



INTEGRATING ETHICAL AND MORAL VALUES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Many environmental problems that we face today are the result of our attitudes and cultural beliefs about environment and its management. Environmental degradation is considered as the result of western belief about environment according to which environment is only for human use. For most of human history, ethics has concentrated on human rights (anthropocentrism); it is only recently that ethics has formally begun to define the rights of animals, plants and other organism (biocentrism). Whatever our beliefs and attitudes may be some mismanagement is done at policy and planning levels where basic condition of equity is not considered and discrimination on racial and class basis is common. There are limits to nature's capacity to absorb impacts. Once alteration of nature's initial state occurs, it cannot quickly revert back to the initial state. Nature has a limited capacity to withstand rapid change. It is clear from the study of teachings of different religions that every religion give due worth to environment. Religions teach us that we should consider ourselves as trustees, not the master of environment. As trustees or stewards of environment, we can use the resources but we should not exploit them. Thus, today, the challenge before mankind is to determine the state in which we wish to live and to continue living within the limits inherent in nature's processes, within nature's carrying capacity. This paper focuses on the key areas of ethical and moral dimensions towards environmental awareness.

Key words- *Ethical and moral dimensions of environment, Sustainable development, Environmental Awareness, Immediate Technology*



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INTRODUCTION

The Earth is the only planet known to support life as we know it. It supplies us with all the resources, the materials we use and the food that we eat or drink. All living organisms have a specific surrounding or medium with which they continuously

interact, from which they derive sustenance and to which they are fully adapted. This surrounding is their environment.

Prior to 1950s, for most people the term environment meant the set of conditions at home or in their work places. In the years that followed, with the publication of Rachel Carson's landmark book "Silent Springs " (1960) as well as the occurrence of major environmental events such as the spilling of oil along the picturesque northern coast of France, the death of fish and other organisms in thousands in Swedish lakes due to long range air pollution and the much publicized threats of extinction of many species, the concept of the environment gained widespread acceptance. Today the environment is widely accepted as a major issue for the very survival of humans and other life forms the world over with serious social and political ramifications. It is realized that a concern for the environment is an integral part of the overall process of development and economic growth. This issue is particularly important for developing nations, which need to keep promoting economic activities in order to improve the living standards of their people.

WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

Why is there so much concern about the environment today? The answer is simple; our very existence depends on the conservation or well being of the environment. The unprecedented population growth and economic progress of the 19th and 20th centuries have expanded our demands on the environment. However, today the whole world particularly the developing countries are facing a near-crisis situation regarding the environment. Perception of environmental concerns differs with different societies. What some people may consider to be a serious problem may be the solution for a different problem. For example, if a factory is set up in a village, the villagers might be happy because as it provides more jobs for the local population's economic growth. While some others may feel that the setting up of the factory would pollute the environment, generate more waste and decrease the standard of living.

However, broadly there are three prevailing viewpoints regarding the environmental concerns:

1. The environmental concern is a conspiracy of the developed First World against progress in the Third World and that environment will become an issue of

importance only when the underdeveloped countries reach the levels of production and consumption of the industrialised nations.

2. The second viewpoint argues strongly that the emphasis on preserving for instance, the tiger and the aesthetic beauty of green belts is diverting the attention from the problems of the poor and that environment has nothing to do with providing a better deal to the large and ever-growing population.

3. The third, in a paradoxical turn, holds this very same, large and ever-growing population responsible for the environmental crisis, maintaining that there is too little of everything except people.

MORAL AND ETHICAL DIMENSIONS TOWARDS ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

An understanding of the environment requires that we know what makes up the environment, and what its limits are and why is a scientific study of the environment important. In the natural world where we all live on the planet Earth, life is confined to a very thin sphere around the globe where conditions for sustenance are favourable. Anywhere below or above this layer conditions become limiting.

The release of noxious gases into the atmosphere, the destruction of forests and the over-exploitation of natural resources have caused irreversible environmental damage throughout the world. In some cases the damage is so severe that life-support systems, both local and global, are being threatened. Unless we curb our rapacious desire for more and more material possessions and unceasing economic growth, continued ecological damage will be unavoidable. To solve our environment problems, there should be a change in the way we think about and the way we interact with our environment.

Ethics, seeks to define as to what right is and what wrong we have done on a universal basis. For example stealing, lying, cheating, killing and indifference to the well-being of others are considered to be unethical. Preserving human life, concerns for others, honesty and truthfulness are considered to be ethical.

