



A Metaphysique of Sustainability: Vedāntic Perspectives

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Introduction – Revolutions of Unsustainability

Many cultures around the world view the Earth as a living entity, referring to it as the Mother since she sustains all forms of life. She is the source of the fundamental elements that constitute all matter. Geographical features like mountains, oceans and rivers allow for ecosystems like forests, mangroves, and coral reefs, amongst many others, to create conditions that are conducive for life to thrive. All are various facets of her expression called the Biosphere, a modern appellation. In ancient times, Anthropomorphism and animism emerged precisely from this conception of nature. Forming an integral part of the web of life, prehistoric people were impressed by the fertile and regenerative powers of the Earth and felt deeply connected to her. It is not a surprise to find belief in and worship of fertility goddesses as central in ancient civilizations (Quarch 2014, 52).¹ Tribal populations, like innocent children, felt unity with nature to even deeper levels, and conferred on it a divine status (Nabhan 1997, 59).²

If we accept Darwin's theory of evolution of species, *homo sapiens sapiens* is the product of thousands of centuries of development and so far, the most sophisticated. However, unlike other species, something unique happened to the

1 Greeks called her Gaia that was alive in everything by the life-force of physis. Indians called her

2 For instance, African Pigmies, Australian Aborigines, etc.

sapiens community some thirty centuries ago. They underwent what is called the Cognitive Revolution (Harari 2011, 3). A cerebral leap that enabled the evolution of complex neurological functions, paving the way for the emergence of speech, imagination, logical thinking, and other unique mental abilities. These were externalized in the form of language, artistic and mechanical creativity. Economic practices, on the other hand, were at that stage, non-existent. Things changed, however, with the second revolution that happened some twelve millennia ago. While the origins of the cognitive revolution remain a mystery according to the author of *Sapiens* (2011, 10),³ it is well-known that the Agricultural one ushered in a new era for humanity, both economically and intellectually. The shift from hunter-gatherers to farmer-shepherds with the Neolithic revolution was paradigmatic from both the angle of economics and of metaphysics.⁴ Along with new socio-economic orders, a deeper and greater philosophical understanding of reality manifested in the forms of more advanced religious beliefs and practices. Throughout the copper and bronze ages and until we reach the iron age, it can be asserted that this process of mutual and proportionate sophistication had been seamlessly happening. On the socio-economic plane communities grew into villages, towns, cities, and civilizations. Concurrently, religious, and philosophical thinking evolved from animism to anthropomorphism to polytheism and to monotheism. There seems to be a direct co-relation between sophistication in living standards and the perfection of philosophical thoughts.⁵ Economic prosperity must have been conducive to the rise of an elite in the society (Smith 2002, 118) which subsequently formed an intelligentsia comprising of philosophers, poets, artists, sportsmen, etc. (Thorstein 2007, 29).

This trend, it seems, continued for millennia, until the next great revolution that happened which broke away from the norm. The Industrial Revolution, unlike the two preceding paradigms, introduced a schism between man and nature by fissuring the seminal link between socioeconomics and metaphysics. What

3 Some attribute it to the increase in volume size of the brain, from 500cc of an Australopithecus to 1500cc for the Homo Sapiens (Ehrlich 1970, 215).

4 Considered as "First Philosophy" by Aristotle, Metaphysics is an area of Philosophy which studies fundamental nature of reality ("Metaphysics | Definition, Problems, Theories, History, & Criticism | Britannica" n.d.).

5 Plato, in *The Republic*, speaks of Philosopher Kings. Karl Marx and Engels argue similarly in *The German Ideology* (Chapter I).

is being claimed here is that human societies were to change to such an extent that their understanding of reality transcended the philosophical perspectives mentioned earlier and made room for novel thoughts to arise. Although the copper and bronze ages enabled *homo sapiens* to create tools for survival, it is the iron age that opened the era of technological innovations and territorial conquests. Mechanization using materials like iron and later, steel combined with the use of steam power and subsequently, fossil fuels, provided man with almost unlimited possibilities of growth (Marx 1990, 441).⁶ The consequence resulted in the conquest of nature itself, thereupon fracturing irreversibly the intimate man-nature relationship. The Industrial Revolution brought unparalleled changes in societies and economies where focus was more on the sociological and financial dimensions of human life (Fremdling 2008, 80). As technology multiplied productivity exponentially, the need for a metaphysical foundation to economic development was no longer felt (Rudwick 2005, 162).

While during the previous historical periods, humanity thrived in the laps of nature, the new world order obstructed the unitary vision or “ontological overlaps” that were characteristic of them (Boyer et al. 2016, 11). Industrialization coupled with scientific discoveries and inventions being made at that time, led to the formulation of sharp conceptual dualisms that raised between barriers man and nature, capital, and labour, subject and object, masculine and feminine (Boyer et al. 2016, 11). This metaphysical divide implied ethical division as well. Some races of men were considered inferior and exploited in the form slavery. Nations in other continents and their people were viewed as resources to greedy colonizers (Fremdling 2008, 81; Wondji et al. 2008, 483; Marx 1990, 64). The Earth itself came to be regarded as a source of wealth and prosperity. The two world wars that shook the occident further catalyzed these metaphysical and ethical divisions. Slavery and colonization were the products of Europe where already wars had yielded unimaginable human and material loss. The post-second world war therefore was a period where economic growth became obsession of occidental governments, often at the expense of social and environmental neglect (Purvis, Mao, and Robinson 2019, 683). The focus was so much on man that historians

6 Marx sees therein a form of slavery for man.

believe we entered the new geological epoch called Anthropocene (Nakicenovic and Zimm 2017, 27) where humanity shapes the face of the Earth.

The events and the consequences that follow are known to us. Within a span of five decades, the damage to nature has been of such magnitude that we are reaching a point of irreversibility whereby even the existence of humanity seems threatened (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005, 1). From *homo sapiens*, the human species turned into *homo economicus*, an 'economic man' who is driven primarily by economic concerns, relegating the environment to secondary importance (Ayres, van den Bergh, and Gowdy 1998, 5). The different revolutions enabled man to develop technology that equipped him with tools, gradually enabling him to master the world and now technology combined with economic development has brought a new revolution called the Digital Revolution, further widening the distance between man and nature. Applying Moore's law, development of technology doubles every generation and perpetuates the vicious cycle of production and consumption and threatens the sustainability of life (Dahlhaus and Weißkopf 2017, 14:86). Of course, at the micro economic level, technology undeniably improves quality of life in many ways. Yet, at the global economic level, it drives profit-oriented industries that are causing damage to the environment, lowering ironically those very standards of living they profess to improve. The greatest matter for concern, however, is at the philosophical level. The metaphysical and ethical dimensions historically associated with Sustainability in ancient cultures and civilizations have eroded.

The different revolutions and metal ages have gradually transformed man from a specie that was part and parcel of nature to one that arrogantly considers himself as the Master of It, who perceives everything else as potential source of economic gains. As a social being, he looks upon all other species as inferior and thus exploitable. As an individual, he even goes to the extent of considering other individuals as such. The process became clearly visible after the industrial revolution with the rise of Capitalist models of economy that polarized societies into two essential classes: on one side, the purchasers of labour or *bourgeoisie* in Marx's terminology, the wealthy elites who own the industries, and on the other the sellers of labour or the *proletariat* (1990, 550 fn9). In this social reality of human existence, the remaining element – that is the environment and all its components,

become instrumental and material resources to generate goods and services (1990, 44). Thus, emerges a materialistic-cum-dualistic worldview which Science and Technology further consolidate and disseminate. This metaphysical vision of reality directly influences the ethical principles that man adheres to. These in turn translate as attitudes, colour his thoughts and manifest themselves in his behaviour and conduct. This is what was exactly happening with European moralities “largely pillared on a Manichaeism of nature versus culture, rendering culture as superior and hence entitled to tame nature” (Arndt 2017, 128 a) going far back to the Greeks who referred to non-Greeks as “barbarians”.⁷

