



Environment, Ecology And Ethics

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Abstract :

The paper narrates the increasing concern of environmental pollution, threat to biodiversity, growth of slums, garbage & wastes, fundamental problems and solutions. It highlights the role of citizens, socio-religious aspects, spirituality and ethics.

Keywords: *Environment, pollution, biodiversity, waste management, developed and developing countries, United Nations, World conferences on climate, global concerns, religious, moral values and ethics.*

Introduction

Based on meditation, intuition and super-human mental powers, India's ancient sages made bold speculations and theories concerning the age of the Universe, gravitation, planetary movements, etc. They also stated that planet Earth has been supporting 8.4 million animal species and many millions of plant species for millions of years. Modern scientific discoveries, using sophisticated equipments and computers, have confirmed that most of these observations and assessments were more or less correct. Man himself might have started his evolution a million years ago, and in the present form 100,000 years ago. Since then, the symbiotic relationship between Man, Animal and Nature was more or less balanced.

But in the last 200 years, more damage has been done to Planet Earth than in the earlier millennia. Mankind recognised the danger of such uncontrolled growth 50 years ago. Since then, a great deal of studies have been done, and some action programs were undertaken to create awareness on the need for restraint in exploitation and excessive consumption. Much more remains to be done to arrest the deteriorating trends.

Commercial Era started around 1500 AD, with Columbus, Vasco de Gamas and several other English, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese and other European Traders travelling across the world, looking for spices and other materials and markets. They were attracted by the high profits from trading in spices and other natural

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products as well as animals including human slaves and started exploiting the gullible small Island habitats of Asia Pacific region and also with countries like China, India, Indonesia and Africa. These traders had a large fleet of merchant ships, accompanied by warships with military men, guns and other advanced firearms and weapons initially for self-defense. But the traders gradually became conquerors and exploiters by using their might and also by exploiting the disunity among the large number of chiefdoms or Kingdoms as the case may be. The greed and power led to colonization and over exploitation of nature's endowments, continents, European traders who went to the vast American subdued the indigenous people / communities there and set up colonies with more migrants from European countries. Amitav Ghosh's book the Nutmeg's curse⁽¹⁾ vividly describes some examples of such destruction of nature & of environment by the 16th century European traders.

The Industrial Revolution in European countries and in the USA moved manual production to Machining powered initially by water, steam and then by Fossil / Fuels and Electricity. This led to mass production, and faster production, triggering faster and larger exploitation of minerals and metals, and fossil fuels. Burning of fossil fuels, and various thermal, chemical, mechanical and such other processes in the industries led to more environmental pollution and global warming. Industrially and technologically advanced countries became the biggest producers and consumers of automobiles and other Industrial products, contributing lion's share to pollution and global warming.

In the meanwhile, the colonial era ended and several newly independent countries, predominantly agricultural and economically backward started Industrialization to catch up with advanced countries to enhance their economy and standard of living. This action by developing countries are adding to global pollution and global warming.

Increasing Global Concern

There is now serious global concern over the reckless over-exploitation of nature, excessive consumption of goods and services by affluent countries, abject poverty in low-income countries, enormous wastage of resources and human talent and depletion of non-renewable energy and resources. These are degrading the environment and upsetting ecological balance.

Spectacular developments in science and technology in transport, communication, industry, mechanisation and automation brought about affluence for one billion in the industrially advanced nations. But one billion in the poor countries still live in sub-human conditions in South Asia and parts of Africa. Meanwhile, population has been increasing at a rapid rate, particularly in the poorer countries. This has resulted in distortions in distribution of wealth and income and increasing inequality. These have given rise to conflicts and confrontations.

Stockholm and Rio Summits

The Club of Rome Report in 1950 first gave warning signals over the deteriorating environment that there should be 'limit'to growth and consumption'. In 1972, an International Conference on Environment⁽²⁾,

held in Stockholm, assessed the extent of environmental degradation, and appealed to nations to formulate policies and start action programs in order to arrest the Pollution of the Environment and destruction of Nature. As a sequel, a major step was taken in 1992 in the World Conference on Environment, held in Rio⁽³⁾. Over 100 Heads of States deliberated over the deteriorating trends. They proposed specific action programs in order to arrest further destruction. Member nations were advised to enact legislation and to launch action programs to slow down the deteriorating process. During the next 10 years, all Natural Governments and thousands of NGOs worked on different aspects of Environment and conserving Ecological balance. Though there is visible evidence of some progress in some parts of the world, the long-term danger to Planet Earth still continues. In 2002, the World Conference on Environment⁽⁴⁾, held in South Africa, gave further impetus to the global effort.

