

## Spiritual Culture and Sustainable Development in Rural India

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### Abstract

*Spirituality is the essence of Indian culture in general and rural India in particular. India's culture is mainly recognised as spiritual culture. Most of the elements of Indian culture are intangible by nature and has a spiritual dimension. In the 21st century, in the age of globalisation where western culture that is materialistic by nature is dominating, rural India is still carrying the rich tradition of spiritual culture that is close to the nature and goes in the line with sustainability of environment. This paper seeks to investigate how spiritual culture can show the way to sustainable development and also solve the problems emerged from environmental degradation. The paper is based on the review of related literatures, interviews with different stakeholders and personal observation of Indian rural life. It is revealed that many spiritual activities practices in India is close to the nature and promote sustainable development. However, the process of globalisation that emphasize materialism is getting prevalence in urban India. Rural India is still very much living with sustainability and spiritual culture. So, there is need to encourage spiritual culture that can be proved much beneficial for sustainable development.*

**Key Words:** Spiritual, rural, development, sustainability.

### Introduction

The industrial revolution, increase in world population and the process of globalisation which promote consumerism and material culture has increased the demands of goods and services dramatically. However, the quality of living standard has improved but it has come on the cost of environmental degradation. Increased demands for goods have created extra burden to the environment. And it has resulted in many environmental crises. The emission of green house gases has been increased dramatically in the last few decades. It has caused global warming. Due to 0.9-degree Celsius increase in world temperature, scientists are observing abnormal behaviour of the species in ecosystem (NASA, 2018). The increase temperature has been resulted in rise of sea level by eight inches in last century and the sea level is still increasing every year (Nerem et al, 2018). Oceans are receiving much heat and carbon dioxide that is leading to acidification of the sea surface, since industrial revolution, the surface of ocean has become 30 percent more acidic (NASA, 2018). This environmental crisis is unprecedented if it comes to its magnitude, pace and severity. And most of the scholars accepts that rapid economic development is responsible for the present environmental crisis. So, there is need to have a development model which can fulfil our actual needs without damaging the environment. For this very reason the idea of sustainable development has been propagated world-wide since 1970s. The world leaders, intellectuals, environmental scientist are engaged in making policies to save the environment. But after having so many policies and agenda, the process of environmental degradation has been increasing year by year. And this can be seen in the abnormal behaviours of the climate, global warming, floods etc. All efforts have been gone in vain because of the rapid growth of population, materialism, consumerism, our greed for more and more money. In this juncture the Indian spiritual culture which is in line with the sustainable development and against conception of the materialism and consumerism can show the way to the world. Although many cultures over the human history have understood the importance of harmony between environment and economic development. But due course of time with the advent of industrialisation, modern science and technology, and most important the greed of humans have ignored the ancient environment friendly economic growth and have carried the world at present situation. However Indian spiritual culture is still working with its ancient pace with minor modification especially in rural India.

### Objectives

The objectives of this study are;

- To recognise the importance of spiritual culture in the process of sustainable development.
- To understand the relationship among culture, spirituality and sustainability in the context of rural life.

### **Research Methodology**

For the purpose of study, I have reviewed related available literatures. I have analysed the outcome coming from the literatures. I have also discussed the issue with some academicians and intellectuals.

### **Literature Review**

The vast literature is available about the spirituality and sustainable development, culture and its role in the preservation of environment but no literature is available dealing with the role of spiritual culture in the sustainable development and especially in rural India. Most of the scholars recognize the relationship between the spiritual values and sustainability. According to Bender (2000), sustainability means a true transformation of basic values, development of spiritual values in our lives and society and making of a system that can lead our actions in, harmony with these values. Most of the scholars are in the view that there is need to manage the environment so that we can get more and more materialistic products with sustainability. As Satish Kumar (1995) states that environment cannot be managed. We must respect environment and see the environment as part of us. And this unity can come only by spiritual base not by just utilitarian base. Many scholars have attempted to conceptualize sustainability and culture and they have found it interlinked (Soini and Dessein 2016). The concept of culture is described differently depending on context. Culture can be explained to three levels of meanings (Horlings, 2015). First, culture of society is often recognised by its diversity. This is the outer dimension of sustainability derived from culture. Second and third, L. G. Horlings (2015) identifies inner dimension of sustainability as personal values of culture and collective values of culture. Motivations, intentions, convictions and symbolic meaning of individuals are understood as personal cultural values. Collective cultural values comprise behaviours, traditions, conventions lifestyles of society. In reality the personal cultural values form collective cultural values and it is recognised as community culture. And the most of the community culture in world links the individual to that of the nature through various means of customs, traditions, beliefs and so on. Although modernity has alienated the individual from the nature.