The Epistemics of Sustainability

This metaphysical myopia and the ethical outcomes consequent of it are putting mankind on a direct collision course with nature and seriously endangering the very structure on which human society and economies stand. This is the root of unsustainability. This paper argues that unless these philosophical issues are addressed, Sustainability will be an empty word and deliver limited results. It is probably the lacuna of a strong philosophical basis, it further contends, that has led to diverse and sometimes contradicting conceptualization of Sustainability at different levels. Indeed, the terms “Sustainability” and “Sustainable development” have been interchangeably used in various quarters whilst these do not carry the same connotations or implications, adding further confusions as to what they actually call for or aim at: economic progress, social development, environmental protection, technological advancement! Regarding Social Sustainability, Boyer et al (2016, 2) acknowledge the legitimacy of its meaning. Click or tap here to enter text. They identify a lack of exchange between different disciplines and highlight hesitations to embark upon scholarly research as causes for opacity in understanding. Christian Berg (2017, 84) Click or tap here to enter text. identifies diverse types of barriers that affect efforts towards Sustainability. He mentions ‘intrinsic barriers’ like differences and changes in value systems as conceptual obstacles. That is, the ethics of Sustainability are variously viewed. According

⁷ Which meant that they had no identity and thus justifiably usable as means and tool (Isaac 2004: 207–11, passim in Arndt 2017, 128 b).

to him, among extrinsic barriers, “the greatest contributions to unsustainability stem from structural, i.e., amoral reasons” (Berg 2017, 83).

Apetrei et al. (2021, 1) concur that sustainability science provides knowledge about the world, which may bear ontological significance based on which insights can be gained on nature-society interactions, which implies moral imperatives and therefore decisions can be taken. After analyzing conceptual knowledge related to sustainability literature in various contexts and disciplines, they conclude that “depending on their background, scholars tend to have their preferred knowledge-related themes, terms and even journals” (Apetrei et al. 2021, 14). The issue of conceptualization of Sustainability, it is evident, stems, as opined earlier, from misconstrued metaphysical positions regarding reality or nature which unravel epistemic and linguistic loopholes as well. Since metaphysics and epistemology are intimately related branches of philosophy, it is natural that epistemic anomalies manifest upon close examination of implications of sustainability as evidenced by Apetrei et al. Further, it is argued that “Sustainability” is a concept broader than “sustainable development” since the latter focuses on human well-being and the former on an ecosystem or biodiversity with or without human well-ness in view (Harrington 2016, 4). Quoting Kates et al. and Parris and Kates, Harrington (2016, 12) agrees that Sustainability is a normative concept since Sustainability and sustainable development represent something intrinsically desirable for societies and environment. However, the variations in the desires of societies (2016, 25) and the lack of clarity regarding Sustainability and Sustainable Development, make them conceptually “fuzzy” (2016, 14). Ramsay (2015) pursues in the same direction that there are problems with the definitional process at language level itself. Quoting eminent thinkers like Wittgenstein and Augustine on the various theories of meaning, he expresses the doubt whether sustainability theorists are more “invested in the desire to provide a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for sustainability” but is certain that “they are heavily invested in the analytical project that is supposed to fix the meaning of the term and to differentiate correct from incorrect usage of it” (Ramsey 2015 abstract).

The epistemic ambiguity behind conceptualization of Sustainability and sustainable development and the variegated narrative that develops thereupon

can be further demonstrated through a survey of the historical background leading to the emergence of these concepts in mainstream consciousness. It is worth pointing out that these were chiefly formulated in western societies in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, fueled by colonization, slavery and further accentuated by two world wars in the 20th centuries. Historically, environmental degradation and climate change is attributed to the Global West (Brock 2017, 62). Voices protesting the course of “unsustainability” driven by such a swift economic development were raised as early as the 18th century. Thomas Robert Malthus, a British economist, was skeptical over food production and population growth (“World Ocean Report” 2015, 11 a). It is estimated that Europe’s population almost doubled in a century following the Revolution, which explains why Justus Möser, a German lawyer, expressed concern over mass vaccination against smallpox. In his opinion, the reduction of child mortality would pose a threat to the future survival of humanity (2015, 11 b). Justus Liebig, who pioneered artificial fertilizers insisted on the importance of sustainable increase in productivity. The term ‘sustainable’ however, was first utilized by Hans Carl von Carlowitz in his treatise *Sylvicultura oeconomica*, where he recommended “prudent management of forest resources” (2015, 10). In his publication, *Man and Nature: The Earth as Modified by Human Action*, based on observations of the effects of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, US statesman and scholar George Perkins Marsh recommended the village community model which “conserves nature in the long term and uses its resources mindfully” (2015, 13).⁸ The Utilitarian Philosopher and Economist John Stuart Mill expressed his fear over the destruction of nature and called for its preservation “for the sake of its intrinsic charm,” an aesthetic perspective (2015, 25 a). French economist Léon Walras, in his *Elements of Pure Economics, or the Theory of Social Wealth* published in 1874 follows the same lines and formulates the concept of natural capital (2015, 25 b). Two trends on sustainability can already be noted here. On one side, the “anthropocentric conservationists” who argue for a sustainable use of the environment and on the other “biocentric preservationists” who saw the inherent worth of nature as an argument implicitly strong for preservation (Lumley and Armstrong 2004; Caradonna 2014 quoted in (Purvis, Mao, and Robinson 2019, 682)). This conceptual polarity highlights the need for a robust metaphysical-epistemic-ethical framework at philosophical

8 Mahatma Gandhi favoured a similar approach through his “village economy” model of development.

level that could effectively translate into reality-knowledge-action at the physical, psychological, and sociological levels.

Despite their dire predictions over unsustainability of the economic development taking place during their times, the aforementioned advocates of Sustainability were conveniently lent deaf ears until the first effects of unbridled industrialization began to be felt. The seeds of this disregard and ignorance of the metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical dimensions to Sustainability started yielding their fruits as early as the second half of the 20th century. Series of environmental disasters, like the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969, awoke man from the complacent “cowboy ethic” he had been cultivating since the first agricultural revolution (Jekap 2016, 106) and brought him vis-à-vis the undeniable fact that economic development cannot go on indefinitely without harming the very planet on which it is thriving. Thus, began at the beginning of the 1970s the journey of the concept of Sustainability and its socio-economic counterpart ‘sustainable development.’ Even a decade beforehand, precursors of Sustainability already validated the prophecies made a century earlier. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) and Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968) warned of the impending ecological catastrophes owing to human intervention and overpopulation. The term ‘Sustainability’ first appeared in the publication of a study entitled *Limits to Growth* which warned of depletion of resources and pollution of the environment by the end of the 22nd century (Ayres, van den Bergh, and Gowdy 1998, 14 a). Some economists questioned the capitalistic model of growth that was unsustainable, for example, in prominent works like *Limits to Growth* and *Small is Beautiful*. They claimed that such a model was “fundamentally incompatible with ecological and social sustainability” (1998, 14 b).

The tide of global awareness that swept over continents prompted nations to join hands to avoid an apocalyptic end of humanity. The first international Conference on the Human-Environment was held in Stockholm under the aegis of the United Nations in 1972 where reconciliation of economic development and Environmental concerns were discussed. Known as the First Earth Summit, it took place more than two decades after the 1949 UN (United Nations) Scientific Conference on the conservation and utilization of resources (Jackson 2007) evidencing thereby the lethargy of the international community to acknowledge

the urgency of the situation. Fortunately, since then, several such summits were held and exhaustive reports and recommendations made, the most famous of which would undoubtedly be the Brundtland Report which attempts maiden official descriptions of sustainable development that are pregnant with ethical implications at various levels.⁹ Even prior to the Report, Sustainability and sustainable development had made their way in collective consciousness. In 1972, The Club of Rome's Project Report 'Limits to Growth' argues for a "world system ... that is sustainable." In the same year, editors of *The Ecologist* suggest proposals for the creation of a 'sustainable society' in *A Blueprint for Survival*. Two years later, the World Council of Churches' Commission on *The future of Man and Society* adopted the notion of a 'sustainable society.' A year later, the Ecology Party, that subsequently became the British Green Party, made public its 'Manifesto for a Sustainable Society.'

