective of any spatio-temporal location because of its straightforward and gradational approach to lift man up from where he finds himself at



any particular moment. It provides practical guidance as to how we can overcome any crisis or conflict in the best possible manner. Coming as it does, from the Supreme being Himself, it gives extremely precise answers to our quest for development and also gives us clear-cut directions necessary for the successful resolution of the personal, social, environmental and spiritual problems that we are faced with at the present moment.

We shall, in this paper, discuss the present situation of the environment in Section-II, our current outlook towards development in Section-III and then proceed to the 'Bhagavad Gita' to enlighten us in regard to these issues in Section IV and V respectively before concluding with a discussion in Section-VI.

The Present Environmental Scenario

Man's immediate environment consists of the water bodies (Hydrosphere), Air (Atmosphere) and the Solid Earth (Lithosphere), that support and nurture life in a harmonious manner which is confined to a very limited portion of their extensive existence known as the Biosphere. The physical body of man is considered to represent the man himself and is made up of portions drawn from the biosphere with which it is required to perform continuous but rhythmical exchanges of matter and energy for its sustenance and growth till its dissolution in death back into the very ingredients of the biosphere. The same is of course true of every living organism.

Unfortunately for man, he is also possessed of a mind full of desires to appropriate to himself as much as possible from whatever is available around himself and thus, he cannot just exist like a dead stone or a plant or an animal. He has a quest for unlimited possession of objects which are pleasing to his mental make-up over and above the basic amenities like food, clothing and shelter etc., which of course, are readily available to all creatures in the biosphere. Not quite realizing that his body as well as his possessions rightfully belong to the biosphere, man started exploiting it to satisfy his selfish desires to such an extent that the very environment that contributed like a mother to his birth and growth has now become dangerous for him to live in, as a consequence of the relentless law of retribution that ruthlessly operates wherever selfishness raises its ugly head. As a result, the air that we breathe, the water that we drink and the very earth that we stand upon have become sources of trouble for us and we are going to face large scale problems of survival in the coming two to three centuries. The alarming rate of depletion of the natural resources through technology and the specter of pollution-related epidemics and climatic disasters have been combinedly referred to as the environmental crisis.

There have been very rational-looking proposals like the 'Sustainable Earth Society' (SES) based on 'Sustainable Development' so that mankind can continue



to survive and progress on this planet with the help of more advanced technologies. But, the sustainability of such proposals needs to be thoroughly assessed for reasons that are explored in this work.

Development: The Current Picture

Development of a society is understood to be the process of ensuring higher life expectancy, availability of education, healthcare, communication and infrastructure to all sections, higher rates of economic growth in terms of increased production and consumption with considerable surplus in all essential goods and a comfortable life for all members of the society. All these factors have been put together in what is now known as the Human development index (HDI), which has been calculated for most of the countries. The western developed nations expectedly rank at the top whereas the small south Asian or African nations rank at the bottom as the least developed countries having very low HDI.

The concept of human development as envisaged in this scheme is, however, not a sustainable one since it runs counter to the realities concerning man and his intimate relation with his environment. Increased per-capita production and consumption of substances entails exploitation and depletion of the available natural resources continuously beyond their renewable or recoverable limits through industries and agriculture. This leads to the generation of huge amount of wastes and pollutants of various kinds which degrade the environment. A sustained growth of economy can be ensured only at the cost of a sustained degradation of the environment, which is disastrous in the end for the whole mankind.

The Sustainable Earth proposals include

- a) Population control and healthcare
- b) Conservation of all non-renewable resources by switching to renewable resources
- c) Pollution control by adopting cleaner technologies
- d) Conservation of Biodiversity
- e) Maximum recycling and reuse of waste
- f) Avoiding the use of non-biodegradable substances
- g) Environmental Education and awareness at all levels of society.
- h) Building things that last longer and are easier to recycle reuse and repair etc.

