



Support of spirituality and traditional culture to achieve sustainable development goals

Narayan G. Hegde

Managing Trustee, Nature Cure Ashram, Urulikanchan, Pune

Corresponding author: narayanhegde47@gmail.com

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Abstract

'Sustainable Development Goals' is the Mission set by the United Nations to reduce poverty and provide basic needs to ensure food security and better quality of life. However with a wide variation in the socio-economic status among different sections of the societies, people with better knowledge, resources and social status are able to dominate others, constantly widening the economic disparity. The exploitation of the poor by rich has been going on ever since the origin of the human races. Knowing the attitude to crave for more, the spiritual scholars of different religions have developed their moral code of conduct, which is expected to be followed to maintain harmony and happiness within the community. If some of the basic principles such as selfless service, control on greed, non-violence, honesty and compassion, etc. are practiced in our daily life, the earth would have plenty of food and other resources to meet the needs of all, and the weaker sections of the society need not struggle to earn their livelihood. Similarly, if all the persons engaged in implementing the sustainable development programme take their jobs as their moral obligation, then the chances of success of the programme will be certain. Hence, spiritual orientation should be an integral part of the Sustainable Human Development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Manava Dharma, Asthanga Yoga, Spirituality and Sustainable development

Uniqueness of Human Species

Human beings are very special living creatures in the world, different from all other animals because of their ability to think, analyse and act as per their will. Our

uniqueness is our ability to think (Johnson, 2002), remember past experiences and develop our intellect (Buddhi), which make us alert in responding suitably on different occasions for our safety and security. Human species is the highest and the most

advanced form of genetic evolution in the world. It has taken over six million years (Sharma, 2007) of genetic modification after the birth of the first mammal to generate the human species. It has taken over 5 - 6 million years for the development of human beings from the monkey. The first human race originated only about two lakh years ago. This indicates the most superior status of human species in the universe. This finding confirms the ancient Hindu spiritual scriptures that the human is the highest and most advanced form of living creature in the animal kingdom. The spiritual scriptures also mention that the soul present in human beings would have taken several births and rebirths as different animal species and the souls performing good deeds (Karma) get an opportunity to take birth as human beings.

The human population which originally grew up in Africa for millenniums, gradually migrated in groups to different parts of the world and evolved their cultures and languages during the next 150,000 years. By about 10,000 BC, the human population had spread all over the world, settled in fertile river valleys and started agriculture and animal husbandry for their livelihood. They started feeling the need for recognising the role of different people in the community, respecting each other for living in harmony. Around 3000 BC, known as the Bronze Age, the communities settled in the Indus valley of the Indian subcontinent, as well as in Egypt and Iraq, were considered as three early world civilisations. During the same period, around 3500 BC, the Minoan civilization was established in Europe, which was the first civilization in the world. The Indus Valley Civilisation, which was developed between 2600 BC and 1900 BC had developed the art of cultivating land for plenty of food production. The community

developed *Sanskrit script for documentation, while the language for communication was developed long before. People started asking many questions about human origin, source of livelihood, presence of God, the way to live, etc. They recognised five elements of nature - water, earth, air, fire and space (Akash) (Muralivallabhan, 2022) as the basis of all living and non-living creatures and started respecting them and worshipping these resources as God. This was the beginning of the human civilisation.*

This was the emergence of the Vedic culture, when many spiritual scholars meditated deeply, sacrificing their family comforts and turned into sages (Rishis). They documented the knowledge they imbibed during deep meditation and this tradition continued for many centuries. Later, their recitations were documented and known as the four Vedas namely, Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda. In each Veda, certain parts were dealt with rituals and prayers (Karma-Kanda), while some other sections contained the philosophy of God, known as Brahman and Self-consciousness (Jnana-Kanda). The teachings of Vedas were summarised in Vedanta through three important documents, namely Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Brahma-sutras. Hindus consider the Vedas as the impersonal, authorless revelations with specific sacred sounds, heard by ancient sages after intense meditation. These Vedas narrate the concept of Hinduism and the logic behind the suggested actions. The teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, Mahabharata and Ramayana also convey the essence of Vedas and Upanishads, in a simple language to help common people to understand their moral and righteous duties and to tide over their emotional crisis. These documents were considered as the

model code of conduct or the rule-book for ideal way of living. These scriptures also serve as a guide to think about the purpose of human existence and to set their goal in life, which is known as *Purushartha* (Aims of human life).

