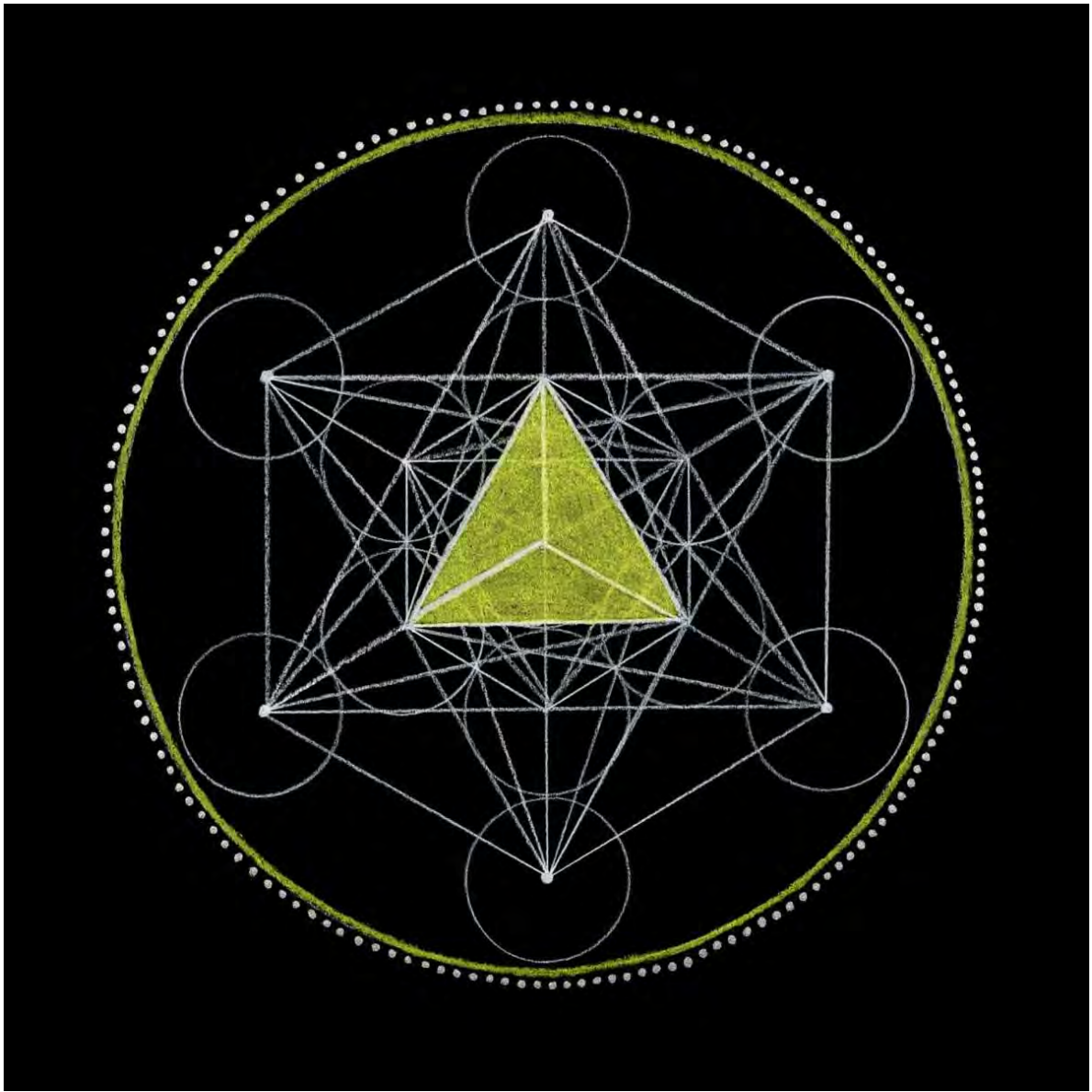




RD  
SPACE



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# **Recovering An Indigenous Knowledge System & Overcoming the Colonising Mind**