Necessity for "Sustainable Philosophical Perspectives"

The very fact of the diversity of quarters from which the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' were being utilized points towards a multiplicity of views and opinions regarding their philosophical implications – whether from the perspectives of ethics, epistemology or metaphysics which obviously underpin the ecological and economic actions. While on one hand there is consensus on the need for Sustainability and sustainable development and acceptance of the urgency to avert disasters, on the other hand divergences on the philosophical dimensions may potentially arrest all efforts and prove counterproductive. Just like unsustainability and unsustainable economic development stem from erroneous views adopted, similarly, the adoption of right philosophical perspectives needs to be taken that can pave the way towards Sustainability. While the community of scientists, economists and sociologists were analyzing empirically and objectively the consequences of unsustainable economic growth, very few attempts could be gleaned from that wave of global efforts that were of a philosophical nature. All actions are surreptitiously guided in the background

9 Although the Report does concede that "arriving at a commonly accepted definition of 'sustainable development' remains a challenge for all the actors in the development process"(Brundtland 1987, 42).

by some form or other of philosophical ideologies. These need to be brought to the foreground, exposed to intellectual scrutiny, their efficacy determined, their impact examined and improved or altered so that, under the new light, the scientific and economic communities move towards genuine Sustainability and sustainable development. Metaphysics attempts to define reality in terms of ontological concepts¹⁰ and epistemology builds up a framework to validate the knowability of that reality. Ethical and aesthetic principles proceed as a praxis thereof.

A brief review of the history of Environmental Ethics may indicate the paucity of metaphysical and epistemic investigations into the concept of Sustainability. A reasonable starting point would probably be Aldo Leopold who has been considered the pioneer in Environmental Ethics. His *A Sand County Almanac* is a seminal work which resonates the modern man's attitude towards nature and calls for the adoption of new ethical perspectives away from religious one that regards her as a commodity belonging to man. Condemning man's obsession with economic growth which he qualifies as 'hypochondriac,' Aldo appeals for an ethical view and aesthetic appreciation of nature.¹¹ Likewise, distinguishing between the 'shallow ecology' and 'Deep ecology,' Arne Naess denounces the anthropocentric vision of nature and the consequent 'master-slave' relation between man and nature which has 'contributed to the alienation of man from himself' (Naess 1973, 96). His appeal for a 'deeper concern' for nature emanates from genuine ethical and aesthetic considerations and implicitly points towards the adoption of new perspectives on nature which are ontological and epistemic in essence. Rachel Carson's compelling *Silent spring* laid bare the colonizing and dominating nature of man and raised the alarm for urgent measures to stop environmental catastrophes unleashed by the Chemical Industry. This attitude of man towards nature as denounced by the author when looked at through the social lens is similar to the treatment of women by long established patriarchal models. The similarity between the two became the ingredients for the rise of eco-feminism in the early 80s (Mies and Shiva 2014, 14).

10 Ontology is defined the philosophical study of being and also referred to as 'general metaphysics' ("Ontology | Metaphysics | Britannica" n.d.).

11 See the Foreword.

The above discussion is evidence enough that not much reflection on Sustainability or unsustainability for that matter, has taken place from a metaphysical viewpoint. One of the possible reasons for this could be that few of the influential authors aforementioned hail from such philosophical backgrounds that focus on metaphysics and epistemology. They are in fact scientists, economists or ecologists or environmental whistle-blowers who sound the alarm of an impending planetary near extinction level event (NELE). Although the issues they raise are ethical and aesthetic, they lack a strong metaphysical ground that would justify and rally the world community behind them. In the paragraphs that follow, an attempt will be made to demonstrate the necessity of a resilient metaphysical substructure for an application of ethics and aesthetics in sustainability and sustainable development; and the possibility and potency of Advaita Vedānta school of Indian Philosophy to meet the requirement.

Sustainability in Indian Philosophy – Genesis in the Vedas

The overview of the History of Environmental Ethics from whichever perspective taken has one common denominator: they all arise out of the imperative to avert ecological disasters. They are repercussions of an opposition movement that emerged in the wake of the industrial revolution and its effects on nature and society (Sreevidya 2014, 139). As long as the impacts on the ecosystem did not reach such proportions that they could create popular discontent and provoke collective conscience, Western states exploited nature with moral impunity. Sustainability and the need for sustainable development are recent terms in collective consciousness. Closer examination thereof however, exposed metaphysical and epistemic inconsistency which could explain why Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were not fully achieved and had to be re-conceptualized as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of the reasons could be a vacuum of an integrated metaphysical, epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic view that are mutually inter-dependent and supportive. Metaphysical perspectives rely on sound epistemic methodologies for validation. Only then ethical and aesthetic values emanate and translate into practice. Such a pattern is in fact a characteristic of Indian Philosophy. The development of philosophical

thinking in India, the roots of which go back as far as the agricultural revolution, had been undergoing a continuous process until the advent of colonization and the industrial revolution. Nature occupies a preponderant place in this process. In the ensuing discussion we will aim to succinctly substantiate this position as well as the role of man in this equation.

Seeds of philosophical thoughts in the Indian subcontinent can be traced to primitive hymns called *Sūktas* that are found in the *Vedas*.¹² Considered to be the 'oldest books in the library of mankind' according to Max Müller (Phillips 1895, preface), Phillips and other eminent Indologists concur¹³ that Vedic culture was deeply rooted in nature worship and many of the hymns were animistic and anthropomorphic in outlook (1895, 26). Elements of nature, like the sun, sky, earth, waters, etc. were categorized,¹⁴ divinized and spiritualized and subsequently propitiated to secure their protection or to soothe their wrath. Vedic Anthropomorphism had a further peculiarity whereby a particular divinity was raised to the status of supremacy over others. This unique henotheistic tendency was termed *Kathenotheism* by Max Müller (1878, 271) to distinguish it from polytheism, later further developed into a form of monotheism that was endemic to the land (p.275). Hymns of later composition achieve further sophistication with the understanding that forces of nature are themselves dependent upon and therefore centrally controlled by a higher law. The regularity of days and nights, years and seasons, the interaction of components to produce natural phenomena, the balance between elements in nature to create and sustain life, and similar patterns suggested the working of a unifying principle. Thus came the formulation of the concept of *Ṛtam* or cosmic order that binds everything in nature, including man. *Varuṇa*, a deity initially attributed the custodianship of *Ṛtam*, was later superseded by the imagination a gigantic man called *Puruṣa*, confirming a monotheistic inclination.¹⁵

12 There are four *Vedas*: *Ṛg*, *Sāma*, *Yajur* and *Atharva* in chronological and historical order of importance.

13 Based on the interpretation of *Sāyāṇācārya*, a 13th century Scholar.

14 According to the region – Earth, Air or Space

15 The 90th *Sūkta* of the 10th *Maṇḍala* of the *Ṛgveda*.

The Metaphysical journey that begins as animistic conceptualizations of natural elements in the archaic literature of the Aryans, develops into a variety of anthropomorphism unique to the Indian mind. This uniqueness, further characterized by henotheistic kathenotheism, bridges the transition to a form of monotheism unequalled elsewhere in human history. The seers of the Vedic era, however, did not seem satisfied with a monotheistic Being whose conceptualization was still bound by the limitations of the human mind. The term *daśāṅgulari*¹⁶ in the *Puruṣa Sūkta* (Swami Harshananda 1996) already hinted at the possibility of the existence of a Supreme Being beyond pantheistic¹⁷ and panentheistic formulations.¹⁸ Even these conceptual barriers are transcended in the *Nāsadīya Sūkta*¹⁹ where occurs the phrase *svadhyā tadekam*²⁰ that unveils a purely monistic metaphysical position of the Vedic Thinker. Indian metaphysics is different from its Western counterparts in that it is the culmination of a long and uninterrupted process of religious and philosophical thinking (Macdonell 1897, 2). Commenting thereupon, Paul Deussen observes that the Monism of the Vedic thinkers is achieved by a method that singularly demarcates it from its Egyptian, Hebrew, Christian and Islamic varieties (Radhakrishnan Sarvepalli 1940, II:96).

