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# **The Colonising Mind and the Polycrisis – An Interview with Sashikala Ananth & Raghu Ananthanarayanan**

## DECOLONISATION

Decolonisation has become a buzz word amongst the woke, leftist progressives on the street, and in some campuses. Overuse has no doubt robbed it of some of its validity. The term is usually understood as meaning liberation from a set of oppressive political structures, or the deracination of cultural attitudes. But it is more than this, as testified to by the work of academics going back to the black intellectuals of West Africa, and others liberated from colonialism in the 1950's. In addition to emancipated political agency, decolonisation involves the deconstruction of a worldview so deeply entrenched that it is almost invisible to those of us immured in it.

In a conversation ranging over two days in the mist-shrouded mountains of Kotagiri in South India, Steve and Mary of 3<sup>rd</sup> Space sat down with Raghu Ananthanarayan, an expert in the Yoga Sutras, and Sashikala Ananth, an architect trained in the Vaastu tradition. Their work aims at dismantling the colonised mind of young Indians disconnected from their own roots. Both are very clear about the current global legacy of coloniality and why it's important for all of us to understand.

Below is the first of a two-part interview. The second focuses on India's rich dharmic worldview rooted in radically different first principles and its relevance to the world

≡ today. Little known outside of India, India's sophisticated Vedic knowledge systems are fast disappearing even within India. Our conversation spotlighted the vast reach of modernist materialist philosophy and its repercussions socially, economically, and environmentally. Raghu made the point that the issue is not so much Western versus Eastern thought. The issue, he argued, is the sheer domination of this one worldview and its permeation of global educational institutions, political and economic policy today.

## The Birth of Two Revolutionary Educators

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** Welcome Sashi and Raghu. Can you briefly introduce yourselves and give some context for your work with young people.

**Sashi:** Raghu and I came from very similar lifestyles and community in Chennai (Madras). We were both exposed to [Indian] traditional culture very early. We learned chanting in Sanskrit, we learned Tamil and also went to a school where we learned English. Both of us were exposed to Indian classical music. My mother was a Vedanta scholar, so I was brought up with Vedanta in my life. And Swami Chinmayananda, my mother's guru, was my greatest influence. Although we were educated in the Western system, we were deeply introduced to the Vedic way. Raghu's family is very similar, except they were all lawyers and mine were mostly medical people.

We were twenty-two when we met. There was some kind of deep inner connection. In fact, we decided to get married after five days of knowing each other. Our initial joy and youthful optimism were abruptly ended when my father-in-law's company failed, and we inherited his debts. At twenty-seven with two young children and no money, life was very challenging. This continued for almost twelve years.

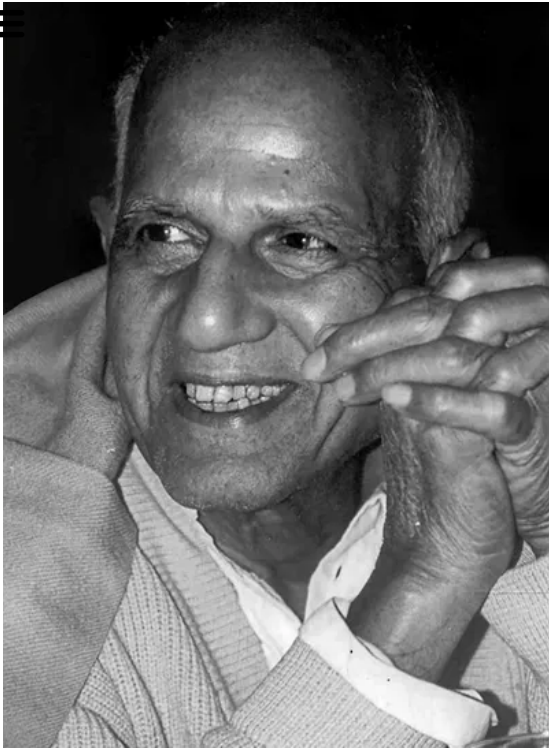


When you're very young, you're resilient. Hard times shape you, right? And this was a time when we met some great teachers such as J. Krishnamurti. We had a lot of exposure to him. And Raghu became very close to Krishnaji, spending hours alone with him in Chennai. We were also highly influenced by other teachers at that time as well.