DECOLONISATION



Talk of the need for an alternate or new paradigm has definitely quickened over the last few years. More and more people are suspecting the dominant extractive worldview (the one that prioritises infinite economic growth over all else), as being the root cause of the catastrophic collapse of earth's living systems that we are all living through. Integral Theory regards the capacity to hold "multiple perspectives" as an elevated 'level of development'. But what does entering an entirely different perspective or worldview actually entail? How easy is it to dis-embed ourselves from the worldview we have grown up in as reality, and authentically adopt another? And what is the significance of entering into an entirely different cultural worldview? In this second half of a dialogue that took place over two days with Sashikala Ananth and Raghu Ananthanarayanan in the Kotagiri mountains of South India, we got a taste of what a radically different paradigm looks like, and what it means to embody it.

## Re-establishing India's Knowledge Systems

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** You said yesterday that you had discovered in your work with young people, that India has had two generations of brainwashing through the modern education system. And as a result, they have, to a greater or lesser degree, lost touch with, or been severed from, the wealth of Indian culture, its knowledge systems and sensibilities. You see your job as helping them have access to this and being able to express it in contemporary ways. We wanted to start today by asking you, how much impact do you see your work having? How is the next generation responding to it?

**Sashi:** There is a momentum even though we seldom do any advertising. People are coming to us. Doors are opening in a variety of ways. And the younger people in our groups are taking up the baton—reading papers, doing research, teaching in colleges and so on. So, there is a momentum, but considering there are only two of us, it is somewhat limited.

**Raghu:** Much of the interest at the moment has to do with the recent push by the government which is asking that 30% of the academic content of universities and colleges be derived from Indian knowledge systems. This has got its positives and negatives. The positive is that Sashi and I are getting invitations from universities. In

January, I am going to work with a university in Delhi to look at its entire education system, and how eventually all teachers would be able to convey an Indian mindset to their students.

The idea will not be to replace science, because it's not as though Indian knowledge systems did not have science. They did. For example, the idea of gravity has been around in Indian thought for a very long time. The idea of atoms and the octet structure of the atom was talked about by the Buddha. What people forget is that one of the reasons why so many came from the Middle East and Europe was because Indian metallurgy was very advanced. Mathematics, astronomy, and metallurgy were all highly sophisticated ancient sciences.



So, more than replacing the current scientific structure, the push is to let students in schools and colleges understand what the Indian contribution to science is, and therefore have a sense of pride. The negative side of this is that there is this colonising idea that the Indian mind is very good at talking about spirituality, but awful when it comes to practicality. And many Indians have internalised this. It's a widespread belief that is simply untrue.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** It's good to hear that the present Indian government is trying to renew confidence in India's knowledge systems. But how does this work when the current syllabus in schools and colleges in India, and the way science and other subjects are being taught, is currently almost entirely following the Western system?

**Raghu:** This is the problem, and I really don't know how it will unfold. But these deeper structures of knowledge are being studied by younger people. For example, Vedic mathematics and Sanskrit grammar and the way the language represents

Knowledge are being studied, including by people who are designing computers and computer language. So, the understanding of these deep structures of knowledge is being recognised.



**Sashi:** The problem with some of the misconception and the misunderstanding that takes place, both in the West and in many, I would say, colonised Indians, is that these subtle truths, which may actually follow their own rational paradigm, are also couched in metaphysical or symbolic language. So, it's highly complex. But this has a particular purpose. One is, so that it can be held in memory because so much of it was orally transmitted. So, knowing it in a particular symbolic rhythmic structure was easier to learn by heart and recite. The second aspect is, they saw everything in a *continuum*. The physical universe, its metaphysical basis, and that which is imperceptible, were all seen together. Today, we try to break these up and focus on only one aspect of it. But this is false. It is not the complete pattern. To be able to understand the complete pattern you have to look at the whole, what is called the *Purnam*, otherwise it loses its substance.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** So, there are still categories, but these categories in the traditional knowledge system exist within a completely different context. And without this, you are saying there is a fundamental miscategorisation?

