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Multi-disciplinary and Trans-disciplinary Approach to Attaining Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) and Aspects of Indian Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

Starting with an encompassing definition and delineation of characteristics of the Indigenous knowledge systems, I specialize to Indian Indigenous Knowledge Systems and throw some light on their diversity and significance for the world in general. I examine the concepts of individual and social development in Indian Knowledge Systems and endeavor to relate them to the need for sustainable development after following a few centuries of western knowledge systems. Why it is that life, which was sustainable for millennia, has now become so unsustainable to the extent that hundreds of species are going extinct every decade and problems of environmental pollution and global warming are making us sit up with danger alarms ringing continuously? What is the solution offered by the Indian knowledge systems in this situation for the world?

Keyword: Sustainable Development, Goal of Life, Indian Knowledge Systems, Indigenous Knowledge System

1. Introduction

Acquisition, storage and transmission of Knowledge is not only fundamental to life and living but also is foundational and instrumental to all achievement and to all evolution of an individual (Krishnananda 2009), a community (Hledik *et al* 2022) and of whole creation (Aurobindo 2022). The acquiring of knowledge happens mainly through sensory avenues, secondarily through mental processing or analysis and finally through intuitive and revelatory means (Sivananda 2009). Almost all communities all over the world have developed methods of acquisition, storage and transmission of knowledge and each of them has continued to evolve over the millennia (Robson 2019; Dalrymple 2024). Sensory knowledge is empirical, intellectual knowledge is rational and experiential revelatory Knowledge is intuitional. The empirical category is the lowest and least trustworthy, the intellectual analytical knowledge is comparatively more trustworthy. But the knowledge obtained through purity, subtlety and sharpness of intelligence, brought about by concentration and meditation for a protracted period, is absolute (Desiraju 2006; Sivananda 2020). The former two methods are the experimental and theoretical aspects of modern western knowledge systems (WKS) such as Science, while the last one is the domain of the quintessential Indian spiritual knowledge tradition (Radhakrishnan 2009; Sivananda 2020).

Humans are scientifically stated to be the highest evolved among all species since they possess more advanced faculties such as intelligence which sets them apart and enables them to tame the most ferocious of animals with ease and éclat. They try to achieve lordship over the forces of nature and to substantially modify them to

suit their convenience and serve their purpose (Rivers 2003). They have unraveled much of the mystery of the physical universe which enables them to even create new species by purposefully altering their genetic makeup in laboratories (Meyer *et al* 2016). They have successfully cloned babies from somatic cells and have also achieved commercial success in surrogate motherhood programmes. Armed with knowledge of the genome, they claim to have gained the ability to satisfy parents with babies to order (ten Have and Patrao Neves 2021). Moreover, from using supercomputers with astounding data processing capacities, Nano-scale manipulations of atoms enabling the huge amount of information to be stored in miniscule memory devices, to recreating intelligence in machines through artificial intelligence programs and devices has already started becoming a reality (Harwood and Eaves 2020).

A little throwback on the past few centuries of material progress of humanity following the industrial revolution in Europe would overwhelm us with a surprising variety of achievements for human society and civilization covering all areas of importance such as healthcare, education, communication, transport, food security, textiles, infrastructure development, exploration and utilization of natural resources and space exploration as well (Nishimura *et al* 2019). Man has walked on the moon and landed rovers on the mars and has looked beyond the solar system with powerful telescopes to gauge the depths of the universe as much as he has gazed into the submicroscopic domain through powerful microscopes. His insatiable inquisitiveness and incomparable inventiveness has led him beyond his middling dimensions in both directions, towards the macrocosm as well as the microcosm. Such is the saga of Man that he, with about a kilogram of a brain material helping him to function intelligently, has penetrated the universe with his incisiveness and ingenuity to comprehend the incomprehensible and control the uncontrollable. This is but the briefest summary of human progress and achievement in the curtest possible description and this progress has been brought about within a just five centuries of western science and technology as the main guiding force of the fast paced human civilizational development.

