

My rejoinder to GSRK's response

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I believe that humans have hugely inflated egos regarding their self-importance. To claim that humans occupy an altogether different and exalted status compared to other animals is highly problematic. While it is reasonable to claim that humans differ from animals by several degrees, it defies common sense when we claim that humans possess several additional dimensions of existence. Such self-glorification generates myths of super intelligent aliens having gifted intelligence to humans on earth and so on. Claim of exalted status also generates the narrative that humans are masters of nature. And that everything in nature has been created for our enjoyment. Many religions propagate such ideas. This also is the foundational idea of western civilisation. The disastrous consequences of such ideas are manifest before us in the form of multiple environmental crises.

I am inclined to reject this idea of hegemonic supremacy of humans over nature. This goes against the common sense that humans are as much part of nature as every other species, plants included, and are also subject to the same laws of evolution as them. This also aligns with the story of the evolution of life on earth, and the genetic evolution of homo sapiens.

Social behaviour is not exclusive to humans. Animals too exhibit social behaviour. Animals too live in groups and exhibit coordinated behaviour. How much of such social behaviour is conscious and voluntary (and therefore CULTURAL) and how much is involuntary (encoded in the DNA) is a matter of debate. The major difference between humans and animals is that humans have highly developed languages which help them tell stories and myths, which in turn bind humans into communities. But does the capacity to handle languages add additional dimensions to human existence? Does this justify humans' hegemony over nature? I have my reservations.

Swaraj is not a moral principle invented by humans. Nor is it applicable to humans only. It is the property of self-organisation and self-sustenance possessed by all entities in nature. This operates at the individual, collective and grand ensemble levels. Animals live in groups and their social behaviour is based on principles that ensure the survival of the species. Irrespective of whether individual members are conscious or not, interactions within species and among species seem to be guided by the principle of survival of the species. Such principles of self organisation enabling survival of the species is manifest in nature, with or without humans. This is what I have called the principle of Swaraj.

Why does it matter whether the members of groups are conscious of their own behaviour or not? Are humans' aware of every aspect of their own social behaviour? Is every human social act deliberate, voluntary and done consciously? I am afraid that humans have not become so intelligent as to be consciously and deliberately committing every social act or to understand why they commit them. Humans are very far from discovering why they behave socially as they do. But every species, whether animal or plant or human, obeys the principle of Swaraj, which is the principle of self organisation by which the species survives. It does not matter whether such behaviour is a conscious one or not.

I consider this principle of Swaraj (the principle of self-organisation of nature) a fundamental property of nature. It is this principle of Swaraj that sustained nature and its diversity in the past and continues to do so today. The land mass of earth was an evolving collection of forests populated by a diversity of plants and animals and other organisms for eons. Swaraj sustained nature made it possible for homo sapiens to evolve in it. Now, homo sapiens have the audacity and arrogance to claim that they are the masters and are of a totally different make compared to the rest of nature. Denying Swaraj to the rest of nature or claiming that human societies operate fundamentally different compared to other species, is a flawed logic that emerges out of such arrogance. To say that Swaraj, or the principle of self organisation of nature, is only a figment of someone's imagination, and has no objective basis, is without justification. Doesn't it imply that self-organisation and self-regulation is a property of human societies only, and it is absent in the rest of nature? It is like arguing that there is no objective reality outside the human mind and therefore nothing exists independent of human thought.

It is incumbent upon us, humans to discern this principle of self organisation (Swaraj) of nature and live accordingly. Disobeying it will not only destroy nature, it will destroy humanity itself.

I have tried to show that in nature there is no hierarchy. Different species of animals and plants enter into mutually complementary relationships giving rise to different ecosystems. In each ecosystem, each and every participant species plays equally vital and indispensable roles. The weakening or elimination of any participant causes the ecosystem to collapse. Hence hierarchy, in the sense of one constituent having hegemony over another, is absent in nature. I have neither used the word equality nor advocated it as a moral principle in my article. Absence of hierarchy cannot be equated to equality. In nature absence of hierarchy manifests as diversity and incomparability, not homogeneity or equality. If at all equality exists, it is because every being is unique and irreplaceable.

Religions are belief systems supported by myths and the concept of God need not be part of every religion. A sense of the sacred may be part of the belief systems. But the sacredness may be attributed to symbols, idols, inanimate entities, nature's forces, and so on. That sacredness need not be associated with one place, thing or being. When it is so, exclusion takes place and the ideas of chosen people, kafirs, mlechha etc. take root. The Swarajist understanding of sacredness will be to view everything in nature as sacred. All entities animate or inanimate are sacred and must be treated with respect. From this it follows that our interaction with other entities and beings should be, as far as possible, non-violent. Non-violence is also another message from India's civilization to the world, intimately related to Swaraj, and stems from the understanding that everything in nature is sacred.