**Raghu:** Exactly.

**Sashi:** And everything is fragmented.

# ⇒ A Continuum – From Abstract Ideas to the Human Perspective

**Raghu:** If you take the whole of the Indian knowledge system as a continuum, you have at one end, very sophisticated, abstract ideas about the nature of the universe. These ideas do not have any reference to God. They talk about how existence could ever have happened: *Did something come out of nothing?* Which is a very modern enquiry. *Did something come out of something? What was this something? What was the origin of it?* The conclusion they came up with through meditative practices is very profound: that there is something that is absolutely *still* and which has the ability to be conscious. You must have something conscious for it to perceive something else. At the same time there is something that is constantly moving and becoming something. But how do I know that something is moving unless I am *not* moving, right? This is a very profound idea. And then there is a whole way of looking at perception which is part of the yogic tradition, of how perception takes place, and what is the nature of matter. There are levels to this which are similar to quantum physics.

The basic structure of the universe is conceived as a tetrahedron, with Consciousness at the apex and the other three *shaktis* or forces at the base, forming a perfectly balanced potentiality. One of these forces could be called Energy (*Rajas/kriya/kriya shakti*). One could be called Materiality (*Tamas/sthiti/iccha shakti*), and one could be called Knowledge Force (*Sattva/prkAsham/jnana shakti*). So, these three interact with Consciousness and create all phenomenon.



**Sashi:** All creation comes out of it. This comes from the Tantric tradition.

**Raghu:** So, all categorisation in Indian thought follows this. From the original unknowable, to the various levels of what is known, it always maintains this relationship between knowing and the known. Between the original unknowable at one end, and the human perspective at the other. For example, in Sanskrit almost all words have a verb base, there are no nouns at all. All nouns are derivative of the verb. And there are no words that describe matter. There are only words that describe your *experience* of matter. For example, water has 125 words to describe it. it's not just 'water', because there are 125 characteristics of water. A flame can be light and heat and dryness, and so on.

So, each of these will have a separate word that describes the same phenomenon, but it's not an object definition. It's not as though we don't have a science that talks about objective realities, and how to describe them, but all categories would be from the human perspective. They will not be so-called objective.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** That's an exquisite understanding of the structures of the universe. In the West we don't have that, we don't even have the language for it. Because it's so inbuilt in us that the universe is separate, objective, and purely material. Whereas from what you are describing, it's living.

**Raghu:** It's living. It starts from the assumption that everything is conscious and alive.



Sashikala Ananth

**Sashi:** Also, I think, it's very important to note that every strata of people have a memory of this, in different ways. Through the *Puranas*, and other ancient texts, some of these very profound truths have been observed by ordinary people, who might even have been uneducated. So, their relationship with the mystery, the profundity of life, is just as special as an educated person.

**Raghu:** Ultimately, just like geometry is seen as the fundamental of all of creation, it is mathematics, arithmetical relationships, and proportions, that make up the foundation, not atoms and molecules. Atoms and molecules come out of it. So, in architecture, for example, it's all about proportions. In yoga also, it's again, proportions. Are all my energies in balance, in right proportion?

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** You could say the same thing I imagine in relationship to Ayurveda, India's traditional system of medicine?

**Sashi:** Yes, according to Ayurveda, the three regulatory principles, *Vata*, *Pitta* and *Kapha*, change in your body in relation to the seasons, and one's particular nature. There is a certain way to regulate these, through food, exercise, and rest. And you

**▬** balance these according but to *your* balance, not to a single perfect standardised concept of balance. Ayurveda accounts for the changing seasons and the daily cycle, which differs from morning to evening.