Unfortunately for us, somewhere something had gone amiss, if not outright wrong! What is that? What did we miss? Why are we faced with the gravest issues of biodiversity loss, global warming, Ozone depletion, glacier melting, coastal submergence, research-generated pandemics, wars, natural resource depletion, life style diseases, increased rates of suicides and genocides, terrorist and subversive activities in addition to increased frequency of the hosts of other natural disasters such as cyclones, floods, famines and earthquakes? All these concomitant effects of fast paced technological progress for a few centuries, especially in the 20th century, has now gripped us so much that we now realize that what we have achieved is not sustainable and we need to make it sustainable before long, lest we perish, and may be, make most of the living species also go extinct before us.

2. Sustainable Development

In January 2015, The General Assembly of United Nations began the negotiation process on the development agenda for humanity to be implemented by 2030 (UNO 2015). There are 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) with 169 targets clearly formulated to guide the member countries and signatories adopted unanimously in September 2015 at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit. These are:

1. No Poverty: Leave no one behind.
2. Zero Hunger: End hunger. Achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Good health and wellbeing: To ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all ages at
4. Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning
5. Gender Equality: Ending discrimination, violence and exploitation, early forced marriages, female genital mutilation *etc* and ensure access to universal reproductive rights and health as well as full participation of women in leadership and decision-making

6. Clean water and sanitation for all: Universal; and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water, sanitation and hygiene free from open defecation, improved water quality, increased waste water treatment, recycling and safe use, ensure water use efficiency, implement Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) at all levels and protection of ecosystems
7. Affordable and clean energy: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
8. Decent Work and Economic growth: Foster sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure: Develop sustainable, resilient and inclusive infrastructures; promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization; increase access to financial services and markets; upgrade all industries and infrastructures for sustainability; enhance research and upgrade industrial technologies. Facilitate sustainable infrastructure development for developing countries; support domestic technology development and industrial diversification; universal access to information and communications technology
10. Reduced Inequalities: Reduced inequalities within and among countries
11. Sustainable cities and communities: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. Responsible consumption and production: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. Climate action: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14. Life below water: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15. Life on Land: protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
17. Partnership for the goals: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

One finds the common refrains of “equality” and “for all” which do indicate an increase of entropy in spite of the repeated use of the cautionary word “sustainable”. Some inherent contradictions certainly plague the SDGs formulated in the above manner, which will, in due course, be more and more visible as the achievability of the targets proceeds farther and farther into the depths of the remote future and the perils of unsustainable development and ignorant notions of progress keep tightening their killer grips over the world.

3. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)

We, in India on the other hand, had a great civilization thriving across millennia with affluence and opulence as well as knowledge and wisdom with regency and peoples’ welfare so much so that our universities in Nalanda, Takshasila, Vikramsila in the days of yore used to attract thousands of learners and academicians from afar, and the libraries were filled with voluminous literature. The rivers flowed in pristine colours, forests abounded with overflowing bounties for the myriad fauna including humans as far as their needs were concerned. This happens when the human society is integrated with the biotic and abiotic components of its environment in a mutually beneficial symbiosis and this is the teaching we receive from the Indian knowledge systems (IKS).

This sustainable system was the Vedic knowledge system (VKS) which is the fountainhead and the ever-flowing essence of India’s timeless culture and tradition that has illuminated the darkest corners of human heart all over the world.

3.1 Vedic knowledge systems (VKS)

The Vedic Knowledge system has the Vedas as its core and simultaneously it also has five other categories of scriptural texts which have subsequently been composed by various sages in course of time as per the requirements: In chronological order, these are - **Sruti-Smriti-Purāna-Itihāsa-Āgama-Darsana** and we wish to introduce the reader a little bit into a bird's eye view of the Vedic Knowledge System.