Vedic Metaphysics begins with nature worship and reaches summits of speculative thought in a form of monism indigenous to India. Intimately linked to it, Vedic Ethics likewise emanated from adoration of Nature. Subsequently, it became directly and indirectly the Ethical foundations of all philosophical systems and religious movements that arose on Indian soil centuries later. They express furthermore, the ecological, sociological, and individual ethical concerns from a holistic perspective. Notable among such hymns are the *Prithivī* and *Saṅghaṭana Sūktas*.²¹ Part of the *Atharvaveda* and comprising 63 verses, the *Prithivī Sūkta* is an ode to the Earth. The hymn celebrates the diversity of her roles by providing 21

16 Literally meaning 'ten fingers.' The Cosmic Man is imagined as holding the universe in the palm of his hands with his ten fingers outstretched denoting immanence and transcendence.

17 Everything in God.

18 Everything as God.

19 129th hymn of the 10th *Maṇḍala*.

20 Translated as 'That one was its own breath'

21 191st hymn of the 10th *Maṇḍala*.

epithets that describe her as the provider, sustainer, and enricher of the multiplicity of life-forms she gives birth to. It is a sincere reminder to mankind of the delicacy, beauty and uniqueness of the planet and the duty of man to preserve, protect and bequeath it to future generations. In other words, it militates for sustainability (Simi 2013, 30). Constituted of only three verses, the author of the Saṁghaṭana Sūkta on his side, urges men to unite in thought, word, and deed (Vedalankar Nardev 1981, 51–53). He exhorts them to cultivate unity of purpose, inspiration, and motivation for individual and social welfare. Similarly, the 60th Sūkta of the 5th *Maṇḍala* militates for equality between men and women. In another hymn, the Vedas call upon men to live in harmony among themselves and to love all forms of life as a calf is loved by its mother.²² They profess equality²³ among human beings, equity in the distribution of wealth and resources and plead for men to be philanthropic towards the needy,²⁴ irrespective of differences. Conversely, they condemn selfish overconsumption²⁵ abhorring such anti-social ideologies as not reflecting the Aryan culture.²⁶ Terms like *ajyeṣṭāso*, meaning “amongst whom nobody is superior,” and *akaniṣṭhāsa*, meaning “amongst whom nobody is inferior”²⁷ further demonstrate a kind of universal egalitarianism that points towards what could be qualified as ethical monism of the Vedas in contrast with its metaphysical version. Indeed, only such a metaphysique could lead to ethical expression like *sarvā āśā mama mitrāṇi bhavantu*.²⁸ The oft-quoted phrase *vasudhaivakutumbakam* meaning ‘The Earth is one family’²⁹ could be considered as the best example of sustainability based on the metaphysical and ethical interdependence envisioned from Vedic perspective.

22 Ṛgveda. V.59.6. *sahṛdayam sāmmanasyamavidveṣvam kṛṇomi vaḥ anyo anyamabhi haryat vatsam jātāmivāghnyā*.

23 Ṛgveda. V.60.6. *yuduttame maruto madhyame vā yadvāvame subhagaso divistha ato no rūdra uta vā nvasyāge vittāddhavisō yadyajāma*

24 Ṛgveda. X.117.3.

25 Ṛgveda. X.117.2.

26 Ṛgveda. X.117.6. The term *anāryamaṇam* meaning “ignoble” occurs in the text.

27 Mantra 5: *ajyeṣṭāso akaniṣṭhāsa ete saṁ bhrātaro vāvṛdhūḥ saubhagāya*

28 “May we be friends unto all directions, may all directions be friendly upon us,” Atharva Veda.

29 From the Maha Upaniṣad which is part of the Atharvaveda.

The Brāhmaṇa section of the Vedas³⁰ formalizes these ideals into various *vidhis* or injunctions and *nīśedhas* or prohibitions. From an ecological perspective these would translate into the 'sustainable ought' and the 'unsustainable ought-not' modes of behaviour. The *pañcamahāyajña* or 'five great sacrifices' are, in this context, perfect illustration of obligations enjoined upon all householders (*Gṛhasthis*) or families.³¹ Emulating the Cosmic Sacrifice (*Yajña*) performed by the Gigantic Man in the *Puruṣa Sūkta* from which creation appeared, these sacrifices are meant to be performed by the individual for ecological and social welfare. The *Bhūta yajña* for instance, is performed for the protection and sustenance of all creatures. Likewise, the *atithi yajña* is performed as an expression of hospitality towards unexpected guests. Similarly, the *Deva*, *Brahma* and *Pitṛ* *yajñas* carry ecological, sociological, and pedagogical significance.

Vedāntic synthesis of Sustainability – Metaphysical and Ethical

Vedic metaphysics and ethics briefly discussed so far can be gleaned from the first section of the Vedas called *Saṁhitā* or *Mantra*, most specifically of the Ṛgveda. The hymns therein are the most ancient and contain the fertile soil which forms the basis of subsequent advances in defining reality as seen in the *Darśanas* or philosophical systems, the latest being Vedānta. Of the six schools (*ṣaḍdarśana*)³² that claim to be Vedic or *āstika*, Vedānta is one that is based on the Vedas as the name itself suggests 'end of the Vedas.'³³ They refer

30 The Vedas are compiled and organized into four sections - *Saṁhitā* (collection of hymns), Brāhmaṇa (Ritualistic Liturgies), Araṇyaka (Forest treatises) and Upaniṣads (esoterism).

31 They develop later in texts known as the Kalpasūtras or Gṛhyasūtras.

32 The other five being Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāyā, Vaiśeṣika and Pūrva Mīmāṃsā. All accept the Authority of the Vedas or include them in their epistemic devices as śabda pramāṇa (revelation). However, only Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta derive their materials directly from them, the others only partly.

33 Literally 'end' means 'that which comes last' whereas figuratively it implies 'goal that has to be achieved' Both senses apply to the Upaniṣads.

to the Upaniṣads³⁴ which are the last section thereof.³⁵ The Upaniṣads propel the metaphysic-epistemic-ethical-aesthetic ideals found in the hymns of the Saṁhitas towards consolidation of the foundations of Sustainability. The term 'Upaniṣad' conveys the image of a 'student sitting down near the teacher.'³⁶ Apart from the metaphysic-epistemic-ethical dimensions, the meaning projects an aesthetic appeal since it conjures up images of the forest hermitages (tapovanam) that India was famous for in antiquity. Surrounded by luxurious fauna and flora, humbly seated under huge banian trees, hoary-headed Ṛṣis unraveled to their avid inquirers the deepest mysteries of the universe and the profound meaning of life. Very often these instructions, after lengthy discussions take the finalized shape of cryptic statements called *mahāvākya* or 'great uttering.' The latter can be characterized as eureka moments or 'intuitional leaps' that arise out of listening, comprehending, and meditating³⁷ on the words of the teacher. Embodying the personal experience of the sages, *mahāvākyas* are loaded with metaphysical significance. They posit the ontological existence of a higher reality beyond the visible world called *Brahman* and a deeper individuality under the outer physical sheaths called *Ātman*. Their experience depends on the seeker's direction of inquiry, whether it is extrovert or introvert. The former begins with an inquiry into the nature of the objective world and arrives at the conclusion that the ultimate substance that constitutes it is *Brahman*.³⁸ The latter, on the other hand, is a subjective quest for one's true nature. Deep within layers of body, senses, mind, and intellect, the seeker discovers the *Ātman* as being one's true identity.³⁹ Whatever approach is taken, the search for truth meets like the two

34 The principal one's being Bṛadāraṇyaka, Íśa, Kaṭha, Kena, Chandogya, Māṇḍūkya, Mūṇḍaka, Aitereya, Taittirīya, Praśna And Śvetāsvatara. There are many others which do not belong to the Vedas. Ādi śaṅkarācārya commented chiefly on the aforementioned.

35 The Brāhmaṇas and Araṇyakas are the intermediate ones.

36 The verbal root ṣad meaning 'to sit' is prefixed by upa meaning 'near' and ni meaning 'down.' Alternatively, ṣad also means 'to cut,' in which case, Upaniṣad would convey the spiritual idea 'to irreversibly cut down the knots of bondage.'

37 Śravaṇa, manana and nididhyāsana.