Evidence of Deterioration

There is scientific evidence of global warming, punctures in the ozone layer, the Earth shield of protection from dangerous radiation, depletion of non-renewable natural resources, wastages and acute scarcity of water in certain parts of the globe, tremendous pollution of air and water, loss of soil cover due to erosion etc. Therefore, UN agencies have proposed policies and programs, which will pave the way for long term sustainable development. NGOs played a key role in the Rio and S. African Summits. It was decided that NGOs should engage themselves in grass root movements, create awareness on the need for sustainable development,

bring pressure on the Government, educate teachers and students, spread the knowledge of technologies which are in keeping with sustainable development.

World population now stands at 8 (Eight) billion, which is increasing at the rate of 80 million per year. Worldwide, 52% are in urban areas. In advanced countries 70% live in urban, while in developing countries 70% live in rural areas. Migration to urban areas has caused serious deterioration of urban life due to congestion and lack of adequate infrastructure. Millions live in sub-human conditions, without basic facilities like water, sanitation, housing, etc.

Slums

Most of our cities have number of slums, where people live under sub-human conditions, without clean water or fresh air. Government has set up Slum Improvement and Clearance Boards. Urbanization is going on at such a rapid rate that Corporations and Municipalities are unable to check the growth of slums. In Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and some other cities and towns, proportion of people living in slums varies between 10 to 30 percent. Surat, which was at one time assessed as the dirtiest city in the World, has made good progress under the initiative of one Municipal Commissioner. Why we cannot repeat it in other cities?

The Ministry of Environment and some State Departments are doing a commendable job. But over all, progress made in India is far from satisfactory due to lack of resources and interest and involvement of citizens. We find slums surrounding posh housing complexes and offices and tolerate it. Resettlement to

environmental friendly satellite townships should be considered under CSR projects by Government, people and industries.

Bio-diversity is Threatened

Plant and animal species are disappearing every day. There are various estimates of such serious depletion of biodiversity. Enthusiastic individuals and groups are trying to conserve wildlife and their habitat. But poachers are active and preventive measures are unable to cope with this menace. Encroachment of forest is also rampant, for making resorts, estates and cultivation of prohibited drugs.

According to published information^(5,6) on a typical day, 116 sq miles of rain forests are being destroyed on an average per day; 72 sq miles of desert are being formed each year 500 million tonnes of hazardous waste are being thrown into the air, water and land Annually; 50 million plant species become extinct every year. Rain becomes a little more acidic every year, and water would become more polluted. Twenty four billion tonnes of top soil are being eroded, 12 million people die of starvation every year, 30 million will die slowly of diseases caused by hunger and malnutrition. If the consumption of oil continues at the existing pace, oil reserves will reach a dangerous level in 20 years. Statistics of such destruction and degeneration are alarming. Scarcity of clean water is already a serious problem. In some European countries, water is costlier than petrol and diesel. In India, river valley disputes are dragging on for 100 years, and not settled yet. Silting and salination are other problems. Water borne diseases are common in urban areas of poor countries. Scarcity of water may drive

communities and some countries to fight and may even lead to Wars⁽⁷⁾.

Atmospheric Pollution

Pollution of the atmosphere has risen to dangerous levels. Industries and automobiles throw out huge amounts of pollutants, particularly noxious gases. Government has introduced CNG for vehicles in order to reduce pollution and has a policy for e-vehicles. Government is insisting on treatment of effluents and filtering and neutralizing fluid and gaseous discharges from industries. Laws have been enacted making felling of trees an offence under the law. Forests are being reclaimed through social forestry and other measures. Vanamahotsava program, involving planting of millions of saplings are adopted by many NGOs. Government and other institutions are carrying on tree planting programs.

Waste Management

Garbage pollution is a serious health hazard in India as in many other countries. Garbage/Waste consists of food and vegetable wastes, industry wastes, end of life vehicle /equipment wastes, consumer electronic, used packaging and so on. Waste management can generate wealth and conserve materials, and avoid pollution.

With rapid industrial and economic growth, wastage is a major factor, which is alarming. One US University estimated that, if the leftover (untouched) of food (in the west) were collected, it could feed the entire population of Asia and Africa, which shows the magnitude of wastage. The hamburger chain has thousands of outlets all over the

world. Through aggressive advertisements, they are also inducing the younger generation to eat hamburgers. All these means raising of livestock for production of such fast foods, which is injurious to health and causes damage to the environment and ecology. The world life stock, cattle population, account for a large percentage of methane emissions.

There are reports that the industrial toxic wastes are dumped over land or buried under ground or in sea by many countries, causing serious environmental pollution problems. Many countries have systematic way of collecting the wastes, segregated into (a) recyclable items such as metals, plastics, glass and such others, and (b) biodegradables, vegetable and food wastes etc. Technologies and equipments are available for reprocessing and recycling the first category, effecting economic use, and conservation of materials. For the second type of wastes, there are technologies and equipments to convert them to biogas or generate electric power and get organic manure as a byproduct.