Purpose of living

Unlike other animals, human beings are born with a unique mental faculty to choose and act against natural laws. They generally develop a tendency to possess more, craving for comforts. In the process of acquiring more resources and power, they do not hesitate to disturb the life of other fellow beings as well as of animals and plants living around them. Therefore, the sages have introduced two sets of rules, such as carrying out the moral duties and to pursue the ultimate goal of self-realisation, curbing their natural instincts of grabbing and craving for pleasure. Accordingly, the human endeavours should focus on achieving Dharma, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha* (Mishra, 2013). Dharma is the moral obligation to sincerely serve for the welfare of others. Artha is to generate wealth through honest means to meet the materialistic and social requirements. Kama is to fulfil the needs and acquire social recognition for pleasure. Moksha is the real and ultimate human goal to detach from the materialistic and emotional possessions to unite with God or the super-soul for real bliss (happiness and peace), which can be achieved through right knowledge.

Eternal laws for living: the rules for human living

These eternal laws or the universal code of conduct is known as *Sanatana Dharma*. It was evolved for all the human beings to develop high standards of living in happiness. Sanatana Dharma suggests that the supreme reality is Brahman (Saha,

2021), who is formless and invisible, but can come in many forms and names on different occasions (reincarnation). The soul or *Atman* is the essential element in each person, which is infinite, indestructible, indivisible and eternal. It enters the body before birth and leaves the body at the time of death (transmigration). Sanatana Dharma believes in the Law of Karma, which suggests that any action committed by someone to hurt others will come back to affect that person in the future life, if not during this life. The same principle is applicable for good deeds as well. The main goal of life is to achieve liberation from the painful cycle of birth and death, which can be achieved by giving up attachment and jealousy. The best way to gain freedom from miseries and painful sufferings is to relinquish personal desires. Humanity should be the core principle of life with non-violence, equality and selfless service. Different people with different religious faith will find the same eternal truth. Hence, one should have tolerance, non-aggression and compassion for others, including plants and animals.

The communities living in Indus valley, following Sanatana Dharma were named as Hindus. Later, several other religions were established by spiritual leaders in different regions. The Jewish sacred text 'Hebrew Bible' has prescribed the laws of conduct known as the Ten Commandments that directs their followers to maintain good behaviour. The other religions such as Christianity, Islam, Jainism and Buddhism have a common belief that God is supreme, omnipresent, creator and maintainer of the universe. People of different religions have called Him by different names. All these religions have developed their code of conduct to maintain high moral values.

These moral values set by different religions are like the rules for ideal living. Before playing any game, the players are expected to understand the rules of the game thoroughly. This will help them to practice properly and play skilfully to win the game. Without the rules, it is impossible to play any game and arrive at any conclusion. Similarly, the Government and business establishments have their standard policies to function effectively with transparency. Likewise, without the moral code of conduct, it is impossible for us to live in harmony with others and the nature.

Ashtanga yoga for self-realisation

Over 5000 years ago, a supreme Yoga scholar, Sage Patanjali prescribed an eight-fold path for reaching the ultimate goal of self-realisation, known as the Ashtanga Yoga (Bhasin. 2008). The following eight components include the moral code of conduct (*Yama*), personal discipline (*Niyama*), physical and breathing exercises, which are basic necessities for human well-being.

- **Yama:** Adoption of moral codes such as Non-violence (*Ahimsa*), Truthfulness (*Satya*), Non-stealing (*Asteya*), Celibacy (*Brahmacharya*) and Non-possessiveness (*Aparigraha*).
- **Niyama:** Maintaining personal disciplines such as Purity (*Shoucha*), Contentment (*Santosh*), Endurance (*Tapa*), Self-study (*Swadhyaya*) and Dedication (*Eshwar Pranidhan*).
- **Asana:** Taking a stable and comfortable Yoga position.
- **Pranayama:** Start breathing with concentration on breath.

