



## Applied Spirituality and Sustainable Development Policy: Perspectives from India

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This opinion piece looks at the role that spirituality might play in helping to address the challenges the world is facing in achieving the sustainable development goals and more generally in shifting the current human civilizational trajectory to one that is more ecologically sound, socially inclusive and with less economic inequality. Such a shift must also ensure the upliftment of hundreds of millions of people still living in poverty, marginalized for various reasons or affected by conflict and displacement. India has long been regarded as the home of the loftiest spiritual wisdoms over millennia. The question now is: Can such wisdom be harnessed in way that can help humanity move to a more desirable civilizational trajectory? It is important to point out at the outset that the term 'spirituality' is used here in a secular sense as distinct from any religion. This is important as religions demand uniformity and homogeneity in acceptance of a common set of beliefs and practices. Spirituality (secular) is about the freedom to seek truth through understanding and realizing one's own true nature. From the teachings of the Upanishads, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, various Gitas such as Ashtavakra Gita, Bhagavad Gita or Ribhu Gita this path of self-knowing has been articulated. This has been used mainly by individuals to arrive at self-realization through an experiential approach which has been enlightening for many.

The term 'applied spirituality' is borrowed from the title of a **book** written by Swami Agnivesh (who was a lawyer, law professor, and cabinet Minister in the Government of Haryana before becoming a monk and social activist) whose life and work gives authenticity to the ideas he discussed in the book. He also takes care to distinguish between 'religion' and 'spirituality' but goes beyond that. According to Swamiji: "Spirituality is like an ever-expanding ripple; from the

individual it spreads and embraces the world around. Spirituality integrates the salvation of the individual with the transformation of the society. That's why values such as love, truth, justice, compassion and so on are basic to spirituality. Spirituality emphasizes our shared destiny as a species, and not the metaphysical or material profit or loss that an individual might incur. Contrary to popular belief, however, spirituality is profoundly this worldly. But spirituality is "this-worldly" precisely because it has a true sense of the divine.... Quality of life as well as the health and wholeness of the whole of creation is basic to spirituality" (Agnivesh 2015, 10). He goes even further: "a reductive Western ontology, more than any field of knowledge, has promoted the spread of deep-seated anxiety and hostility...This is because the Western world, in its belief in the supremacy of reason and materialism, has overlooked the Eastern philosophical-religious traditions, dismissing them as merely mystical. The Western ontology of linearity (and reductionism) insists on defining everything in terms of old and new, black and white, or progressive and orthodox, which connotes a neat opposition and polarity."

Such insights reveal some common misconceptions which make the quest to understand how spirituality might influence public policy in general and sustainable development policy more concretely. The first misconception is that spirituality is the domain of just inner self-realization of the individual having nothing to do with the politics and economics of the world. The work of numerous spiritual-political leaders such as Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi in India or Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela outside of India or of scientists like Einstein or Max Planck vividly demonstrate the opposite. Recent scholarly books like *Politics of Being*, *Buddhist and Daoist Systems Thinking* and *Applied Spirituality and Sustainable Development Policy* have begun to chart the way of how spirituality can be applied to sustainable development policy. The second misconception is the illusory separation of humans from each other and from nature. This separation results from our conditioning and the growth of our imaginary ego which seeks fulfilment through our desires in such a way that that the fulfilment of one desire leads to another and so ad infinitum. Our wants are quickly deemed needs which must be fulfilled and preferably instantly. It is this separation, one might argue which is the root cause of human over exploitation of nature and conflicts between individuals, communities, and even nations. This is the root cause of overconsumption, of over exploitation and of unsustainable practices.

The ancient Indian spiritual philosophy of Advaita Vedanta is the most advanced philosophic method of understanding the nondual nature of the world. The

approach is to understand one's own true nature by investigating what you are not. The investigation is based on the question "Who am I?" and this has been thoroughly explained in recent times by saints like Ramana Maharshi or Sri Nisargadatta. This internal investigation leads finally to the understanding that in essence we are pure consciousness or pure awareness and most importantly that we all share the same consciousness, divinity or *Brahman*. This experiential understanding helps dissolve the illusion of separation between human and human and human and nature and the essential oneness is revealed. This oneness can serve as a revolutionary principle is resolving many of the contradictions of sustainable development policy by helping us rethink our values, our priorities, and our relationships. Most importantly it leads to a new framework for ethical policy making which might be termed ontological ethics as distinct from deontological or utilitarian ethics. The approach of Advaita Vedanta is strongly complemented by other ancient wisdom traditions like Buddhism and Daoism. The Buddhist approach leads us to an understanding of forms as emptiness and emptiness as form, we arrive at the dissolution of self but it stops short of seeing our underlying reality as *Brahman*. More importantly Buddhism's understanding of interdependent origination and inter-being fits well with the notion of emergence in complex adaptive systems and with the relational ontology of the world further supporting the superficial nature of separateness.

Current scientific approaches like quantum physics and some recent neuroscience research support consciousness as primary and matter as derived from consciousness and not the reverse. Such modern scientific insights converge and strengthen the understanding of Advaita Vedanta. India, the home of both Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism and now the fifth largest economy in the world, can and must play a lead role in helping humanity rethink the nature of reality, our place in the universe and what might constitute right living.

### **Author Biography**

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