**Raghu:** Which means simply, are you in harmony with all the various energies within you?

**Sashi:** You can play with these patterns yourself until you are well, and healthy. And that's beautiful, because it gives you freedom, it liberates you. You're not being pushed by some expert out there in the market, controlling your food, your diet, and your life. My grandmother for example, knew what to feed which child in the home in which season, in line with their particular nature. And she only had an eight-standard education.

**Raghu:** One of the traditions that's becoming well-known in the Bengali tradition, is called the Bauls. The Bauls are nomadic, they travel around the country playing music and singing. They represent a profound mystical tradition. And their songs have these same three levels. At one level, the song is just a description of Shiva or Krishna, or whatever deity they are singing to. They sometimes sing to Allah. They don't make any superficial [religious] divisions. At another level, their songs will talk about how you should live and what you should do, so that your prana or life-force is at its best. And then they will also refer to profound truths about the origination of the world, all in the same song.





**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** So, all these dimensions are alive in ordinary people's experience in some form?

**Raghu:** Exactly. For example, if you go to many South Indian villages, you'll find the great Indian epic of the Mahabharata being traditionally performed there over eighteen days, through half the night or sometimes the whole night. Again, these three levels are there in the dialogue. Each character, if you look at the name of the character, for example Yudhishtira; on one level, it's just the name of a person. At a second level, it's symbolic of a person who can go into chaos and bring order. So, each name has its own inner meaning. And you'll find villagers using this in dialogue amongst themselves. For example, they'll say, "What's happening to you? Why are you shaking? You are a Yudhishtira!" It's really amazing. They know these so-called secrets.

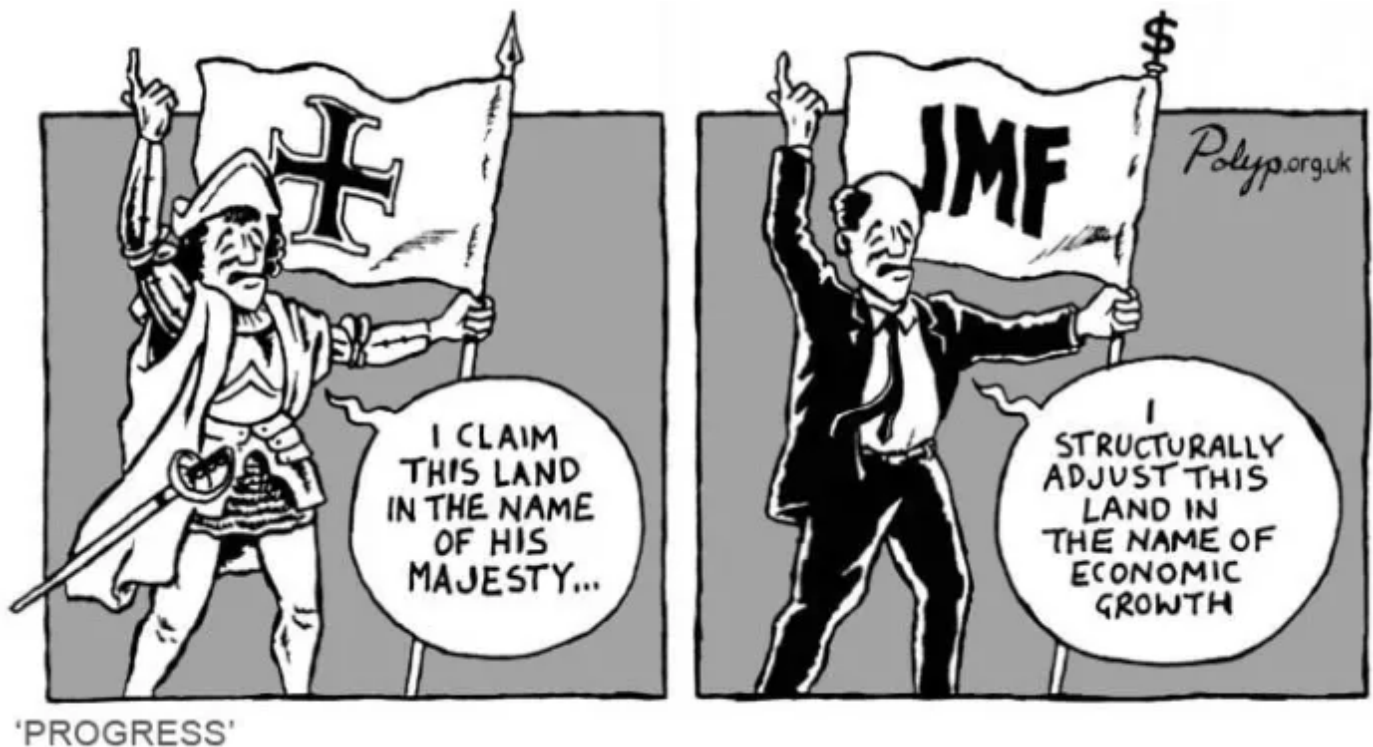
Ayurveda was also taught like this. The general knowledge of Ayurveda was available to everyone, not only to the Vaidya doctor. My great grandmother would know what to cook, when to cook, and for what remedial purpose.