Berry (2009) and Lee (2013) argue that the global environmental dilemma is a result of spiritual and moral situation which is due to alienation of human from natural world. Spiritual ecology takes an integral path where it is understood that all the different components of environment with human being functions as a unit (Lee, 2013). This philosophy takes us in a new set of environment morality which promotes simple living, high thinking, preservation of wildlife and population control. Personal achievement in spiritual course moulds the preferences of individuals. The search for mental peace takes an individual closer to the actions that led the sustainable living (Rajvanshi, 2010)

### **What is Spiritual Culture?**

Culture is considered a way of life; it is a human made environment which includes all tangible and non-tangible products of a societal life and has been transmitted from one generation to the next. UNESCO (1958) defines culture as the total accumulation of material objects, ideas, symbols, sentiments, values and social traditions which is transferred from one generation to another in any society. By analysing this definition, Culture can be classified in two-material culture and spiritual culture; material culture is related to the production of goods and services while spiritual culture is linked with art religion and philosophy. In other words, we can describe material culture which satisfy the needs of humans as well as animals while spiritual culture satisfies the spiritual needs of humans only. Spiritual culture is the expression of the spirit of the society. The cultural richness of society is based on its spiritual values and spiritual faiths. Spiritual culture can be proved a bridge between old and new developmental process. It can give guarantee to coexistence of humanity and development in the form of sustainable development. Spiritual culture is based on highest law of the nature and the best philosophical works in art, literature, music etc. are considered as spiritual culture. Culture plays an important role in shaping the life of any

individual. Although the real aim of culture is to uplift the individual's soul and spirit. Spiritual culture is a systematic method for realization of mind and our five senses and the godliness within us. By using meditation technique, breathing techniques, people try to balance their materialistic life with the spiritual life. The spiritual culture helps them to do so.

### **Spiritual Culture in Rural India**

Harmony with nature is the most important part of Indian spiritual culture. This can be seen in different traditions, rituals, arts and crafts and religious beliefs and in the day-to-day life of the people. It can be visualized in rural India more comparatively to that of urban India. Some so-called intellectuals consider villagers primitive, backward and superstitious. However, villagers understand more about the ecosystem and its sustainability. Rural people see nature as sacred; they worship nature as mother. Atharva Vedas also considers the earth as mother and creations are her offspring. However, the idea of mother earth reflected in Indian spiritual culture is being vanished with the process of urbanisation and globalisation. Earth based culture is being converted in market-based culture and as earth dependency is being exchanged for market dependency (Spencer, 1997).

Spiritual beliefs and practices reflect in all aspects of villager's day-to-day life. Most of the activities of the rural population are spiritual in nature and linked to the sustainability of the environment. They have an attractive lifestyle. Villages are very peaceful, calm and full of green vegetation. The environment of villages is very much favourable for growing spirituality. Many rural houses are made of bamboos and muds. These are eco-friendly. Villages life style is clean, sweet and simple. The spiritual and religious life of people linked to sustainability of the environment. They are so spiritual; they understand sprouting seeds as feminine. Many images of rural cultures have spiritual dimensions; icons, magical geometry, drawings painted on walls and floors of home. Villagers are linked to the worship of natural deity, sun, water, air, grains and so on. The culture of nomadic people, their rituals, arts, beliefs and traditional practices are spiritual in nature. However Indian villages are experiencing many changes not only economically but also culturally. The process of globalisation and the spread of technology, Internet, mobile phone has globalised the world like a village. The impact of these changes can be seen in the village's economic, social and spiritual life. Most of the intellectuals are in the view that there is a need to preserve the village's spiritual culture.

### **Spiritual Culture and Sustainability**

Most of the environmental problems are due to human's behaviour. If we want to change the present scenario of environmental destruction. We must change our way we behave. All external situations either good or bad originate from our state of mind that regulate our actions. If our surrounding environment is polluted, it is because of state of mind which generates greed, hatred, unlimited desires etc. sustainability requires limits on our unlimited desires. We must realize that by fulfilling one desire another generates and it never ends. This leads to exploitation of natural resource more and more. Therefore, if we want to preserve the environment, we must control our unlimited desires and regulate our thinking patterns. For the purpose, spirituality shows the way to regulate and control our thinking and spiritual culture can accelerate the process.