We started working with yoga when we met Krishnamacharya of the Yoga tradition. So, our diet, our lifestyle, everything got attuned to the traditional way. All this time we kept pursuing our own subjects of interest. The person who inspired us to do this was a person called Dharampal. [A researcher of pre-colonial Indian history and culture, writer, thinker and philosopher].

Dharampal came into our life when we were in our 20's. There were about eighteen or twenty of us, all coming from premier institutions in India. Dharampal told us, '*If your generation doesn't go back to the traditions and study them, they are going to get lost. So, I want each of you to choose one tradition, go to a master and study for ten years and bring it back.*' So, I chose Vaastu Shastra, traditional Indian architecture, studying under the expert Dr Ganapathi Sthapati for ten years. Raghu chose the Yoga Sutras, studying under Krishnamacharya. Someone else chose Vedic mathematics, others Indian medicine, traditional agriculture, metallurgy and so on.





Shri Dharampal

Between us we had experts in every field. We all studied for a decade and came back and formed an organisation called PPST (Patriotic People Science and Technology), initially based in Chennai.

Around 2010, as we entered our 60's, our responsibility for the family was over. We entered Vanaprastha, [one of the Vedic stages of life] which means the *world* is your family. Whatever you've learned or acquired, you now offer back to the system.

So, in 2013 we sold our property in Chennai, came to this beautiful place in Kotagiri, and built Ritambhara, an ashram and learning centre. It's about 15 acres with lots of trees close to the forest, totally undisturbed. You only hear the birds. This is a place of retreat where we run programmes, where people can be reflective, contemplative.



Ritambhara Ashram, Kotagiri

# Looking Back to Go Forward

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** What was your intention with young people? What are you trying to achieve through the courses you teach?

**Sashi:** I teach Vaastu Shilpa (traditional architecture). Raghu teaches the Yoga Sutras. Through these, young people come to understand space and design, inner and outer balance, and harmony. We both bring traditional knowledge, keeping it alive for the next generation.

**Raghu:** The critical thing Dharampal said to us was, '*Don't study the Indian texts to glorify India, study them to see what's relevant today and apply it today.*' So, that's what we've been doing. And that's what we help these young people to do. The whole focus is on helping them to really understand what Yoga is.



**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** How do you do this?

**Raghu:** They go through many programmes working with the Mahabharata, [one of the most revered of India's ancient Sanskrit epics], and doing workshops based on experiential theatre. It's very intense. We do a lot of work also with the Yoga Sutras, understanding these and how they apply to oneself and to life. This involves dialogue, and a lot of reflection and contemplation. Many people who have been through all this are now teaching it in various domains themselves.



**Sashi:** Yes. We have trained at least 20 people who can take the work forward. The intention is to train the trainers. The framework of both traditions is so relevant today. Vaastu architecture is not disruptive to the environment. The Yoga Sutras teach us not to displace our inner sense of wellness by searching for something outside ourselves. But beyond this, we are also teaching people how to live a better life, how to be in harmony with the world around, how to be quiet, how to be contemplative. The people who come to us are looking at important life choices. Something critical in today's world.



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*In solitude the silence through which the atman speaks finally becomes audible.*

## The Colonised Mind

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** Who comes to see you, and what are some of the fundamental difficulties young Indians are struggling with?

**Raghu:** The average Indian doesn't know very much about our own traditions. This is primarily because of the way Indian education has been taught over the last seventy-five years.

There are generally two kinds of people, those who are hungry [to know] because they sense something very beautiful in our traditions. And they come to us. In fact, we started Ritambhara because a group of about 20 young people said, 'We are into

**Activism.** We'd like to understand how to anchor our activist work in the Yoga Sutras, and other Indian texts'. So that's how it all started. And interestingly, that was very much the way we started when we met Dharampal.

There is another set of people who have ended up with almost a self-hatred of being Indian.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** Is that a legacy of the colonial process?

**Raghu:** Yes, the colonised mind; what they have been taught about Indian culture. The British were excellent at inducing self-hate, and people have internalised it. We are running a programme now for those questioning this called, *The Difficulty of Being Dharmic*. People come to us from very diverse backgrounds including other religions, not necessarily Hindu. All the work we do involves at least a week of intensive self-reflective work and is fundamentally anchored on the Yoga sutras. The paradigm of development that was set up when we got our independence is a Western paradigm, and it's been imposed on most countries. But it's very clear we're destroying the earth with that paradigm.