## Cultural Memory and Finding the Middle Ground

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** My Ayurvedic doctor's real concern is that Ayurveda is now being taught almost exclusively in universities. And he says you can't teach Ayurveda in university. It's not an academic subject because it's grounded in a completely different orientation that has a spiritual basis. His own guru never charged for any of his treatment.

**Raghu:** It's not really to do with the fact that he didn't charge. The tradition was that there were certain things for which there was no exchange of money, like education, health, and food that was given in the temples. There was a certain category of things that could not be commoditized. But then there was a larger social structure that included monetary exchange which kept all of this alive with the sale of fabric, spices, metalwork, and so on. So, when that whole system got disrupted, those who operated from and trusted that system suddenly became impoverished. Most of the criticism of India today does not consider the way we were pauperised. There is a study that the equivalent of \$43 trillion was taken from India during the colonial period. So, then India went from being one of the wealthiest countries in the world to one of the poorest. And there is the perception that this is just because we are Indians, and many Indians believe this. That's the sad part.

Just yesterday, I spoke to the National Association of Psychologists in India, and we discussed how to bring India's own knowledge systems into the university. And the organiser said, 'the problem is that we ourselves are half colonised'.



So, we have to go beyond terms like West versus East and go into the *colonising mind* itself. There are different types of knowledge systems which are respected for their own realities. But the colonising mind, whether it's in China or America, apart from superficial structures, is doing exactly the same thing, 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 structure, impenetrable beyond a certain point and extremely secretive. So, they may look different from the outside, but the paradigm is exactly the same. They're both of the *Charvaka* (materialist) paradigm. There's no sacredness or respect for indigeneity in either of them. So that mind, that paradigm has to be questioned. Then there is hope for other paradigms to emerge.

## Collective Knowledge Holding and Community

Sashi: There is a concept of what I call *feminising* which questions this whole pattern of hierarchy and power holding. In the earlier system, knowledge was available to everyone. So, there was a collective co-holding of knowledge. Just as there was a co-holding of reality. We have to bring back that mutual dignity, where holding knowledge *collectively* can create a better life for all. Because knowledge is not really 'mine'. This is what the tradition valued. Knowledge is simply *there*, and I'm just a

**H** conduit for that knowledge. It's always there, and each generation is able to utilise it in its own way, allowing that knowledge to flow. Until that happens, I don't think we can talk about real change, real transformation of the psyche.