The aim of sustainable development is to achieve a balance with nature and the aim of spirituality or spiritual culture is also tend to maintain the balance of individuals with nature. Maintaining balance with nature or with inner and outer world can be seen in the thought of the ancient philosophers. As a Greek philosopher, Delphic Oracle is in the favour of nothing to excess (as cited in Sachs, Loske and Linz, 1998). Lord Buddha also emphasized on middle path to avoid extremes. We are witnessing an ecological imbalance that can be seen in the form of environmental degradation, the extinction of flora and fauna, increase in criminal activities, decline of morality of individuals and so on. The main challenge is before humankind is- how can we make balance in nature and also in our lives?

According to Brundtland commission (1986), sustainable development is the development that avails the needs of present generation without compromising the capacity of the future generation to avoid their own needs (as cited in Martell. 1994.p. 45). But at present material culture prevailing world-

wide conflicts with the goals of sustainable development, as a result, sustainable development can be achieved by eliminating of this conflicts that can be done by propagating the spiritual culture.

### **Spirituality and Environmental Protection**

Materialistic culture promotes consumerism in order to promote profit and satisfies the unlimited wants. To check this unlimited wants Jainism provides a powerful way about non-accumulation of materialistic things, it limits the amount of food also that we eat. This principle is not linked to environmental protection but it can help us to understand the difference between what we need and what we actually consume. Buddhism also preaches a gentle, non-violent approach to the nature. According to Sigalovada, Sutta, A householder should accumulate wealth as a bee collects nectar from a flower. The bee harms neither the fragrance nor the beauty of flower but gathers nectar to turn into sweet honey. Similarly, a human being is expected to use natural resources legitimately (as cited in Silva, 1992). According to Hindu scriptures all creatures on the earth have right to life. Human being should not dominate other creatures. The Indian spiritualism demands respect and obedience of the nature and ask for the unity of nature and God. It is belief that the soul visits in different life forms and this belief that all animals, birds and insects have soul. In Hinduism, nature is considered as body of God. Many birds and animals are linked with God and Goddesses. Vedic literatures talk about an integral relation among man, Nature and the God. Vedas commands the man not to pollute the environment and preserve its beauty. Vedas also commands the man to keep the environment free from impurities by performing sacrifices. Buddhism also forbade the pollution of rivers, ponds and wells.

### **Impact of Globalization on Rural Spiritual Culture**

Globalization is the process which accelerate the free movement of goods, services, ideas and technology. It has impacted the people with respect to their culture, taste, fashion, preferences etc. Indian culture with spiritual dimension is in threat from the ruthless forces of globalization. Impact of globalization is visible in urban areas. The process of globalization, advancement of new technology and material culture has not impacted the rural life as compare to the urban life. India's spiritual culture is still preserved in rural life. Rural culture is still untouched and unaffected by western influence. Indian villages are also undergoing major changes. These changes are both in nature positive and negative. The reach of multinational companies is everywhere now. And these companies are spreading materialism by advertising their products. In this way it has become a threat to the rural sustainable lifestyle. Rural people are being attracted towards the urban settlements and urbanisation is taking place that is promoting western values, western lifestyle and consumerism. There is need to make policy, so that we can preserve the rural life and also uplift the rural Indian without damaging their way of life.

### **Conclusion**

India is known as a country of villages in the world and it is said that the soul of India resides in her villages. In this age of globalization where material culture is dominating in the world. People are after making more and more money and ignoring sustainability of the environment, rural India can show the way to the sustainable development to the world with her spiritual cultures. Development based on material culture which can be seen in China and USA has resulted in unsustainable growth. India must follow her spiritual traditions and guide the world through spiritual culture that can produce sustainable growth. Indian culture is one of the riches cultures in the world and spiritual culture is its backbone. And it can be seen mostly in rural India. Due to its closeness to the nature, intellectuals today see it as solution to the environmental problem which has emerged due to materialistic way of life. Western culture which emphasizes on materialistic way of life and promote consumerism is responsible for the present artificial scarcity of resources, unsustainable development, unequal growth which has resulted in many ecological, social, political and psychological problems before humanity. Indian spirituality which teaches us live a life which is full of happiness and prosperity that comes from not any outer materialistic things but from inner peace. So, there is need to live a life which promotes inner peace, love, brotherhood etc. spiritual culture is the way to the same direction. However, the process of globalization is promoting consumerism and most of the Urban India has been badly affected by it and rural India still carrying the spiritual culture. The two

cultures that works against spirituality is materialism and individualism. And both are main hurdle in the path of sustainable development. However, both are not so effective in rural India, due to having long tradition of spiritual culture. So, there is strong possibility that the rural India can have sustainable development better than urban.

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