**Sashi:** There's no space for replenishment in this paradigm, either at the level of the self or the ecosystem. It's a paradigm of constant use. This is something we need to help people to think differently about. It's not our prerogative to constantly use something that doesn't belong to us, that belongs to all humanity, to the next generation, to the earth. The paradigm of relentlessly using it for one's personal enjoyment, has to shift.



**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** Yes. It's an extractive paradigm.

## Western Versus an Indian Paradigm

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** Raghu, you've spoken at times about the impact of the West stripping practices and systems such as Yoga of their sacred roots. Can you say more about the significance of this?

**Raghu:** People understand the word Yoga in a very, very 'thin' way, and even that is distorted. Yoga is seen as an alternative form of exercise even here in India, because most of the people who study Yoga here are imitating a lot of what happens in the West.



You see it also with mindfulness. A lot of people here won't go to Vipassana. Yet they don't know that the entire mindfulness programme is a distorted, or extremely simplified version of that Buddhist practice. That's one of the consequences of the way we've been influenced by the West.

**Sashi:** These practices have been hijacked. And this is often tied to their becoming commercialised. That's why the trainings are often quick, easy to learn. Teaching mindfulness or yoga has become incredibly profitable. Certainly, in the West anyway. It's a massive business. And very rarely do those teaching it give attribution to the origin.

**Raghu:** It's a big issue. Yet this is the paradigm that people are taught in.

≡m struggling right now with how we introduce Indian psychology. I'm sure you've noticed how many major ideas in psychology came from the study of something Eastern. Most people don't know for example that Freud's idea of the id came from Taoist philosophy. Carl Rogers' work on Unconditional Positive Self Regard, was also influenced by Eastern thought.

**Sashi:** The issue is that these systems often come back repackaged in a distorted manner to the people from whom they were taken. Their sacred roots and meaning are lost, and they are presented as a 'product'.

**Raghu:** There was a period when Sanskrit had a huge impact, especially in Germany. People were looking at different paradigms then, it was more inclusive. But ultimately 'other' knowledge systems were pushed to the side as not being valid in the Western scientific community.

## The Idea of Being an Individual is a Lie

**Sashi:** Another aspect of all this is the exaggerated influence of the 'individual'. For example, we've become very conscious in our travels from East to West of how meditation has become all about the development of the individual. This lacks context, meaning one's development doesn't have much to do with the state of the world, or even the local community. It's all basically focused on the individual in a vacuum.



**Raghu:** This then gets translated and presented here in India in a way that is very attractive to the pleasure-seeking mind. I'm starting to call the idea of being an 'individual' a disease. Only a cancer extracts and never gives back. The idea of an

**Individual** as being a separate entity is a lie. It's one of the biggest misconceptions because in all the traditions where the deepest teachings of meditation come from, the self is connected to Nature, to the Cosmos.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** Yes, the whole point of quantum physics points to the fact that we are inseparable from the universe.

**Raghu:** Yes, at every point of given time.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** When you become aware of this, the way you interact in that moment with the world around you changes, right?

**Sashi:** Yes, absolutely. Everything completely shifts because you're relating from within a living context that you're an integral part of. There is a graciousness about the way you see, the way you listen. You're paying attention. Reciprocity is a natural result of that understanding.



**Raghu:** It's a result of saying that I belong. That I am because everything is and has been for billions of years. There's a story that when the Buddha had his satori or nirvana, he sees a leaf falling from a tree, and by the time this leaf fell to the earth,



~~The~~ Buddha saw the entire process of the interdependence of the universe that had created this particular leaf, on this particular tree, and caused it to fall.

Bill Bryson, in his book, *A Short History of Everything*, came up with something similar in the way he talks about interdependence. The only difference is there is no sacredness in this, no reverence. It's just stated as a fact.