- **Pratyahara:** Withdrawal of the senses to increase the power of the mind.
- **Dharana:** Concentration of mind on one object.
- **Dhyan:** Meditation, by focusing on one point and concentrating on it.
- **Samadhi:** State of supreme bliss and joy, while merging the self with Brahman.

Thus the spiritual scriptures insist on regular control of human behaviour for progress, both in personal and public life.

Caution about blind rituals

To imbibe high moral values and to promote good deeds, the Hindu traditions based on Sanatana Dharma have introduced several rituals from the conception of a child by the parents until death, aimed to inculcate good values, known as Samskaras. However some of these rituals are outdated and misconceived. Therefore, while following the old rituals prescribed in the scriptures, it is necessary to be cautious and rational, because there have been rampant exploitation of innocent people in the name of rituals and religion. Most of the rituals were initially introduced to create faith and devotion among common people (McGuire, 2008). However, these religious practices became a source of blind faith and exploitation by the priests and other vested interests in the society, which were absolutely unethical and unreasonable. Such exploitations were resisted from time to time. This has also been the reason for revolt and birth of new religions and faith. For instance, Raja Ram Mohan Roy witnessed various socio-religious evils such as the Sati system, polygamy, child marriage, persecution of widows, caste distinction and meaningless Hindu

ceremonies including human sacrifice, lavish expenditure on food, alcohol and prostitution under Tantrism, which were practiced as Hindu customs. In protest against these practices, he established the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, which propagated the worship of one Supreme God, based on the tenets of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. In 1875, Swami Dayanand Saraswati established the Arya Samaj, upholding the validity of the Vedas, the doctrines of Karma and the importance of *Samskaras*, while opposing the worship of images, animal sacrifice, and rejecting castes and untouchability, child marriage, pilgrimages, offerings to priests and temples, etc. Mahatma Gandhi and Bhimrao Ambedkar fought against untouchability. The time has come to understand the principles of our religion and practice them, while discarding many outdated and blind rituals (Hegde, 2022).

Status of human development

The guidelines provided by the ancient sages through various scriptures over the last 5000 years are relevant even during modern times, except certain outdated religious rituals, which need to be ignored. The prediction about human beings becoming victims of uncontrolled desires has also come true. There has been some variation among the communities living in different regions. With the knowledge acquired, religions practiced and resources available, the living habits of different communities have also varied significantly. Both spiritual and formal education played an important role in their development. Thus, there was a clear divide between different regions. Some regions made faster progress to become developed nations, while some regions remained underdeveloped and a few other regions who made slow progress came in the

category of the developing nations. Within every country and even within the communities, there has been a disparity among the families, with regard to their access to the resources and capacity to generate wealth, social status, etc. This was not merely because of their knowledge and physical ability, but also due to discrimination, non-cooperation and exploitation by the powerful members of the society.

Presently, out of the 8 billion world population living in 195 countries and spread over 6 continents, about 8.5 per cent people are living in poverty, earning less than \$2.15 per day. There are wide variations in the socio-economic status of these countries and among the communities within each country. The percentage of poor population has been less than 1.0% in the developed countries, while it was the highest - at 34.6% in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Sustainable development goals

To address the sufferings of the people caused by various problems, the United Nations member countries have adopted a set of 17 global goals for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to address the most pressing social, economic and environmental challenges in the world as presented in Figure 1. These goals aim to eradicate poverty, promote sustainable development, and ensure a better quality of life for all. The SDGs address poverty alleviation, food security, water supply, clean energy supply, education, healthcare, gender equality, climate action and inter-regional cooperation. By 2030, these countries are committed to achieving these goals through targeted actions, policies and international cooperation. UN has developed comprehensive guidelines for sustainable development, with equitable,

inclusive and sustainable growth of our future generations.