It is claimed that these steps, if undertaken, will lead to minimal environmental impact with a minimal population growth rate and thus would lead to a



sustainable development of the society. However, on a closer look several contradictions come to the fore.

Let us look at proposals (f) and (h) above. We have to have non-biodegradability along with longevity which is possible only with plastics and polythene or with metals. Metals are prone to oxidation and erosion, while plastics lead to environmental pollution. The way out of this is to go for proposal (e) which advocates recycling and reuse of such wastes. However, every round of recycling gives a more brittle and less useful, short-lived substance unless it is added with further newer substances to increase its strength and longevity. The environmental costs of the recycling plants will always be higher than the usual ones for direct processing of raw materials. With each succeeding stage of recycling the utility value of the substance would fall and would ultimately end in more waste generation and pollution.

The unhealthy practices of population control by adopting large scale use of condoms may prove to be a hazardous practice as far as the environment is concerned after 30 to 40 years. We are simply and indiscriminately throwing tones of non-biodegradable substances (Latex) on the earth thereby polluting the pedosphere. ***Mankind does not foresee the impact of a practice unless and until it reaches an alarming proportion.*** The examples of hazardous medical wastes and electronic wastes are cases in point where we see how myopically we undertake programmes and practices.

Looking at the history of the development of science and technology, one can readily see their fallibility due to their being based solely on empirical sense data and analytical inferences which makes them prone to frequent changes, alterations, modifications and even rejections in favor of something new which goes by the name of “progress of science”. The very fact that something is in a process of development means that it is incomplete and unfortunately, we have gotten accustomed to basing our lives on such shaky foundations as science and technology.

German mathematician Kurt Godel in 1931 proved a completely mathematical theorem known as ‘Godel’s incompleteness Theorem’ which states that, “any axiomatic system (e.g., scientific theory) is incomplete”. This proves the fact of the finitude of the human intellect and on the unreliability of empirical sense data as foundations for the search after Reality. One can verify the veracity of the theorem by taking a look at the history of the progress of science through the continuously changing axiomatic systems.

As an interesting example of falsification, we take the well accepted “fact”: “Human wants are unlimited” and, go on to show how it is a false premise in economics. In fact, this is also related to the issue of the environmental crisis since we cannot



accept a “society without wants” or a “human being without wants” as a reality. Because, we have a sense of ‘want’, and we ‘want’ to develop. Then, all the development and the related problems arise.

Suppose, we ask a human being to simply spell out his wants in quick succession at the rate of two wants per second for eighteen hours every day for his entire life of, say, 100 years. We may take the help of computers even, to get the picture of the wants from advanced brain scanners including his dreams also. It turns out that this man can have at the most 10^{10} (One followed by ten zeros) wants and if we assume the population to be 6×10^9 , then the total number of ‘wants’ of humanity comes out to be no greater than 10^{20} , which still is a finite number, though large, but certainly not infinite or unlimited. A more realistic calculation taking into account the time spent in fulfilling desires and other regular day-to-day activities essential for the maintenance of good health would drastically reduce the number of wants that a person can have in life. So, this very famous, oft-quoted hypothesis has been proved wrong very flatly by our little analysis. Like this, all hypotheses can be falsified on which rest the huge edifices of the most successful and rational scientific theories!

Should we base our programmes and our lives in general on science and rationality? Can we not go for some other profounder alternative which we can safely rely on, without any fear of contradictions? The best available treatise in this regard would be the Bhagavad Gita which with her wonderfully complete message gives the much-needed safe technology in addition to a deep understanding of the concepts of man, environment and development.