**Sashi:** The Buddhist story is steeped in wonderment and reverence.

**Raghu:** Yes, and for that you have to be extremely grateful that you're alive. But if you say the earth *belongs to me*, why should I respect it? It becomes a 'thing' that I relate to as a separate individual, and then I'm not answerable to anybody or anything. There's no conscience in this. I can just consume, and it only depends on how powerful I am.

The interesting thing is that if you go back to the time of the Vedas, there is a hedonistic philosophy called the Charvaka, which atheists follow. This is as old as Yoga. However, all other Indian philosophies, whether Buddhist, Vedic, or whatever, opposed that theory which said exactly what modern materialism is saying – that the idea of life is to maximise your pleasure; the only obstacle being your fear, or lack of power. So, develop power and conquer fear. Have fun! That's the idea.

**Sashi:** This develops the demonic side of oneself. The Bhagavad Gita asks the question, "Can you have a conversation between the demonic side and your divine side, and allow the divine to keep the demonic under control, and ultimately dissolve it?"



Krishna instructing Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, from the Bhagavad Gita

**Raghu:** The understanding of deep structures of knowledge and language [in India] is being recognised today, but the problem in the West and with colonised Indians, is that these subtle truths which follow their own rational paradigm, are couched in metaphysical or symbolic language that is highly complex. So, on the one hand, in a scenario where Indian knowledge systems are beginning to regain some importance, (which is good for our work), on the other, the prevailing market forces are telling people it's all superstition. So, there's a clash then between those attempting to restore and rewrite Indian history and its systems, and the modern system.

## Shifting the Psychology of Scarcity

**Raghu:** About a year ago there was a video clip of a local Indian villager saying, 'you know why the colonisers came over here? Because they were living in areas that lacked resources. We didn't go outside India because we had plenty of food and resources. It's simple. The West colonised because of this scarcity. Now, you [the West] can shift your mindset because there is enough in the world for everybody. Instead, you develop more powerful weapons of war'. This is the outcome of a mindset that says the earth belongs to me.



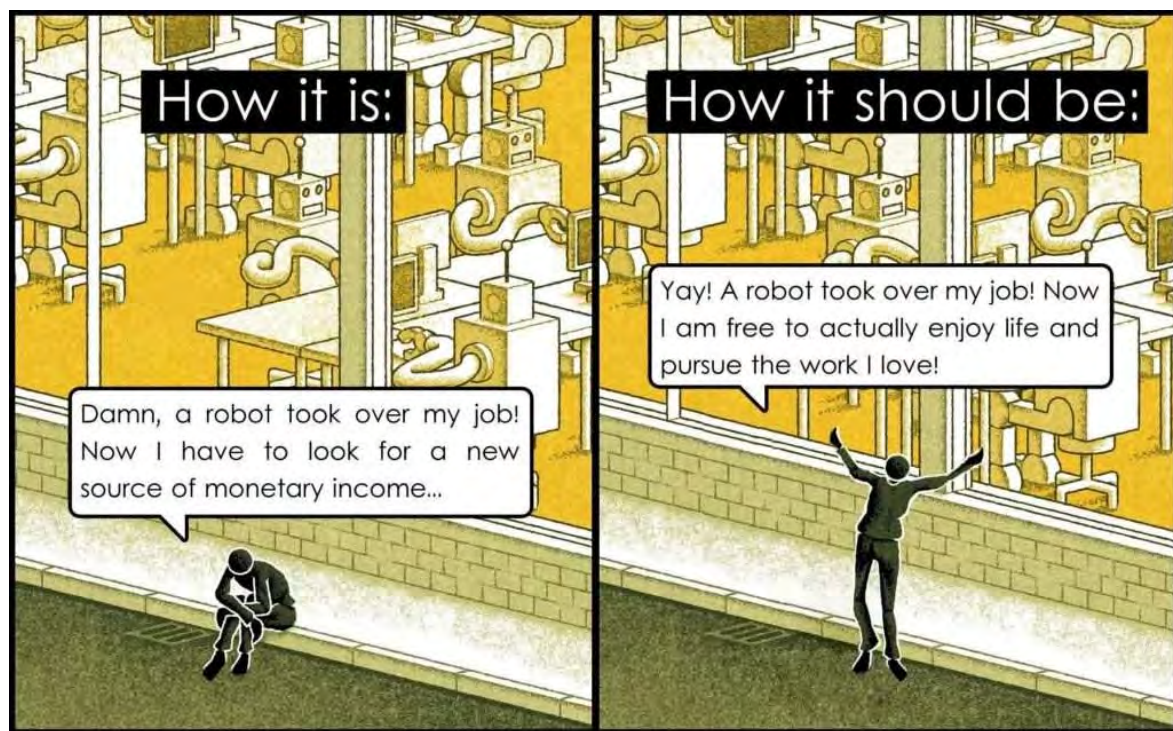
**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** It seems more like an existential poverty in the West. As that villager observed, there is no actual scarcity. In fact, those who have the most are cannibalising their own societies. Britain, one of the richest countries in the world, now has a black market in food because there is so much ‘created’ poverty. Relentless acquisition is a deep groove in the consciousness of modernity.