Fundamental Problem

The above examples are intended to give only a glimpse of the huge problem. Lack of resources and awareness are the main reasons for slow progress in protecting the Environment and conservation of Ecology. But the root cause of all these problems is of a fundamental nature. Capitalism, or market-driven economy as it is called, is the main politico-economical ideology affecting progress in most parts of the world. Consumption is encouraged to sustain the economy, growth and development. Market economy model of development has produced excellent results

in economic growth in advanced countries as well as in middle income countries. It has used science and technology for harnessing nature's endowments for man's comforts and convenience. But concurrently, it has also brought a lot of problems, particularly to the Environment and sustainable development, and even threaten our existence. With proper regulations, laws and enforcements, it may be possible for national governments to reduce the ill-effects to some extent. But committed affirmative action based on ethics by human beings is essential for greater success.

Balancing Environmental Protection and Growth

Environmentalists all over the world have been protesting against high consumption of nature's resources and the resultant wastages. In order to keep profit high and to be competitive, the manufacturing and service sectors neglect the damage caused to the Environment. UN Summits had stressed the need for setting apart a certain percent of the GNP for investment in Environment friendly technology and also finance poor countries to reduce pollution. Advanced countries can easily afford this. But poor countries have been pointing out that they cannot afford non-polluting industries due to lack of resources. Also, some developing countries have soft democratic State governments, which are unable to enforce Environment related laws. Thus Environment suffers.

Socio Religious Situation

Next to the market economy model, the other factor, which is partly responsible for such indiscreet exploitation of animals and nature, is the socio-religious situation in different

parts of the world. Religious literature in the West gives an impression that man is the main object of creation, and that everything else, that is animals and nature, have been created for meeting man's needs. Therefore, leaders and professionals have been going ahead with exploitation of animals and nature without any compunction or guilt feeling. Till recently, they considered earth, as inert matter as "can be exploited for man's growth. This has been a gross distortion of religious teachings, when those religions endorsed man's ownership, the was along with the responsibility to protect and sustain. Fortunately, concepts of social responsibility and realization of the need to preserve the Planet for posterity have led to policies, which would reduce the damage to nature's endowments, including top soil, plant life, atmosphere, water bodies and animals including fish, birds and insects, which are essential for preservation of a well balanced ecosystem.

Role of United Nations

UN and its several organisations have taken a number of steps to induce National Governments, with incentives of financial and technical support for Programs and Projects to reduce emissions and check global warming. It is the duty of institutions, organisations and individuals to contribute to this movement in order to save Mother Earth. Taking the cultural tradition of India, even the UN is now using the term 'Mother Earth', implying that living entities should treat earth as dear as one's mother.

Conclusion:

Citizen's Role, Spirituality and Ethics - Everybody – individually and collectively

– are responsible for polluting, pillaging and plundering Mother Earth. Therefore, all must and can contribute in a variety of ways – small or even symbolic to reduce the damage. It is well known that people in several countries lack civic sense. Citizens spit on the road, throw rubbish, talk loudly and often shout, urinate and defecate in public places, blow horns loudly etc. Unethical Municipalities drain the sewage into rivers and tanks. Industries throw waste and even poisonous toxic materials into rivers. Factories, making paper, batteries, fertilizers and chemicals, let out the effluents into rivers. Oil is spilt into water bodies. Precious fresh water lakes are polluted all over the world. Habitat of wild animals are being encroached upon for building dams, resorts, roads, housing, factories and other establishments. Huge dams upset ecological balance.

From the dawn of civilization, two streams of thought and values have influenced mankind – Materialistic and Spiritual. Governance, public administration and management of the economy have all along been on materialistic line, to enhance materialistic economic prosperity at the exploitation of Earth, and now Space. Education and training for administration and management draw principles from the above. But attitude and behavior must be moulded with humanism, ethics and moral values. These are to be imparted by the family, teachers and the system of education.

Spirituality of all religions are one and the same and all human moral values and ethics have been evolved from this. All religions advocate faith in God and compassion to all God's creations, including Nature, Religious

advocate, honesty, integrity, selflessness, love and discipline. These values should form part of education, training and practice. Good character and attitudes must be developed with skills, knowledge and competence. Man ought to be guided by ethics which really means “concern for all; including animals and nature. Humans are “value-seeking”. They have the ability to discriminate between “right and wrong”. Good values include honesty, integrity, kindness, selflessness, love, sacrifice, charity, fairness etc. The present attitude and behavior of the majority of common people is more often guided by selfish motives, rather than selfless ideals and service and this must change. All have to cooperate with Govt, and Govt agencies and others and act as responsible citizens, guided by ethical values for successful realisation of the goals as per the UN and World resolutions and National Government’s Rules, regulations, policies and

plans to protect environment and preserve a balanced ecosystem. Be aware that this is for our survival and sustainable development for the wellbeing of the future generations.

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Note: Living Planet Report presents the state of the Planet including biodiversity and eco-system.



WHY WE NEED *Best Friends*

Because they laugh at the same stupid things.

Because they give us honest advice.

Because they are there for us even if they’re thousands of miles away.

Because they celebrate with us when we’re at our best, but still love us at worst.