Environment in the Gita:

According to the Gita, the Supreme reality or Paramatma is the source of both, the perceiving subject and the perceived object referred to as the ‘*para*’ and the ‘*apara*’ prakriti’s respectively. The ‘*para prakriti*’ (Superior Nature) of the Lord is in the form of *jiva* (individuals) while the ‘*apara prakriti*’ (Interior Nature), also a manifestation of the Lord, is in the form of the five great elements, the mind, the intellect and the ego:

“*Bhumirapoanalovayuh kham manobuddireve Cha* *I*

Ahamkara iteeyam me bhinna prakritirashtadha *II (7-4)*

Apareyमितastvanyam prakritim viddhi me param *I*

Jivabhutam Mahavaho yayedam dharyate jagat II” *(7-5)*



The human being or any living creature which is the Jiva, is an eternal spark of the Lord and it draws to itself the conditioning and distinguishing characteristics of the mind, intellect and the ego.

It is clear that our present concept of environment of man is not as per the Gita inasmuch as we do not include the inner nature consisting of the mind intellect and the ego in the definite. This is because, we consider man to be the empirical self or the physical body so that whatever is beyond the body can be regarded as the environment. Now, the Gita points out that this is incomplete and that the true man or living being is a part and parcel of God and that all the rest has to be the environment. This environment or *apara prakriti* is again a manifestation of God. The great lesson to be learnt here is that both the *Jiva* and the *jagat* or, man and his environment are like siblings cloned from the same source, God who brooks any kind of exploitation of the one by the other through the law of action-reaction which guarantees the oneness and the wholeness of His Being.

When this is grasped, then the mode of our relation with the environment has to be the same as that with God Himself, since the environment is none other than God Himself! It has to be an attitude of worshipfulness and adoration manifested in and through our actions in daily life. The Lord says in the Gita:

“Mattah parataram nanyadkimchidasti Dhananjaya!

Mayi sarvamidam protam sutre manigana iva “ (7-7)

There is nothing other than or different from me,. Everything is strewn in me like flowers in the thread of a garland. Similarly, the Ishopanishad also states the same fact:

“Ishavasyamidam sarvam yatkimcha jagatyam jagat

Tena tyaktena bhunjitha ma gridha Kasya Svit dhanam”

(Isa.Up.-1)

The first line of this opening verse of the *Ishopanishad* declares that everything here is indwelt by the Lord. Similarly, the ‘*Narayana Suktam*’ of Krishna Yajurveda 13.10.5 declares the same fact with a slight variation:

“Yatcha kimchit jagat sarvam drishyate shruyate apiva

Antarvahischa tatsarvam vyapya Narayanah sthitah”



“Whatever in there is this world that is seen or heard of, is pervaded within and without by the Lord”. The phrases like “*Vasudevah Sarvam* “–Everything is the Supreme Reality” (Gita-7.19); “*Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma* –Everything is the Lord (Chhandogya Upanishad, 3.14.1)”, “*Sarvam Vishnumayam jagat-* this whole universe is pervaded by the lord”, are all meant to convey to us the self-same truth that our environment (including ourselves) is a manifestation of the lord and our interaction with the environment should be in keeping with this great fact.

In many verses in the ‘Vibhuti Yoga’ (Ch.-10) of the Gita, the Lord explicitly refers to his divine presence in Ganga (*srotasmasmi Jahnavi-* 10-31) in the Himalayas (*Sthavaranam Himalayah:* 10-25); and in the peepul tree (*Ashvathah sarva vrikshyanam:* 10-26) etc. as places of His special manifestation, apart from His general all-pervading presence. So, in all these and many more aspects of His glorious manifestation as this Universe, we must learn to adore Him in and through all our activities. This is the ultimate and perfect understanding that we gain from the Bhagavad Gita about ourselves and our environment.

The Gita Approach to Development

That process which takes us out of our present situation or position to a better one can be termed as development and it should be such that there is no back-reaction in the form of suffering or regress following an attempt at such development. This process of development must continue till we reach the very pinnacle, beyond which further development is neither possible nor required. Development can only happen to him or that which is under-developed or partially developed.

What then, is human development? Who or which part of ours or of nature needs development? Why should we develop and to what end? These are very pertinent questions to be addressed sufficiently clearly before embarking on any developmental efforts, more so, when the Lord Himself tells us that He is already present inherently and pervasively in the earth, water, fire air, ether etc. including ourselves.