The United Nations has also developed the Human Development Index to measure the progress of the nation, based on the performance of three important areas of human development, such as health and longevity, educational status and standard of living of the citizens. India has fallen behind on 19 of 33 indicators. Over 75% of Indian districts are below the target for eight crucial indicators including poverty, anaemia, child marriage, domestic violence, malnourished children, access to essential services, modern contraceptive use and tobacco consumption. According to the United Nations SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2023, India secured 112th rank among 166 countries, with an overall index score of 63.5 percent in its progress. Nevertheless, India has made significant progress in important sectors. Most significantly, the poverty rate in India

has decreased from 45% in 1993 to around 21% in 2011 and it further declined to 9.89% in 2023 (Niti Aayog, 2023). The prevalence of undernourished people has decreased from 18.2% in 2004-2006 to 16.6% in 2023. There was a significant reduction in maternal mortality ratio from 254 per 100,000 live births in 2004-2006 to 52 in 2023. The under-five mortality rate has also declined from 89 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 30.6 in 2021. India has achieved near-universal primary school enrolment, with an enrolment rate of 98.3% in 2018. The child marriage rate has declined from 47% in 2005-2006 to 30% in 2015-2016. Access to improved drinking water sources has increased from 73% in 1990 to 94% in 2017 and access to improved sanitation facilities has also increased from 21% in 1990 to 71% in 2017. For the success in all these sectors, social capital has played an important role through community engagement.



Figure 1. Sustainable development goals of the united nations

Support of spirituality to achieve sustainable development goals

It can be observed from the above SDG progress report of India that the performance has been better with social capital inputs, where the activities were not carried out mechanically, but with concern and commitment for the vulnerable sections of the society, by actively involving them in implementing the development programmes. It has been observed that the guidelines and methodologies developed by the United Nations to achieve the goals are not adequate to reach the last in the society. In most of the developing countries, many people chronically deprived of their basic needs, are ignored by the vested interests in the society. The poor and socially backward communities are also unaware about the new development programmes and opportunities. They are generally hesitant to take any risk. In a heterogeneous society, where the poor have to compete with the literate, rich and powerful people for their survival, intelligent and influential people would have grabbed all the good opportunities before the poor could take a decision to take part. Therefore to ensure inclusive development and active participation, the programme implementation team should mobilise the target population at the grassroots level and mentor them throughout, till the completion of the programme. This in a way calls for selfless service, without expecting any benefits in return from them. When the programme implementing team members consider the project work as obligatory or a moral duty, then they feel concerned about the poor and go out of their way to support them. The well-to-do families within the communities should be willing to sacrifice the benefits which they were taking by exploiting the poor in the past. This can happen when the stakeholders are oriented

through spiritual awareness that it is unethical and immoral to exploit others. Kindness and concern for others is a part of all the civilised cultures. Thus spirituality and awareness about moral obligations prescribed in most of the religions and cultures can accelerate the process of achieving the SDGs.

Impact of spirituality on sustainable development

The spirituality and our cultural values can help in promoting sustainable development in the following ways.

- 1. Motivation of participants for active involvement:** As the poor are ignorant about the benefits of the development projects, most of them keep away from these programmes. Those who have been practicing traditional rituals, do not like to give up these practices. For instance, people who believed in performing religious rituals to get cured of certain diseases do not like to go to any doctor for treatment. Many of them might have also experienced exploitation by some of these doctors. There have been many instances where some of the doctors have removed certain organs of the ignorant and poor for selling them to rich patients in the pretext of treating them for their ailments. However, all doctors are not bad. Hence the community leaders and fellow members in the communities should be sensitised to motivate the target groups to take active part to harness the benefits of the development programmes and come out of poverty. It is probably the progressive members of the

communities who need to realise their righteous duties to help others, instead of exploiting them. Then the development programmes can be accelerated to realise our goals.