38 There are two perspectives: the *Saprapaṇca* or cosmic where the outlook is pantheistic and panentheistic and the *niṣprapaṇca* or acosmic where the outlook is purely monistic.

39 The theory of *pañcakośa* or five sheaths is commonly accepted as constituting the Blissfill (*ānandamaya*), Intellectual (*vijñānamaya*), Mental (*manomaya*), Vital (*prāṇamaya*) and physical (*annamaya*) dimensions of being

ends of a circle. There is fundamentally no distinction between *Brahman* and *Ātman*. Both the Universal Self and the individual Self are claimed to be of the nature of Pure Existence or Being (*Sat*), Pure Consciousness (*Cit*) and Pure Bliss (*Ānanda*) which explains the variety of *Mahāvākyas* on the experience thereof. The Utterance *ahambrahmāsmi*⁴⁰ depicts an experience of their union – like that of a river with the ocean.⁴¹ Identity or *abheda* is also characterized by the saying *ayam ātma brahma*⁴² and the most famous *tattvamasi*.⁴³ Other great statements question the nature of the world when realisation of the underlying unity⁴⁴ is achieved and the whole universe is experienced as being nothing other than the Self.⁴⁵

As argued earlier, a consumption driven society and a profit-oriented economy are the roots of unsustainability, themselves upheld by a fragile metaphysic-epistemic-ethical-aesthetic structure where the relation between the four are flimsily constructed. The Upaniṣads propose instead, a framework that comes closer to a comprehensive sustainable worldview which unites the quadrangle intimately. The highest ontological reality being *Brahman-Ātman*, the world can be nothing other than an emanation or an expression thereof. The Upaniṣads distinguish between *Jagat* and *Samsāra*, both of which convey the idea of ‘the world.’ However, while the latter refers to ‘the world to which man is bound,’ the former refers to the ‘the world that is all-inclusive,’ even that of man. The continuity of human *samsāra* is maintained by the law of karma since rebirth is its corollary. *Jagat* instead, is the manifestation of the creative power inherent in the Absolute. Creation is the descent of the *Sat-Cit-Ānanda* into materiality, a congealment of energy into matter, as Swami Vivekananda describes it (1989, 16–31). Whether it is the *saprapañca* or cosmic or *nīsprapañca* a cosmic cosmological theory, all the Upaniṣads agree that the origin of the world is *Brahman-Ātman*. The Chāndogya

40 Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up. 1.4.10. Note: All references to the Upaniṣads are from S. Radhakrishnan (1968), unless specified otherwise.

41 Chāndogya Up. 6.10.1; also Mūṇḍaka Up. 3.2.8

42 Mandukya Upaniṣad, 1.2.

43 Chāndogya Up. 6.7.8

44 Kaṭha Up. 2.1.11. *na iha nānā asti kiñcana*.

45 Chāndogya Up. 3.14.1. *Sarvam khalvidam brahma*

Upaniṣad claims that from Sat in the triadic nature of the Absolute descended fire from which followed water and finally food.⁴⁶ In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, the source of all life is said to be *Prāṇa* or vital breath.⁴⁷

While accounts of cosmo-geneses may be contextual and differ in terms of sophistication, yet the ontological bond *jagat* shares with *Brahman-Ātman* is constant. Ethical and aesthetic considerations are based thereupon. A good illustration comes from the *Īśa* Upaniṣad. Though comparatively short, the Upaniṣad demonstrates aptly the quadratic principle.⁴⁸ Metaphysically, it declares all pervasiveness of the *Īśa* and later it elaborates on its impersonal and incomprehensible nature, which epistemically, is experienceable only through a transcendence of the dualisms of the knowable (*vidyā*) and the unknowable (*avidyā*),⁴⁹ the manifest (*sambhūti*) and unmanifest (*asambhūti*).⁵⁰ The ethical and aesthetic principles that translate therefore demonstrate the Upaniṣads' relevance towards Sustainability. Realization of the *Īśa* (*Brahman-Ātman*) as the foundation of all that exists should lead towards the cultivation of 'Universal Brotherhood' as Mahatma Gandhi reflects on the significance of the first verse (Radhakrishnan 1968, 568).⁵¹ Since everything that moves in this moving world (*jagatyām jagat*) is pervaded by that Reality called *Īśa*, then who can claim possession of property (*kasyavid dhanam*)? All consumption therefore should be with a spirit of detachment (*tena tyaktena bhūñjīthā*), without greed (*mā gṛdhaḥ*) guided by the inner vision (*anupaśyataḥ*) of the equality of all living beings with one's own self (*ātmaiva*).⁵² Such a monistic view should inspire man to perform all actions (*kurvan eveha karmāṇi*) with a self-less spirit (*na karma lipyate*). The Upaniṣad thus proposes a strong basis for Sustainability and Sustainable Development which, as it claims, should embody ethical practices resulting

46 VI.2.1-4

47 III.7.3

48 Verses 1, 4, 5

49 Verses 9-12

50 Verses 13-15

51 *Īśāvāsyam idaṁ sarvaṁ yat kiñca jagatyam jagat
Tena tyaktena bhūñjīthā mā gṛdhaḥ kasyavid dhanam*

52 Verses 1, 6 and 7

from spiritual realization or at least from the intellectual cognition of the unity of life. Any action or view contrary to these would be immoral and unspiritual and consequently translate into Unsustainability. The *Īśa* Upaniṣad condemns such wrong views considering them as demoniac (*asuryā*), their upholders as 'slayers of the self' (*ātmahano janāḥ*) and the consequences thereof as rebirth in worlds (*lokāḥ*) of blinding darkness (*andhena tamasā*). These warnings seem prophetic, considering the uncertain ecological future awaiting humankind.

Notions of Sustainability succinctly gleaned from the Upaniṣads, the scriptural foundation of Vedānta philosophy, are further elaborated upon in the *Bhagavadgītā*, another important Vedāntic scripture (*prasthāna*). Though considered a *smṛti*, the *Gītā*⁵³ is not less significant than the Upaniṣads (*śruti*) of which it is said to be the 'milk' (Radhakrishnan 1963, 13 fn). Metaphysical and ethical concepts strewn across the Upaniṣads under the conceptual triad of *Brahman-Ātman-jagat* are harmonized in the *Bhagavadgītā* from a pragmatic perspective. For instance, the call for 'enjoyment in renunciation' and 'vision of unity' in the *Īśa* Upaniṣad develop into the cultivation of *Naiṣkarmya* (desirelessness in action) and observance of *lokaśaṅgraha* (compassion with the world). The pantheistic and panentheistic notions of creation and its relationship with the Absolute, the *Brahman-Ātman* equation are reviewed by the author of the *Gītā*. From a perspective of Sustainability, the *Gītā* has much to offer. In Chapter IX, the Lord identifies Himself as containing and yet transcending all living things.⁵⁴ The latter can ignite the flame within them through devotion and secure His grace through self-surrender to Him.⁵⁵ In Chapter III, Lord Kṛṣṇa, citing famous Sage and King Janaka as an example, appeals upon man to perform actions as a moral or spiritual duty with a view to maintaining the world order⁵⁶ and to rejoice in the service of all creatures (*sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ*).⁵⁷ Compassion towards life and enjoyment in the service towards it echo the words of Vedic and Upaniṣadic Ṛṣis

53 *Śruti* meaning 'that which has been heard' applies to the Vedas (including all the sections) while *Smṛti* meaning 'that which has been remembered or learned' applies, with varying degree of importance, to all other scriptures in Hinduism (Epic, Paurāṇik, etc.)

54 IX.5 and 30

55 XVIII.66

56 III.20

57 V.25

and resonate the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of Sustainability. In practice they convert into the practice of the *Pañcamahāvrata* or 'Five Great Vows' by Hindus and Jains and *Pañcaśīla* by Buddhists. The first and most important is 'Nonviolence' or *ahimsā*, the practice of which made Mahatma Gandhi an apostle thereof. It presents itself as what could be the core of the ethics and aesthetics of Sustainable Development.⁵⁸ This is because it is the logical sequence that emanates from the spiritual realization of the metaphysical reality of *Brahman-Ātman*.