So, we cannot be foolhardy in dealing with anything within or without us because of the omnipresence of the Lord. That part of the Lord where there is the feeling of dissatisfaction with the present lot needs development. The earth, the water, the air etc. are all fully content with what they are and what they have. So, they need no development. They are supremely happy! But, not always! For, there is interaction with another manifestation of the Lord in the form of the *jiva* (individual soul) with mind etc., which is restless for some reason or the other and thus, is in continuous need of development, which it thinks, can be achieved by appropriating parts of nature to itself!



This selfish proposal of man to develop himself by adding externals to his possession is the crux of the matter.

What shall man do? He cannot sit calming without developing! The Lord says:

“Bhogaishvarya prasaktanam tayapahrita chetisam

Vyavasayatmika buddhi samadhayu no vidhiyate “ (2-44),

meaning that: “those who are given to the acquirement of material prosperity and sensual pleasures and are completely overpowered by these desires do not have an intellect that is developed enough, or fit for union with God in one-pointed meditation, the highest goal of human life”.

True development of man, according to the Gita, is in an uplifting of his inner being from the limited, finite human status to the unlimited, superhuman or divine status. We are born humans and we should not get stuck all our lives in this human level, since, life is the continuous movement towards ever-greater and ever-broader expansiveness of being. Not understanding this truth, we run after material prosperity, that too, by the indiscriminate and selfish exploitation of Nature, which is none other than God Himself. **We are meant for experiencing God within and not for exploiting Him without.**

But, nevertheless, God, all-merciful as He is, takes cognizance of our ego-based selfish desires and grants us a great concession when He says that, He is the ethical desires in beings – “*Dharmaviruddha bhuteshu Kamoasmi Bharatsarshabha*”(7-11). Thus, we have a respite and we realize that God Himself appears as the morally approved desires in man, which when fulfilled in the right manner as per the guidelines prescribed by the scriptures, become also helpful processes in the expansion of the being of man to the divine level. When the desires are not ethically or morally approved, when they are not fulfilled as per the scriptural procedures, then suffering results:

“*Yah sashtravidhimutsrija vartate kamakaratah!*

Na sa siddhimavapnoti, na sukham na param gatim” (16 -23)

The right techniques of the fulfilment of such desires have also been delineated by the lord with due reasoning:

“*Sahayajnah prajah srishuva purovacha prajapatih!*

Anena prasavishyadhvamesha voastvishtakamdruk (3-10)

“*Devanbhavayatanena te devah bhavayantu Vah!*



parasparam bhavayantah shreyah paramavapsyatha” (3-11)

“Ishtanbhogan hi vo devah dasyante yajnabhavitah

Tairdattanapradayaivyo yo bhunkte stena eva sah (3-12)

“Yajnasishtasinah santo nuchyante sarva kilvishaih

Bhunjante to tvagham papah ye pachantmatnukaranat” (3- 13)

“Yajnasishtamritabhujanti Brahma sanatanam

Naayam lokoastyayajnyasya kutoanyah kurusattamah” (3-31)

“The creator having created the entire Universe along with the principle of “Yajna” or sacrifice told the humans and the Gods that, may this Yajna, this spirit of self-sacrifice be the wish-fulfilling cow for all of you. May the humans propitiate the gods by Yajna and may the gods be satisfied through this self-offering and grant them boons as desired. May both parties attain their supreme goal through this method or technology of Yajna? However, those who, without first offering to the gods their share, appropriate or consume the materials or contact sense objects for enjoyment which rightfully belong to the gods themselves, is but a thief. (Gita ch. 3, verses: 10, 11, 12).

“Those who take the remnants of a sacrifice go beyond all sin and those who cook food for themselves only, that is, who selfishly enjoy the objects, enjoy only sin (Gita: 2-13). On the other hand, the ones who eat the remnants of a sacrifice, go to the abode of the eternal, the supreme being, while those who try to enjoy without sacrifice, do not get their desired ends even here, what to speak of the higher levels of existence.