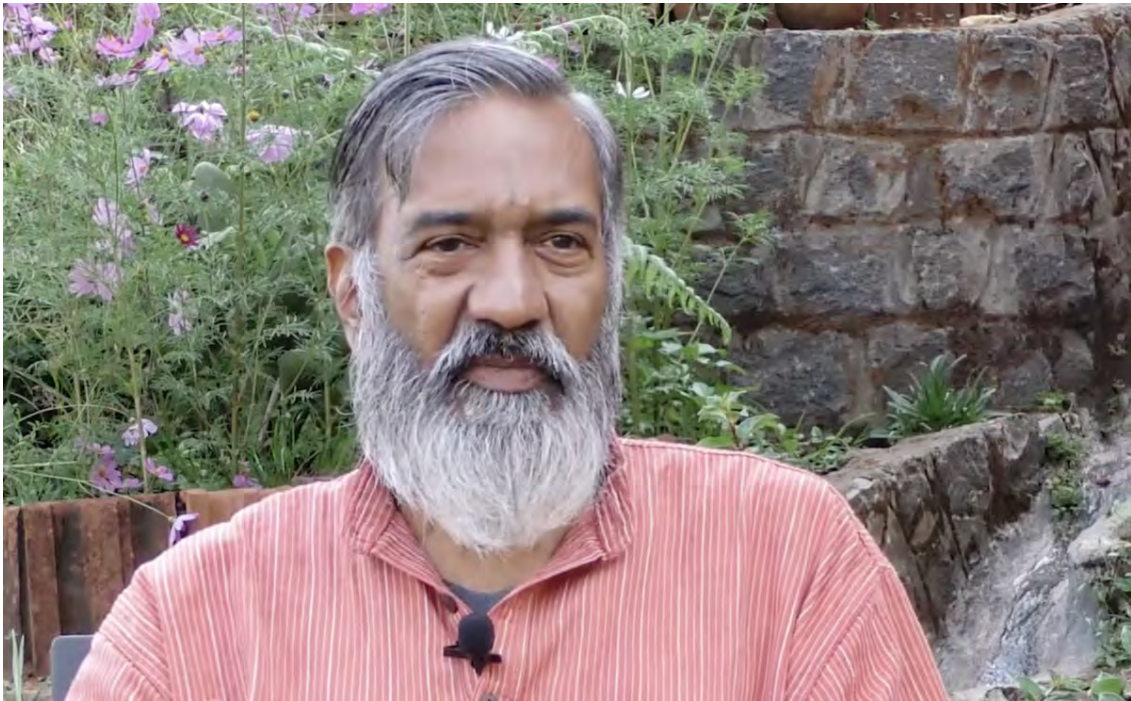


**3rd Space:** One of the things that's been decimated in the West is the sense of the local, of community, where local people, their voice, their thoughts, their concerns, are valued. There is a movement now to revive this sense of community.

**Raghu:** Recently, a colleague and I who have been working on local grass roots issues, were invited by the Tamil Nadu government to determine how to relieve poverty from the most backward districts in the state. So, we looked at their current approach and the way it was designed, and all the indicators from our point of view were wrong. It was designed according to the so-called Western model. The only indicators were economic. So, we sat back and worked on a framework consisting of six resources, where we looked at economics, education, ecology, as well as the political, social, and cultural realities.

What we discovered was that the *poorest* district in all the real indicators of well-being and health and local employment was the one which had a very high GDP. This was eye opening! This whole area had been given over to contract and machine-based farming. So even though there was seemingly economic prosperity, the highest infant mortality, and negative impacts across all of the six indicators we were looking at, were in that same place.

If you went there, however, you would see nice so-called 'pukka' houses. So, there's an appearance of prosperity but it's completely superficial. Then you have the loss of all these traditional continuities. The grandmother's knowledge, who does she pass it on to?



Raghu Ananthanarayanan

The easiest way of pushing you to be an individual, utilitarian, objective, is to take away community. And because all the community processes, where people knew how to come together and work with each other, despite differences, have been destroyed, divisions appear. So, we gambled with this. We went there and we said let's talk about the old system. And they understood it. This so-called marginalised group of people came together and said, 'water is such an important thing for us, the health of mothers'. There was the memory of how to work together as a community. It was incredible to see this.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** That's an amazing illustration.