Moral values reflect the dominant belief of a particular culture about what right and wrong. For example killing a person is wrong but during the wartime, killing a human being is not considered as an immoral act. It is difficult to define what is wrong and

what is right because of the differences in cultural and religious beliefs. Some individuals consider it unethical, immoral to unnecessarily waste resources while others argue that maximising consumption is a moral act because it promotes the economic growth, that is a source of jobs and funds for helping the poor and protecting the environment. When we use the term “Environmental Ethics” we refer it to as a discipline that studies the moral relationship of human beings, and also the value and moral status of the environment and its non-human contents.

Why do we need a new set of ethics for the environment? The answer includes three factors.

1. *New effects on nature:* As our modern technological civilization affects nature greatly, we must examine the ethical consequences of these new technological actions.

2. *New knowledge about nature:* Modern science demonstrates as to how we have changed and are in the process of changing our environment in ways not previously understood, thus raising new ethical issues. For example, until the past decade, few people believed that human’s activities could be changing the Earth’s global environment. Now, however, scientists believe that burning fossil fuels and clearing forests have increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and that this causes changes in our climate. Hence the emphasis is on a global perspective.

3. *Expanding moral concerns:* Some people argue that animals, trees, and even rocks have normal and legal rights and that it is a natural extension of civilisation to begin with the environment in ethics. These expanded concerns lead to a new need for a new ethic.

For most of human history, ethics has concentrated on “human rights”, the rights of individuals, of families and ethnic groups. However ethics now include the rights of animals, plants and the environment beyond the human rights to rule and use them.

Environmental ethics makes the distinction between intrinsic value and instrumental values of things. Instrumental value is the value of things as *means* to further some other ends, while the intrinsic value is the value of things as *ends in them* regardless of whether they are also useful as means to other ends. For example think of a person

who is a teacher, beside teaching, those who acquire knowledge from them, s/he also have intrinsic value, value in her or his own right independently of her or his prospects for serving the ends of others. Same is the case when we think of a medicinal plant that has instrumental value because it provides the ingredients for some medicine or as an aesthetic object for human observers. But if the plant also has some value in itself independently of its prospects for furthering some other ends such as human health, or the pleasure from aesthetic experience, then the plant also has intrinsic value. As the intrinsic value is that which is good as an end in itself, it is commonly agreed that something's possession of intrinsic value generates a *prima facie* with direct moral duty on the part of moral agents to protect it or at least refrain from damaging it.

RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS ABOUT ENVIRONMENT

World religions and individual spiritual traditions can provide a framework for changing our attitudes. World religions teach us that the land, rivers, mountains, minerals, oceans are held in trust for God, but can be wisely used for the general welfare of the humanity. Put another way, our religion tell us that we should consider ourselves only as trustees of the universe, and as trustees we are authorised by God to use natural resources, but we have no divine power over nature and the elements. From the perspective of many religions, the abuse and exploitation of nature for immediate gain is unjust and unethical.

Religions and culture can awaken that dimension of human mind which is not involved in scientific or technological reasoning. Religion can help humanity to realise that limits must be imposed on our dominance of and control over the animate and inanimate world, and that our arrogant manipulation of nature has backfired. Religion recognizes that our lives cannot be measured by material possession alone, and that the ends of life go beyond conspicuous consumption. All religions and cultures have something to offer to conservation and environmental protection. From each religion, several injunctions or exhortations can be brought forth to form a code for environmentally sustainable development. No religion says that we have the right to destroy our habitat, and no religion sanctions environmental destruction. On the contrary, penalties and admonitions are mentioned for those who

do so. This is amply demonstrated in the codes of all the religions. A brief review of teachings about respect of nature and conservation of natural resources as given by **Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam** and **Sikhism** is given in the following sections.

Hinduism

In Hinduism one finds a most challenging perspective on respect for nature and environmental conservation, and the sanctity of all life on this planet and elsewhere is clearly ingrained in this religion. Only the supreme God has absolute sovereignty over all creatures, including humans. Human beings have no dominion over their own lives or over non-human life. According to Hindu scriptures people must not demand or take dominion over other creatures. Environmental awareness was more manifest among humans during the Vedic period.

The concept Aranyani The queen of forests identical to the concept of tree Goddesses of Indus people. Aranyanis are worshiped as the presiding spirit of forests, conceived as women is praised, honoured by herbs and described as mother of wild animals (Rigveda). There are instances of attribution of divinity to plants and are found in Rigveda and Atharvaveda.

Ancient Indians looked to the universe as an integrated whole – man, animal, plants life and all other materials were seen as an interlinked phenomenon – all activities interrelated. The following Sloka explains the complete harmony. “Winds brings forth nectar, so do the waters. Let our herbs be sweet with nectar. Let night be sweet and the let the morning be sweet. Let environment be sweet which nurses as parents, trees be sweet and so be the sun and our cows” (Rigveda 1-9 – 6-8). Animals and nature were revered along with Gods. Hanuman and Ganapatti are the most powerful deities, Peepal, Ganga, Himavan, Tulsi, Banyan trees are considered holy even today.