Similarly, the second line of the opening verse of the *Ishopanishad* quoted in the last section also tells us that the right technique of enjoying anything is by sacrificing first of all to the gods, who are the proprietors of all that we wish to enjoy here.

As to whether we should only be content with exploring the inner secrets of Nature through science or, should we go for technology, the Lord very categorically replies that, “science is certainly better than technology”.

‘Shreyan dravyamayajjainat jnana yajnah parantapa

Sarva karmakhilam Partha jnane parisamapyate” (4-33)

“Material development is certainly inferior to advancement of understanding through deep study and meditation”.



Now, here is a clue offered by the Supreme Being to the science planners of India that we should concentrate on science i.e., fundamental science, rather than on technology. This of course, does not in any way mean that we become retrograde as far as material progress is concerned. What it emphasizes on the other hand, is that material progress should be achieved by adopting the process of Yajna without any kind of exploitation of natural resources. Our entire attitude and approach to outer development changes due to the inner evolution in understanding. God as Earth, God as water, God as air, God as fire and God as space itself must not be treated with scant respect as a milch-cow for our selfish desires. *“We cannot salute and pollute at the same time” as we grow in knowledge of the all-pervasiveness of the Lord.*

The state of ultimate development for an individual has been stated to be the attainment of ‘*para gati*’ or ‘*parama gati*’ in Gita verses: 8-13 and 8-22, wherein, all doubts and desires vanish, wisdom shines forth from within as streams of revelation and one is established in eternal communion with the Supreme Reality. This state is variously termed as God- realization, self-realization, liberation or moksha etc.

Thus, as long as we persist with our incorrect and incomplete understanding of man, the Universe and God, there can be no hope of sustainable development, no matter how rational it may seem on the face of it as a scheme.

Discussion and conclusion

We have done an analysis of the present environmental and developmental scenarios from the scientific-human and from the spiritual Divine perspectives and have shown very clearly how our erroneous conception of both the environment as well as of development has led to the selfish pursuit of exploitation of nature. In fact, in a certain sense, we are no better than the ancient aboriginal cavemen whom we derogatorily label as “hunter-gatherers”. ***While, the ancient hunter-gatherers hunted animals and gathered foods, we, the modern hunter-gatherers hunt minerals and gather goods!*** But, there is one difference, and a significant one at that- they were satisfied when their needs were fulfilled, but we are never satisfied because our greed is never fulfilled. Thus, we are never at repose, never at peace with ourselves, with the world or with God.

This peculiar restlessness of man is increasing day by day by the stupid adoption of technology-based industrialization to entice everybody into the hedonistic, all-consuming flame of consumerism at the Global level.

As far as India is concerned, lack of proper understanding of the Indian mind, lack of vision for the methods of progress suitable for our society and lack of will have completely impoverished us at the moment and we have become an idealless



society. We look to the west for everything, right from the basic amenities like food, clothing and shelter to the pursuit of science technology and cultural values. We do not have an Indian viewpoint on anything under the sun! How has all this come upon this great land of the illumined saints and sages? What has swept the ground away from under our feet so that we are floating in utter confusion and seem to be heading towards an inevitable doom?

It is our own ignorance and forgetfulness that has temporarily blinded us to the rock-solid spiritual reality of India that is firmly fixed to the eternal and the infinite. The terra firma of the ageless wisdom of our great ancient forefathers as well as the great modern masters has to become the very basis of our lives, if we are to make a mark in any field, for; they provide us with the essential nourishment. Moreover, because the spiritual teachings are the very life-breath of everyone on earth, we have to realize that we have everything to guide the world out of its deep delusion of materiality onto the glorious effulgence of Divine wisdom through the knowledge and practice of Yoga and Spirituality. Then and only then, earth would truly be sustainable as a dwelling.

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