Mantras, *Upaniṣads* and the *Gītā* stand as the bedrock of Indian Metaphysics and Ethics and along with the *Brahmasūtras*, constitute the canons or *prasthānas* of Vedānta Philosophy. All other texts in Indian Literature either consolidate them epistemologically as done by the *Darśanas* or re-construct ethical and aesthetic theories with the metaphysical assumptions explicated in them as done in the *Kāvyas*, *Purāṇas* and *Itihāsas*.⁵⁹ As such, they naturally exude notions of Sustainability, detailing which unfortunately escapes the purview of this paper. The dramas of Kālidāsa, the epics Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, the myths and legends in the *Purāṇas* are replete with eco-centric ideologies that can contribute towards holistic application of sustainability and underpin a responsible socio-economic development. Their depiction of nature is tinged with feelings of deep emotional connection between man and nature which are the expressions of the *Ānanda* or 'Bliss' facet of the triadic nature of *Brahman-Ātman*, the other two being *Sat* and *Cit*. The Axiological and aesthetic dimensions of *Brahman-Ātman* in the *Upaniṣads* come as the third member of this triad: *Ānanda*.⁶⁰ The Bṛhadāraṇyaka *Upaniṣad* claims that the very nature of *Brahman-Ātman* is knowledge and *Ānanda* (*vijñānam ānandam brahma*).⁶¹ The Taittirīya *Upaniṣad* states that all beings are born from *Ānanda* or Bliss, live by Bliss and

58 The other four which are considered variations of Non-violence

59 Poetics, Mythology and History.

60 Although popularly translated as Bliss, *Ānanda* has no English equivalent. It is more a state of being in one's true reality which is Brahman-ātman realized in the state of *Mokṣa* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death and suffering). Negatively it is freedom from all suffering which positively is a state of absolute peacefulness (*śānti*)

61 Bṛh. Up. III, 9. 28. ...*vijñānam ānandam brahma*...

enter Bliss again at the time of death (Radhakrishnan 1968, 557).⁶² At another place, the Upaniṣad provides a scale of enjoyability of Ānanda at distinct levels of embodiment – beginning from *Brahma* and ending with human beings. The intensity of blissfulness at each level is thus stated to be a hundred times more than the lower one.⁶³ Ānanda being the essence of *Brahman-Ātman* is objectively the substance that becomes the world while subjectively it is consciousness individualized as embodiments. Thus, the Upaniṣads declare Ānanda to be the fifth and core layer of all beings, the other four being vijñāna, Mana, Prāṇa and Anna in respective order.⁶⁴ Deep within the physical, vital, mental, and intellectual layers, every living being is made of Bliss, which explains why it is instinctive to seek pleasure and avoid pain.

Advaitic vision of Sustainability – the Triadic Dimension

All Vedānta Philosophers concur that *Brahman-Ātman* is the underlying reality of all worldly experiences objectively and subjectively. However, owing to beginningless (*anādi*) ignorance (*ajñāna*, *avidyā*) the metaphysical reality eludes all beings. The Advaita School of Vedānta equates *avidyā* with *Māyā* by whose operation creatures experience the *Sat-Cit-Ānanda* triad of *Brahman-Ātman* in three states of consciousness (*avasthātraya*) and at three levels of reality (*sattātraya*) with varying degree of ecstasy and depending upon their embodiment – ‘from *Brahmā* down to a blade of grass’ as states Īśvarakṛṣṇa, the author of the Sāṅkhya kārīkā (Virupakshananda 1995, 110). The triad corresponds to the quadrangle of metaphysics-epistemics-ethics-aesthetics in a monistic fashion which, when veiled by *Māyā-avidyā*, appears stratified like a rainbow. Sat or Existence, the absolute (*paramārtha*) ontological substance (*padārtha*) through the lens of *Māyā* becomes segregated into empirical (*vyāvahārika*) and phenomenal (*prātibhāsika*) levels of realities (*sattā*). Objects experienced

62 III.6.1: *Ānando brahmeti vyajānāt, ānandād hy khalv imāni bhūtāni jātante, ānandena jātāni jīvantim ānandam prayanty abhisamviśanti.*

63 II.8.1

64 Taittirīya Up. III.1-4.1

possess levels of tangibility that range between absolute unreal (*asat*),⁶⁵ neither real nor unreal (*sadasat*)⁶⁶ and absolute real (*sat*).⁶⁷

Cit or Consciousness under the limitations of ignorance gets constricted from its absolute nature (*Turīya*) into the dreamless deep sleep (*suṣupta*), dream (*svapna*) and waking (*jāgrata*) states (*avasthā*). These are different degrees of awareness of objects depending upon the reality they possess. Thus, *sattās* and *avasthās* are directly proportionate to each other. In a state of dream or hallucination, awareness of objects or perception of their existence is confined to the experiencer only, that is, they are private. Such a state would then be called phenomenal or *prātibhāsika*. When cognition of objects takes place publicly or collectively, cognizers are said to be in a waking state living at the empirical or *vyāvahārika* level. However, in the deep sleep (*suṣupti*) there are neither objects nor subject which is a state of non-cognition and statelessness. However, the very fact of acknowledging having slept soundly ‘without knowing’ betrays ‘knowing having slept soundly’ and thus indicates a ‘vague awareness’ (*cit*) of ‘something’ (*sat*). Moreover, the fact of having ‘slept soundly’ in *suṣuptāvasthā* is also highly significant in the sense that the person experienced some kind of joy (*Ānanda*). *Ānanda*, the experience of the third dimension of *Brahman-Ātman* is likewise proportionate to the *sattās* and *avasthās*. There is a tendency to think that *Advaitins* ignore this dimension since the Śāṅkarācārya himself laid fewer emphasis. Like the well-known *sattātraya* and *avasthātraya* Śāṅkara had formulated an *Ānandatraya*. In his famous *Upadeśa Sāhasrī* (A Thousand Teachings), he identifies *Ānanda* as *laukika*, *rasā* and *svābhāvika* (Mayeda 1979, 201–4). Accordingly, he defines *laukikānanda* as the mundane pleasures we enjoy in life while *rasānanda* is a higher aesthetic delight experienced by the purified mind at the level of the *Ānandamayakośa* (layer of Bliss). *Svābhāvikananda*

65 For instance ‘the son of a barren woman’ (*vandhyā putra*) is a logical impossibility

66 Refers to objects of the world that are experienced at *prātibhāsika* and *vyāvahārika* *sattās*. They are subject to space-time-causation for their existence, i.e., they have a beginning, a duration, and an end. Since at one point they are real and at another point unreal, they are called indescribable (*anirvacanīya*) or relative.

67 Only Brahman-Ātman is the ‘substance’ that qualifies for reality since it is not subject to space-time-causation limitations. It satisfies the criterion of unoblatability of Truth in the three divisions of time – *trikālābādhitatvam satyam*

is the Ānanda in its highest and purest condition at the *pāramārthika sattā* experienced in the *Turiya avasthā*. In other words, at the *Brahman-Ātman* level.

Considering the foregoing discussion, it can be assumed that in *suṣupti*, *Sat-Cit-Ānanda* which is the essence (*svarūpa*) of *Brahman-Ātman* is experienced albeit in an 'absent mode.' The absence of any full awareness is caused by the accumulation of impressions (*saṁskāras*), passions and desires (*vāsanās*) which are nothing but the working of *Māyā-avidyā*. Hence, all living beings, everyday transcend *Māyā-avidyā* to merge into their true Self which is *Brahman-Ātman* and experience its metaphysical, epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions as *sat-cit-Ānanda*. Unfortunately, the force of *Māyā-avidyā* being still powerful, they are quickly pulled down to their respective psycho-physical garbs and specific karmic contexts. They all on the other hand, feel lucid, joyful, and energetic, which are nothing but the effects of being in that state. The understanding of the Vedantic vision of the world thus shows the holistic nature of reality which appears stratified owing to our ignorance but in which we are all indivisibly united. All ethical and aesthetic values are nothing but expressions of the metaphysical realization of the Absolute.