2. **Dedication for selfless service:** For the success of any development programme, the programme implementation team should have faith and confidence in the programme. They should make sincere efforts to implement the programme in the true spirit. The Professionals engaged in development should have concern for the target population and interact with them with respect and humanity. Unfortunately this aspect is missing in many professionals. If the project members consider diligent implementation to be their moral obligation, then their communication with the stake holders will be very effective in delivering the services effectively.
3. **Self-discipline:** When Mahatma Gandhi launched the Sarvodaya programme for the upliftment of the poor people in rural India, he prescribed a code of conduct for the volunteers of the Sarvodaya team to maintain discipline and ethical standards. The Sarvodaya volunteers had to take the following eleven pledges to practice. These are: Nonviolence (Ahimsa), Truth (Satya), Self-Discipline or Chastity (Brahmacharya), Non-Stealing (Asteya), Non-Possession (Aparigraha), Physical labour (Sharirashrama), Control of Palate (Asvada), Fearlessness (Abhaya), Equal Respect for All Religions (Sarva-Dharma-Samanatva), Duty

towards the nation (Swadeshi) and Removal of Untouchability (Asprishyata nivarana). With this discipline and commitment for selfless service, the Sarvodaya workers were able to motivate the target population with confidence to participate in the development programmes with success. Such disciplines can be followed by engaging Civil Society Organisations for implementing the programme and closely interacting with the communities.

4. **Curb on consumerism:** It can be observed that most of the people crave for more pleasure and possessions for their security and enjoyment. This results in increasing the demand for consumer goods and shortage of essential commodities available in the market. It has been amply demonstrated that without any spiritual base, most of the human beings are not contented with whatever they earn and possess. They have the tendency to compare themselves with others who are more resourceful and powerful and thus remain frustrated. With more wealth, they become arrogant and egoistic and feel angry and humiliated when others do not oblige them. People with spiritual orientation are capable of rational thinking and control their desires. Reduction in personal greed and worldly possessions can reduce the demand for many commodities and the resources available on this earth will be adequate to meet the needs of our people. Control of mind can prevent wastage and reduce pollution. Thus, sustainable

development can be achieved easily.

- 5. Non-violence for peace and conservation of biodiversity:** Non-violence is the basic foundation of humanity, preached by most of the religions. Jainism and Hinduism emphasise that even harsh words which hurt the feelings of others is also an act of non-violence. It also includes the protection of the plants and animals, which help to conserve the nature, reduce pollution and ensure harmony in the society. In a peaceful atmosphere, people develop trust among themselves and extend cooperation for mutual progress. This can bring transparency while implementing development programmes, leading to inclusive development of the entire society. If we had realised the importance of nonviolence, there would not have been any terrorism or war, which are keeping the entire world on tenterhooks and making life very uncertain.

Hence, there are many advantages of linking the development programmes with the community groups who respect the traditional culture, righteous duties and spiritual values. This can be done without any major change in the organisational structure and general guidelines suggested by the United Nations.

Conclusion

The objective of promoting the Sustainable Development Goals is to reduce the disparity between the haves and have-nots within the communities and between the regions in the world. The common causes of disparity are uneven access to resources, disparity in education, social and religious

taboos and unethical practices by the powerful and wise people to exploit others, either directly or indirectly. The nations participating in the SDGs aim to provide resources, infrastructure and technologies empower the local governments and the local communities to address their challenges and achieve the set 17 goals. However, without the commitment of all the stakeholders, both the participant communities and the officials engaged in programme implementation, the progress is slow. For realising the goals, the target communities are expected to change their attitude and work hard to engage in gainful employment, adopt basic hygiene and sanitation, family planning, good care of their children through proper feeding, immunisation, timely health care and education, control on their consumption, while avoiding the wastage of food and other resources. Simultaneously, the well-to-do members of the communities and the members of the programme implementation team should realise their righteous obligations for the welfare of others, weaker sections of the society in particular. This can address all the hurdles and accelerate the process of achieving the SDGs. As told by Mahatma Gandhi, the world has enough to meet the needs of all the people, but not enough to fulfil their greed. With spiritual and cultural orientation of the stake holders, SDGs can be achieved successfully.

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