**Sashi:** It’s very concerning.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** Those who know something is deeply wrong, often feel cynical, unlistened to by their political leaders. But there is also a growing interest in Indigenous thinking. In fact, one of the most significant shifts in the last twenty years in the West is the recognition of what we’ve done to the natural world, how we’ve disassociated ourselves from it. But it’s just a very small beginning.

**Sashi:** Yes. One of the problems it seems, is that even when something different or new is revealed, the mind has been *trained* to convert this into something for the self. Like adding it to your CV or gaining market advantage. Instead of looking at it as an experiential pathway to open new thresholds.





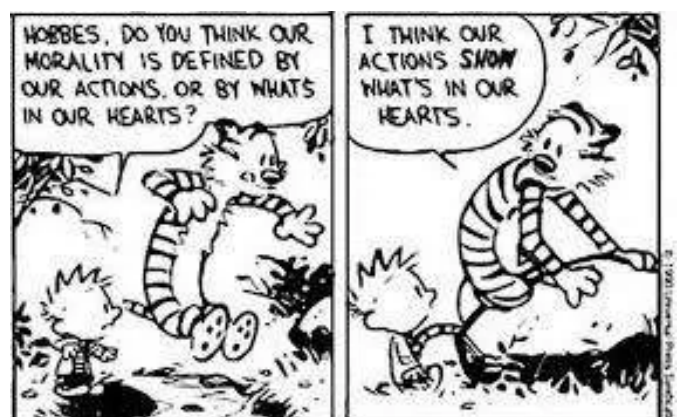
This seems so deeply ingrained that anything different that does open an unknown perspective, is not even given the time to be fully registered. It's so quickly made into an instrument for one's own advantage.

**Raghu:** It's a very difficult problem. Not that I know the solution. We see it also with allopathic medicine which strips away everything that makes Ayurvedic or Indigenous healing traditions holistic. Companies create a pill from certain herbs, put a patent on it, and make billions from it. This process is key to the problem.

Even regarding Buddhism, it's usually taught without knowledge of 'Sila' (Sheela), the ethical ground for 'right living', relating to the environment etc. Yoga too is taught without the Yamas (rules) that teach honesty, how to deal with money and so on. Removing these essential parts of Eastern teachings, on the grounds that they will not be bought or consumed in the West if included, is a real problem. If people who are teaching are really concerned, they will not remove the 'dharmic' elements of these practices.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** It's an entrenched mindset, largely unquestioned. It's all seen as entrepreneurship.

**Sashi:** Yes, people need to make money, but how do we prevent this movement? How does one help people stop the habit of using something sacred for their own advantage? I think this is the first learning.



# ≡Beyond East and West

**Raghu:** You have to get beyond using terms like West versus East and focus on the ‘colonising mind’. There are different types of knowledge systems which are respected for their own realities. Right now, whether it’s China or America, apart from superficial structures, they are doing exactly the same thing. It’s the colonising mind extracting from the earth, destroying the earth, creating weapons of war, and so on. In the US, if you have money, you can get power. In China, if you have power, you can get money and control. It’s the same hierarchical structures, impenetrable, extremely secretive. They may look different from the outside. But the paradigms are exactly the same. Both are the Charvarka paradigm. There’s no sacredness in either of them, no respect for indigeneity. So that mind, that paradigm, has to be questioned. Then there is hope for other paradigms to emerge.

The 2nd part of this discussion on what a different paradigm can look like, will be published as a podcast.



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