From the perspective of sustainability and sustainable development, it seems utopian to expect the whole of humanity to attain the *pāramārthika sattā* to see real change. According to Advaita, *jagat* and *saṁsāra* are at the *Vyāvahārika sattā* (empirical level), a dimension of *Brahman-Ātman* where subjects and objects appear segregated and hierarchical and where all phenomena happen within a closed system of space-time-causality. Knowledge and experiences are thus conditioned. While the *Pāramārthika* is metaphysical and intuitively experienced, the *Vyāvahārika* is practical and rationally known. The beauty of Vedānta is that it lays down a pathway to reach Absolute by sublating the relative.⁶⁸ It is observance of ethical and aesthetic principles and values that create a truly Sustainable environment at the empirical level that man can elevate himself

68 Sublation (*bādhā*) in Advaita refers to the transcendence of a lower reality by a higher one through a cognitive process. Dreams and their content are immediately sublated upon waking as we realise their true nature. The relative can likewise be sublated by the realization of the absolute, albeit not so easily as in the latter case because of the greater tangibility of experiences while awake. The classical analogy of rope and snake is the perfect example. It illustrates the dual operation of *Māyā-avidyā* as *āvaraṇa* (concealment) and *vikṣepa* (distortion) as well as indicates the possibility of sublating the world-body (snake) by apprehending their real Foundation (*adhiṣṭhāna*) which is Brahman-Ātman (rope).

spiritually to apprehend the metaphysical truth. Such an individual is called an *adhikārin*, one endowed with the four-fold qualifications (*sāadhanacatuṣṭaya*) who can tread the arduous path that leads to the metaphysical ideal. He is the personification of Sustainability.

And when he reaches the cherished goal, he becomes a *Jīvanmukta*, a liberated individual who has been able to free himself from the grip of *Māyā-Avidyā*. Not much different from the *Sthitaprajña* in the *Bhagavadgītā*, he understands reality in its pure state. As such he becomes an epitome of Sustainability understanding the necessity to maintain the world (*lokaśaṁgraha*) as a platform of the relative (*vyavahārika*) from which one can leap into the *pāramārthika*. Vedānta sees each individual as a potential *Adhikārin* and *Jīvanmukta*. Yet it acknowledges that not everyone aspires for them, steeped as they are in the fundamental illusion (*adhyāsa*). On the other hand, everyone can grasp the logic and rationality inherent in Advaitic methods.⁶⁹ And this is where Vedānta becomes relevant for Sustainability and applicable for sustainable development. To those who claim that the *Sat-Cit-Ānanda* triad may seem remotely achievable at the metaphysical level, Advaita reminds them that it is experienced every day. It cannot be denied that all objects possess a form (*rūpa*) to which we give a name (*nāma*). As such their *astitva* or existence, nor their knowability (*bhāti*) can be rejected. Their form exists and thus their name becomes knowable. Alternatively, it can be stated that they have form and thus exist and since the form has a name, it can be known. Finally, all existing entities that have form and are given names create bondage (*baddha*), whether positive (*rāga*) or negative (*dveṣa*). *Asti* (isness), *bhāti* (illuminability), *priyam* (attractiveness) are thus the characteristics of *Brahman-Ātman* that owing to *Māyā-avidyā* appear to have form (*rūpaṁ*) and name (*nāma*) (Swami Nikhilananda 1931, 27).⁷⁰

69 In his commentary on the first sūtra of the *Brahmasūtras*, Śaṅkara lays down four pre-requisites to embark upon a deliberation on *Brahman-Ātman* – *Viveka* (Discrimination), *Vairāgya* (Detachment), *śaḍśampatī* (six spiritual qualities) and *Mumukṣutva* (longing for liberation)

70 *Dṛg-dṛśya-viveka* by Śaṅkara verse 20

Conclusion – Vedānta: an appealing Metaphysique for Sustainability

The intuitive metaphysics of the Upaniṣads, the harmonious synthesis of the Bhagavadgītā and the rational reconciliation of the *Brahmasūtras*⁷¹ are skillfully interwoven by Śaṅkara (Chatterjee and Datta 1939, 428) into a beautiful and profound philosophy.⁷² With a language that is mellifluous, an intellect that is incisive and a personality that is charismatic, Śaṅkara uses ‘common experience and reasoning’ (1939, 427) to shape a unique Weltanschauung, a worldview that leads man towards his highest and most valuable goal (*paramapuruṣārtha*) which is *Brahman-Ātman* – the ultimate metaphysical ground.⁷³ It is experienced by all living entities in dreams at a phenomenal level and while awake at relative level. In other words, the metaphysical reality is ever-present and ever experienced, but never realized. The rope is always there and seen but it is taken for snake, and this is due to wrong knowledge (*mithyājñāna*). Our actions and reactions at ethical and aesthetic levels are thus conditioned by it. Wrong notions about oneself and the world are, in the Vedāntic context, the root cause of unsustainability and all the damages that follow thereof. Once the metaphysical reality is achieved through discriminative knowledge (*viveka-jñāna*), Sustainability and Sustainable development follow naturally since spiritual realization translates into ethical and aesthetic practices.

Even if not realized, the mere intellectual understanding of Vedānta carries the potency to bring about ethical, religious, and socio-economic transformations that can positively impact upon Sustainability and foster sustainable

71 Collectively, they are referred to as *prasthānatrayī*

72 *Prasanna Gambhīraṇi*

73 Even as a child, he had notions of Sustainability in mind. The *Śaṅkaradigvijaya*, which is a biography of his life, mentions incidents that can be viewed from a sustainable vantage point. It is recorded that once, as a *Brahmacārīn* (celibate student) he refused to take alms from a rich Brahmin who was hoarding wealth and went instead to the house of a poor lady who had nothing but bitter *amala* (gooseberry) fruits to offer. Out of pity for the lady, Śaṅkara composed spontaneously a hymn (*Kanakadhārāstotra*) to goddess Lakshmī who according to the text, appeared and showered golden amalas for her (Madhava-Vidyaranya 2002, 25 (21-33)). During his life time, Śaṅkara condemned social and religious malpractices which were also unsustainable. For instance, casteism, extreme ritualism, animal and human sacrifices, tribal beliefs (cutting down trees), to mention a few. Of course, these do not make the *Śaṅkara* an Environmentalist *per se*. Yet they are instances of practical demonstration of the Advaitic vision he was endowed with that were spontaneously translated into ethical and aesthetic values.

development. Experts from different fields of science have been inspired by the rationality and the metaphysical and epistemological clarity of Vedānta, ever since Swami Vivekananda introduced the philosophy to the Western audience (Swāmi Mukhyānanda 1997, 10). The metaphysical implications of discoveries in Quantum Physics and Astrophysics compelled many scientists to turn to Advaita⁷⁴ for rationalization as they involved phenomena that defied the classical laws of physics defined by Newtonian determinism (Penrose 2005, 440). Capra (1975, 25) commenting on the relevance of Advaita makes the significant remark that it provides “a consistent and relevant philosophical background to contemporary science.” Psychologically and physiologically, Vedānta captures the attention of scientific minds (Lanza 2009, 34, 158). Epistemologically, Advaita projects a ‘scientific’ outlook as it rejects all knowledge that does not satisfy various epistemic criteria. Not less than six sources of knowledge of right knowledge (*pramāṇa*) are resorted to by Advaitins to substantiate their metaphysical claims (Dharmarājādhvarindra 2003, 8).⁷⁵ Thus, a metaphysics impervious to epistemic flaws makes Advaita a stronger contender that provides a much-needed philosophical alternative to the current narratives on Sustainability, whose ethical and aesthetic applications might gather credence within educated circles.

Post-Scriptum: Challenges to relevance of a Vedāntic metaphysics of Sustainability

The Monistic perspective of Vedānta may seem idealistic in two senses. Firstly, its metaphysical approach to view reality as stratified into levels of Truths (*sattā*) proportionate to states of consciousness (*avasthā*), relegates the world experienced to the status of *mithyā* or falsity. Secondly, the Advaitic framework, rigorously constructed as it is by the great teachers of the tradition, beginning with Śaṅkara himself, seems too perfect and thus the ideal basis for Sustainability and sustainable development, but not necessarily practical. When it comes to issues related to the practical level of reality (*vyāvahārika*), the metaphysics of Advaita seems to fail to translate into the ethical and aesthetic dimensions anticipated.

