

IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICAL ISSUES ON OUR LIVES

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Introduction

The term ethics means character. It refers to one's ability to distinguish the right from the wrong, the values, beliefs and actions which shape the society. Ethics deals with questions at all levels. Its subject consists of the fundamental issues which include the nature of ultimate value and standards by which human actions can be judged "Right or Wrong". These notations varied from time to time. However there are certain ethical principles, which have been universally accepted and have remained unchanged throughout the entire course of human history. Some of the widely accepted ethical principles are honesty, integrity, being caring and compassionate, having respect for human dignity and affair and open mind which is willing to admit mistakes etc.

So environmental ethics can be defined as a system of ethical values, human reasoning and knowledge of nature which show a pattern of right conduct towards environment so that needs of living beings of the present generation are fulfilled without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs. (Reference-1)

Need of environmental ethics

In its five billion years of existence, our planet has endured bombardments by meteors, dramatic realignment of its landmass and the advance and retreat of massive glaciers, the block of ice that reshaped earth surface. Several animal and plant species have come and gone but life has persisted without interruption. Man has since long affected his local environment but it is only in twentieth century, consequences of his actions have expanded to a global scale. Today, cumulative effect of human activity is a significant force driving the changes in the global environment. These changes make life more and more difficult every day (Ref.-2). We have to devise the right code of conduct to regulate our behaviour towards the environmental and natural resources so that quality of life and ability of our future generation to meet their own ends is not affected. Environmental Ethics assumes a

pivotal role in our efforts to halt the damages we are causing to the environment, wild life and natural resources. (Ref.-4,5,6).

Many writers such as Milbreth, Delors, Schrader-Frachte agree that the guiding principles of environmental ethics should be:

- The distribution of the resources of the world should be egalitarian as far as possible. For all there should be equal opportunities to compete for the comforts and riches of world.
- The rights of the environment and natural resources should take precedence over the right of individuals as they are linked to the welfare of the entire nation.

Basic directives of Environmental Ethics

We are living in a transient world. Every living being is born to die one day. No one has come here to live forever. Older generations are replaced by newer ones. We have inherited the riches of the world and environment, in which we live from our predecessor. Today they belong to us. Tomorrow they to our future generations. Man is simply a temporary resident of living and nonliving resources of this planet. His unique mental capabilities, erect posture and hands with thumb opposite to fingers have placed him in a commanding position. He shall be failing in his duties if he does not hand over the riches of the world in a usable state to his successors. In doing so his Rights may be compromised but that is a small price today for carrying out the obligations he has to the society, the nature and the residents which shall occupy this planet in future. (Ref.- 1,7,8,9)

From a study of current prospective of environmental ethics certain directives crystalize out to regulate our conduct towards the human society, the nature and our future generations and these are:

Individual's obligations to the community and society

If an individual has right, he has duties also. He should refrain from such actions, which create difficulties or damage life and property of fellow citizen or the community or the country. The effect of individual life style decisions such as using a bike instead of a car, taken by a large no of people may finally accumulate to cause significant reduction in the amount of green house gases we discharge in the atmosphere. Avoiding the use of polythene and plastic bags, or using wastes from kitchen to manure kitchen garden may reduce the kitchen burden of solid garbage which municipalities have to dispose of. Using domestic wastewaters to irrigate our kitchen gardens and save a bucket of water or two everyday by everyone could save enough fresh water to irrigate many additional hectares of crops. Enough

electricity can be saved if everyone uses a fan instead of air conditioner or puts on woollen pullovers instead of heating the entire house, to light hundreds of additional homes. Population growth rate can be significantly reduced if most of the couples decide to have only two children(Ref-8).

Our obligations to the future generations

How much we owe to the future? From a social contract view of ethics, the answer would seem to be nothing. Because we can benefit them, but they are unable to reciprocate. The fact that members of future generations do not yet exist is no reason for giving less consideration to their interest than we give to our own. Most environmentalists believe that the world is already dangerously overcrowded. We are responsible for the existence of future generations. We can allow maximum number to come into existence so that per capita availability of resources or rough and harsh environment compels them to live a life of want, misery and starvation. The choice is difficult to make. (Ref-7)

Man is a temporary resident of this planet. We do not have the right to spoil the resources pollute the environment and disrupt the cycle of life of which we form an insignificant link. It will affect the future generation whether small or large. In 1949, Aldo Leopold put forward the concept of Land Ethics which affirms the right of all resources including microbes, plants, animals and earth materials as well to continued existence in a natural state. Humans have ethical responsibility for the preservation and maintenance of the biosphere, the atmosphere, the hydrosphere and the lithosphere. (Ref-10)

Ethics and environmental issues

Environmental issues are the most pressing national and international issues of the present century. Elevated concentration of greenhouse gases, chlorofluorocarbons in the atmosphere are the major changes that will persist for many centuries. We can not halt these changes altogether but we can reduce them. Environmental problems like Fog, Smog and acid rain, thermal and noise pollution have paled out existence before the global issues, which now threaten man with drastic consequences. (Ref-11,12)

Major environmental issues which humanity faces today are:

- Global warming and Stratospheric ozone depletion
- Disappearing wild life and forest
- Diminishing fertile land and fresh water resources

These three major global environmental issues of today arise from our daily activities, the cumulative effect of which have reached a scale and pace sufficient to disrupt the natural

system that took millions of years of years to evolve. (Ref-3,13). Each of us contribute a little to these global problems:

- When we cut down a tree, put an overdose of chemical fertilizer toraise our crops or use insecticides and pesticides, we are adding our share to global problems.
- The thriving markets and the Black markets of wild life product exist because we decorate our houses with ivory, fur, animal trophies and use other animal products.
- The smoke, fumes and acidic fallouts from our domestic and industrial establishments adversely affect plant and animal life.

Conclusion

If most of the people realize and believe that by their action they are adding something to world wide problems, many shall try to limit such activities. To save our physical environment from degradation, we shall have to alter our conceptual environment and in altering our conceptual environment, ethics or moral philosophy plays a major role. A little restrain and a shift to more environment friendly technologies is the need of time. We shall have to move beyond compartmentalization and outmoded patterns to draw the very best of our intellectual and moral resources from every field of endeavour. In due course of time, the altered public opinion shall translate into policies, which shall be followed by action in technologically advance democracies of the world. The rapid rate at which we are degrading the environment, wild life and natural resources forces a huge re-learning task on the humankind. It has to make a choice thoughtfully and foresightedly. (Ref-14)

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