Even during medieval India – natural parks, gardens were common feature. Planting of saplings along public roads, was undertaken in a big way by Shershah Suri – Trees were planted for food, shelter, medicine, and furniture etc. Through such exhortations and various writings, the Hindu religion provides moral guidelines for environmental preservation and conservation. From the perspective of

the Hindu culture, the abuse and exploitation of nature for selfish gain is considered unjust and sacrilegious.

Jainism

Jainism places great emphasis on the principle that one should refrain from avoidable acts that are harmful to him or others. According to Jainism violence grows out of passion, and one who has passion causes self- injury. Preventing injury to oneself and others is accomplished through control of speech, control of thought, regulation of movement, care in taking things up and putting them down, and examining food and drink, and a vow is taken by Jains to do all of these things.

Ahimsa (non-violence), which is the fundamental tenet of the Jain way of life, is a term that is clearly allied with realism, common sense, and personal worth and responsibility. It touches the deepest and noblest aspects of human nature: *‘it adheres to the universal law which states that like, order comes of order, and peace can only be achieved through peace.*

Buddhism

At the very core of the Buddhist religion are compassion, respect, tolerance and ahimsa (non- injury) towards all human beings and all the other creatures that share this planet. A Buddhist prayer exemplifies this:

“As the mother protects her child even at the risk of her own life, so there should be mutual protection and goodwill which is limitless among all beings. Let limitless goodwill prevail in the whole world – above, below, all around, untarnished with any feeling of disharmony and discord”.

Buddhists regard the survival of all species as an undeniable right, because as co inhabitants of this planet, they have the same rights as humans. In Buddhism the rivers, forests, grass, mountains and night are highly respected and regarded as bliss bestowers. Buddhist thinkers have always had great respect for the sun, moon and other planets, and they recognise grasses, creepers and herbs as bestowers of bliss and objects of adoration.

The teachings of Buddhism have concentrated on the theory of Karma and the theory of cause and effect. They demonstrate that unmindful neglect of these principles of right living may lead to chaos, and thus to environmental crisis. That is why there

should be no exploitation of nature beyond what is needed for survival, and if we believe that all life forms are interconnected, our exploitative tendencies towards nature can be controlled.

Christianity

There is a common thread in the Old and New Testaments concerning the concept of nature and the rules governing our responsibility to it. Although certain verses in Genesis (1:26 and 1:28) have been interpreted as giving humans dominion and absolute control over nature, there are places where the responsibility of human beings has been clearly delineated. For example “*And the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and keep it*” (Genes is 2:15). The word ‘dress’ has been interpreted as the duty of man to manage, and the word ‘keep’ has been interpreted as protecting the natural world from harm. Furthermore the scripture clearly establishes God as the sole owner of the natural world, while humanity is actively responsible for the care of the world: ‘*The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it*’. (Psalm24:1), and *Every animal in the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills* (Psalm 50:10)

Islam

The Islamic ethic holds that we have a choice in our interaction with nature. People have been given the intellect and the ability to decide what is just and unjust; what is right and what is wrong.

According to Islam the riches of the earth are a common heritage. Everyone may benefit from them, make them productive, and use them for their own well- being and improvement, but our quest for progress and development must not be detrimental to the environment; instead it should ensure conservation.

Sikhism

Baba Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, assigned divine attributes to nature. According to Sikhism, people should respect God’s creations and know the eternal truth regarding their place in the universe. God has not granted any special or absolute power to humans to control and dominate nature. To the contrary, the human race is an integral part of nature and is linked to the rest of creation by indissoluble

bounds. God Himself is the source of the birth, sustenance and eventual destruction of all living organisms. It is He who created the universe through His divine will and with His word. According to the Sikh holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, 'From the Divine Command occurs the creation and the dissolution of the universe. The basis of creation was divine will, and the universe was produced by His *Hukum* (command).

CONCLUSION.

Nature has bestowed us with many gifts. The natural resources have made this planet livable and have supported the evolution and sustenance of living organisms. Natural resources are of utmost importance to all living beings particularly to humans. We are fortunate in having all the vital natural resources such as land, water, minerals and a large variety of living organisms. The consumption of natural resources is increasing because of many factors such as increasing population, increasing pace of development including industrialization, urbanization, mining and related activities etc. However, the amount of natural resources is limited and they are depleting at a very fast rate. Thus, there is an urgent need for their conservation. Environmental ethics is a field that aims to provide a moral justification of all decisions regarding the worldwide environment. The facts that environmental ethics is vast, global, plural, revolutionary and interdisciplinary determine us to pay a growing attention to this area that can lead to the implementation of a competitive and sustainable environmental management.

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