74 Schrodinger, Bohr, Heisenberg, to mention a few.

75 Vedānta Paribhāṣā, Upodbhāṭaḥ, verse 10.

Advaitins, viewing the *vyāvahārika* from the height of the *pāramārthika* tend to dismiss the former as unreal compared to the latter which is absolutely real. As a result, social, economic, political and even religious dimensions of human life are, from this perspective, treated as irrelevant and thus ignored in Advaita. Social injustices and imbalance; uneven distribution of wealth and power, discrimination based on race, caste, gender; sectarian divisions, clashes based on religious beliefs and practices, wars and conflicts are prominent issues that plague humanity probably since the time of the agricultural revolution. Advaitic metaphysics relegates all these to the operations of *Māyā-avidyā* as being the result of *adhyāsa*. Sustainability, in this logic, would therefore be destined meet the same fate. The “Grand Narratives” that embody the Traditional Advaita which emphasizes the importance of spiritual transcendence over the binary of matter and non-matter, would, by virtue of its own metaphysics, not only perpetuate socio-economic and political exclusions and marginalizations but actually consolidate them.

Whether from the ethical perspective or from the metaphysical one, Advaitins had to bear the brunt of the criticisms of rival systems, beginning as early as *Gauḍapāda* (Mahadevan 1968, 24–45).⁷⁶ Within and outside the Vedānta tradition, Advaita metaphysics has been subject to vociferous criticism, the earliest being the Dvaita and *Viśiṣṭādvaita*. Bhāskarācārya famously called the Advaitins ‘Buddhists in disguise’ as both believe in an indeterminate absolute reality concealed by an unreal world (Whaling, 1979, 1). Rāmānujācārya formulated seven untenables⁷⁷ to deconstruct the concept of *Māyā* (Mishra 2015, 1–36). A long tradition of polemics delineates the tug-of-war between Advaitins and other schools regarding the ontological status of the world (Dabee 2017, 89–104). In contemporary times, non-traditional views also emerged, influenced essentially from social or political backgrounds which questioned the relevance of Advaitic principles in their respective circles. B.R. Ambedkar (Moon 2014, 4:159) holds that Vedānta fails in its opposition against caste system. Many accused the system of promoting ‘a philosophy of escapism rather than engagement with

76 The Grand-Master of śaṅkara whose Ajātivāda formulated in his Māṇḍukya Kārikā formed the basis of the latter’s Māyāvāda.

77 Saptavidhā anupapatti – in his commentary on the Brahmasūtras

the world' (Malhotra 2014, 171). Advaita has also been labelled as dogmatic and orthodox, owing probably to its acknowledgment of the *Śruti* (Vedas) as holding a valid epistemic premise and itself being an exegesis thereof (Nicholson 2007, 536).

The applicability of Advaitic principles and practices have always been subject to interrogations whether in traditional or non-traditional settings. Correspondingly, refutations have also been taking place. The *Siddhi* Literature in Advaita addresses the traditional scholarly critics.⁷⁸ Incidents in the life of *Śaṅkara*⁷⁹ and the literary heritage⁸⁰ he bequeathed are abundant in instances which demonstrate Advaita's realism. The famous meeting with the *Cāṇḍālā* is a glaring evidence of his engagement with the practical world (Madhava-Vidyaranya 2002, 59–60). In non-traditional settings, contemporary Indian Philosophers, hailing from both academic and non-academic backgrounds have attempted to represent Advaita with emphasis more on the practical and ethical aspects than the metaphysical or epistemological ones. The list begins obviously with Swami Vivekananda whose Practical Vedānta was the pioneering attempt to establish the universality of Vedānta ("Swami Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta American Vedantist" n.d.). Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's Advaita of Integral Experience and Aurobindo's *Pūrṇādvaita* downplay the over-emphasis laid upon *Māyā-avidyā* and propose new interpretations and pathways to actualize Advaitic principles in ethics and praxis (Lal 1978). These eminent thinkers and a host of other scholars have demonstrated the perennial relevance of Advaita Vedānta amongst whom Swami Sivananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati and Swami Chinmayananda still influence current discourse. One of the first to raise the alarm on the need for sustainability could have been Gandhi. He is indeed the archetype of the ethical and practical application of the Vedāntic metaphysics. His adherence to Satya

78 Notable among them are – *Brahmasiddhi* of Maṇḍana Miśra, *Naiṣkarmya Siddhi* of Sureśvarācārya, *Advaita siddhi* of Madhusudana Saraswatī and *Īśāsiddhi* of Vidyāranya

79 As a social and religious reformer, he condemned several malpractices, reformulated some and inaugurated others.

80 Apart from the scholarly commentaries on the *Prasthānatrayī*, Śaṅkara composed several hymns and hundreds of Stotras addressed to popular deities worshipped in different sectarian groups: The *Bhajaḡovindam*, *Śivapañcākṣara Stotram*, *Saundaryalahari*, etc. These are literary gems that overflow with devotional fervor and emotions (Sastri, n.d., 26–28).

(Truth) and Non-violence (*Ahimsā*) were based on the fundamental tenets of Vedānta.⁸¹

These therefore legitimize Vedānta's metaphysics and epistemology. While during their time, Sustainability may not have been a burning issue⁸² and since it is already inherent in the Indian ethos,⁸³ it is not surprising that their respective publications make no direct reference to related themes. On the other hand, with the rise in global consciousness regarding the issue, numerous activists have triggered a new discourse based on environmental ethics of ancient Indian sages. Vandana Shiva for instance, militates for an ecological philosophy from a feminist perspective partly-inspired from the Vedas. Swami Veda Bharati's Seed as the Cosmic Principles, Swami Atmarupananda's Seed of Wisdom, Swami Omkarananda's The DNA of our Soul cannot be genetically modified! Swamini Svatmavidyananda's Cosmic Ecology and Diversity: Lessons from the Vedas, are all instances of contemporary endeavours to examine the narratives on Sustainability from Vedic-Vedāntic and Advaitic vantage points (Sacred Seed 2014, 36, 46, 77, 110). Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Sadhguru, founders of Art of Living and Isha Foundation respectively, are amongst spiritual leaders who are preaching Vedāntic principles with focus on social, political, and environmental justice and equality. Adherence to Vedānta's metaphysics is tacit in the discourse of all the aforementioned modern gurus since any ethical or aesthetic delineation is inevitable without referring to the system's ontological standards.

Substantiating Vedāntic metaphysique's relevance to Sustainability in its own begs for a dedicated chapter of discussion, which extends beyond the scope and purpose of this paper. It recognizes, however, the necessity to revise the "grand narratives" of Vedantic philosophy to incorporate intersectional perspectives that consider how caste, gender, and class intersect and contribute to marginalization. However, setting aside the critics – whether contemporary or ancient, and considering its resilience and adaptability, the previous discussion validates the

81 His comments on the first verse of the Īśa Upaniṣad were noted while discussing on the Upaniṣads

82 Most contemporary Indian Philosophers belong to the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.

83 As discussed during analysis of Vedic, Upaniṣadic and Advaitic passages

potential of Advaita to furnish a sound Metaphysique for Sustainability. Being a sophisticated system of thought evolving from the Upaniṣads, themselves called Vedānta as they constitute the “end of the Vedas,” Advaita resembles the majestic *Aśwattha*⁸⁴ tree, firmly grounded in Indian culture and supported by an unwavering metaphysical trunk. Its branches bear ethical and aesthetic fruits and flowers that frame the character and guide the conduct of its practitioners. It stands resilient against the challenges of its environment, anchored by its sound epistemic roots. As such, its contribution towards Sustainability is an option worth considering for mankind’s future and man’s ultimate accomplishment (*paramapuruṣārtha*).

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84 The tree ‘whose roots are above and branches below’ is the metaphysical symbol for Brahman-Ātman has been mentioned in the Upaniṣads (Kaṭha Up. II.3.1) and the Bhagavadgītā (XV.1-4)

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