3.2 Goal of life in IKS

The purpose of life is declared to be Moksha or liberation by realization of the Absolute Truth or God or Brahman as one's own self or Atman, which is the highest of the *Chaturvarga purushārtha* (four-fold goals of life) the primary three being Dharma (Duty), Artha (prosperity), Kama (desire-fulfilment). Dharma or righteous performance of duties and obligations is the foundational value which determines the success to be achieved in the other three *purushārthas*. The economic value or artha is the earning by dharmic means which will be sufficient to fulfil one's rightful desires which don't in any way contravene dharma. Once such a dharma-based earning and fulfilling of desires is practiced, there follows inner poise which enables one to sit for meditation to achieve the goal of moksha by Samadhi.

3.3 Social progress in IKS

Society exists to help the spiritual growth and evolution of the individual in the above manner so that the life of the individual sails smoothly to the other shore of perfection. If there are upheavals and disruptions in society, one obviously cannot have a calm and composed state of mind that would conduce to meditation. Therefore, social wellbeing is essential in IKS. IKS views society as fully connected with the living and nonliving components of the environment so much that there is need for ensuring the harmonious coexistence of all components simultaneously. This is achieved by the exalted view of the individual being connected to nature through and through, both having their origin in the one supreme God or Brahman. Nature may not depend on the existence of any single individual or society but any individual or society cannot do without nature. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the space we occupy, the soil we walk upon, the forest we dwell in or get our needs from, are all components of nature only. Therefore, harmony with nature is of paramount importance in IKS. Societal progress at the cost of the wellbeing of the environment is, therefore, the result of a lopsided vision which is at the root of all unsustainability which we now face because all our modern sciences, limited as they are, never really bothered about taking nature along with us in the arrogant journey to progress but tried to achieve human progress at the cost of the environment or with utter disregard for the environment.

IKS, therefore, advocates a timeless human society with lively avenues for innovations and progressive outlook which completely conforms to the tenets of dharma, and yet, does not jeopardize the evolution of the individual to spiritual perfection or Moksha and nor does it jeopardise or endanger the wellbeing of anything else.

3.4 The Nature of the Absolute

Moksha is said to be attained when the state of absolute existence, absolute knowledge and absolute bliss is reached. The absoluteness is the fact of the non-relative nature of the experiences. Currently, we are afraid of losing our existence, our knowledge and our pleasures because they are now relative and are subject to decay and dissolution. This is the reason we are hopelessly running after sustainable development goals. Our development has been for relative pleasures and our relative existence is threatened by the developments we have achieved. Our knowledge, being relative, does not stand us in good stead either. Thus, there is dire need of either reaching the state of absolute existence-knowledge-bliss, or until we achieve that, we have to mold our agenda of civilization and progress in that direction so as not to get bewildered with more dangerous effects afterwards.

Taittiriya Upanishad asserts in the Bhrigu valli-

Brahmavid āpnoti param—

tad eṣābhuktā—satyam jñānam anantam brahma—

yo veda nihitam guhāyām—parame vyoman—

so 'śnute sarvān kāmān—saha brahmaṇā vipāściteti.

“The knower of Brahman attains that supreme, having realized his oneness with Truth, Knowledge, Infinity, the Brahman, He who knoweth that hidden in the secrecy in the supreme ether, enjoyeth all desires along with the wise-thinking Brahman.” [Tai. Up. 2-1]. This highest state of ourselves is not any attempt to deny or contradict or annihilate all that we are now or we have now at present, but is a fulfillment of all that we have at present, in the best and highest possible manner, so that we are not confronted with unsustainability of any kind at any point of our existence. Our present knowledge of the world and its laws is inadequate and inappropriate and our knowledge of ourselves leaves a lot to be desired as we have not yet been able to shake off the shackles of physiological understanding of an organism and our understanding of God is almost zero. In such a scenario, no wonder we are faced with prospects of annihilation by progress of civilization. Once this imperfection is remedied, we no longer would be in any way tormented by unsustainability of any kind, because our actions would have become guided by that complete knowledge of things which would automatically bestow permanent happiness and permanent existence (Krishnananda, 2010).