**Raghu:** The more you destroy this cultural wealth, the more this group of people have to be part of the industrial complex for jobs, and the easier it is to break all the cultural continuities, the learning systems and so on.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** And then the view from outside is that this is an impoverished place.

**Raghu:** Exactly.

## **The Dharma and Being a Custodian of the Earth**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** One thing that is beginning to emerge in the West is an intuitive sense that things are profoundly wrong at an existential level. People are beginning to recognise that this is a systemic problem, a consciousness problem. Is this similar in India? Or is there still an enchantment with the current paradigm?

**Raghu:** The enchantment is wearing off. There are a lot of people who are saying that the Western paradigm is wrong. They know there is an Indian way of looking at things, which has a much better answer. I've been having conversations with younger people who are asking, 'what about dharmic principles of living'? So hopefully, there are more and more people who understand there is an alternative. And dharmic principles are not only Indian. If you read about the Māori culture, they speak in dharmic terms. If you take any indigenous culture in Africa, or the people of Turtle Island in America, their ideas are profoundly dharmic.



**Sashi:** The dharmic question is, how much can I take without extraction? And what do I offer in return? How do I replenish? The traditions of the carpenter in India are fascinating in this respect. The original text of caretaking a forest was held by the carpenter. So, they knew which seasons you could cut down trees, and which ones to take in a group of a hundred, without destroying the forest. This is the dharmic way, not only for the human collective, but for nature.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Space:** This is the beauty of this understanding. Everything is built on the principle of balance, and not disruption.

**Sashi:** Yes, I think the underlying principle has always been that you are a custodian. This trusteeship is being a custodian of the earth for the next generation. One does not have the right or ownership to misuse it. We are custodians, which means my

Children's children will have access to good water and good air. So, I'm only a custodian, I'm taking care of it for you. I'm only receiving, or taking, that which I need, not for my greed. This itself is an amazing principle of dharma.



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## Comments <sup>3</sup>



 **Prof. R. C. Verma**

FEBRUARY 24, 2024 AT 5:52 PM

I appreciate the purpose and theme of 3rd space.  
In fact not just 2, but 4 generations have been pre-conditioned to live in intellectual schizophrenia, by creating a false image of Bharat, which differ from true existing Bharat.

Though a few people and few institutions worked to discover IKS before and after independence, their works were not given due attention.

Being a High Energy Physicist studying fundamental structure of matter and space -time, I did spend time to search for ancient Bharat Darshans(Vedic and nonVedic) views on matter, space, time, causality and universe.

Published few articles in some Indian journals and have given many talks in various institutions.

I again thank all the friends talking here!

Reply ↩



 Ramadas AR

FEBRUARY 25, 2024 AT 3:00 AM

All other living organisms other than human every moment of life they are going through one or other uncertainty, that is their natural being . As human who has “MAN” that uncertainty is overruled. But that is the only reason we are continuing our destruction of the spaces where we are living.

Ayurveda says People living in the desert 🌵 are healthiest people where they value their food and water with their uncertainty life.

Do the Good Karma to create good space around and let mind go through that uncertainty with the humanity.

“No pain No Gain”. I mean Spiritual Gain... Namaste

Reply ↩



 Sukhin

FEBRUARY 25, 2024 AT 5:28 AM

The Vedic systems and more of what is shared here is fascinating. I hope that more of the wisdom will be embedded or recalled deeply into India’s education system. I am not clear about how feminising relates to hierarchy, power structures and knowledge. Were there not patriarchy in the ‘before times’ (not just Western) which were part of the traditional power structures? I will chat with Steve and Mary later, maybe it’s my modern-day feminist principles obscuring and not getting this or mixing up the ‘feminising’ principle. Thank you for this article and care in sharing to articulate simply what is very deep and nuanced.