The Chhandogya Upanishad says; “Where one sees nothing else, and knows nothing else (but the Self), that is the Infinite (Bhuma or Brahman), but where one sees anything else, knows anything else, that is the finite” (Chh. Up. VII-24-i).

Our knowledge is limited by various factors including the finiteness of our senses, mind and intellect and thus we don't see the same Brahman everywhere in everything at all times but see different objects with their different capacities to give us pleasures, which are, by their very nature, finite. The problems faced by us are the results of our finitude of knowledge of things.

The four great sentences or Mahavakyas of the Vedas affirm about the nature of Brahman as the following affirmations-

1. *Prajnanam Brahma*- Consciousness is Brahman. [Ai. Up. 3.3 of Rig Veda]
2. *Tat Tvam Asi*- You are That. [Chhand. Up. 6.8.7 of Sama veda]
3. *Aham Brahmaasmi*- I am Brahman. [Brihad. Up. 1.4.10 of Yajur Veda]
4. *Ayam Atma Brahman*- This Atman is Brahman. [Mand. Up. 1.2 of Atharva Veda]

The first one is the *swarupa-bodha vakya* as it gives the definition of Brahman as pure absolute consciousness. This gives the knowledge of the *sadhya* or goal. Hence it can be called *sadhya vakya*. The second one is the *upadesa vakya* or instruction by guru to sishya about the latter being essentially of the nature of Brahman. This is from the siddha guru who is perfect in knowledge and hence can be termed *siddha vakya*. The third one is the *anusandhana vakya* or the sentence for practice in order to realize Brahman. This sentence therefore can be called *sadhana vakya*. The last one is the culmination of the practice in the realization of one's own self being the same as Brahman and hence is called *anubhava-bodha vakya*. This is the *siddhi vakya* of realization (Sivananda, 2008).

The Bhagavadgita declares- *Brahmārpaṇam Brahma Havir Brahmāgnau Brahmañā hutam, Brahmaiva Tena Gantavyam BrahmakarmāSamādhina*. [B.G. 4-24]. “The whole creation being the gross projection of Brahman, the Cosmic Consciousness itself; the food too is Brahman, the process of offering it is Brahman; it is being offered in the fire of Brahman, the eater is also Brahman and by this kind of conscious awareness of the pervasiveness of Brahman one attains to Brahman” (Sivananda, 2003).

Further, its nature is described as- *Kavim puranam anusasitaram anoraniyamsamanusmared yah, sarvasya dhataram achintya-rupam aditya-varnam tamasah parastat*. [B.G.-8-9]. “That supreme who is the oldest, who is the controller, who is smaller than the smallest, who is the maintainer of everything, who is beyond all

material conception, who is inconceivable, who is luminous like sun and being transcendental is beyond this material nature” (Sivananda, 2003).

4. Conclusion

Inasmuch as science is fundamentally falsifiable in light of more refined theories and experiments of future, it truly does not befit any divinely perfect system to take pride in agreements with scientific results, but given the current scenario of overwhelming adherence to science by the majority intellectual mass, it is not entirely out of place to point out a few agreements for a just cause. Science changes, and it should, and it must, because it is not perfect and is man-made, though its empirical and rational methods are very finely designed and reasoned.

In this essay, we have proposed that the goal of every human being should be the realization of Brahman as per IKS and this goal then would direct all our actions to be in harmony with every aspect of nature so that there will never be any conflict anywhere and the fear of unsustainability looming large over us will be dispelled forever from the firmament of positive human aspiration. If we are to enjoy fullness here, we have to consciously cultivate the presence of the all-full undiminishing Brahman at all times, in all places, in all circumstances and in all beings, so that partaking of the fullness would never diminish.

*Om poornamadah poornamidam poornat poornamudachyate,
poornasya poornamadaya poornamevavasishyate.
Om santih santih santih.*

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