



ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS ON INDIAN AND WESTERN CONCEPT

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Introduction:

Man is a son of nature. Unlike today, the ancient man was happy being in nature. In certain ways there is a relation between man and nature that used exploits the nature for his betterment without being harmful to it.

The word “environment” is as wide in connotation as the word “ culture.” In fact, both the concepts are closely related. Some environs are provided by nature, among which water, air, fire and earth are prominent. Environs are natural and artificial. There is a close interaction between the two.

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Today, environment and the need to maintain its proper balance have become topics of great importance. Unfortunately enough, the common person in India is hardly aware of the problem. Big business persons like those involved in Bhopal disaster are at best, lukewarm in their interest. A disturbed ecological balance is threatening of man’s environment is not at all a new development.

‘*Environmental Ethics*’ is a relatively new field of philosophical ethics concerned with describing the values carried by the non-human natural world and prescribing an appropriate ethical response to ensure preservation or restoration of those values. This often-urgent concern arises especially in view if threats are both to other humans and to non-humans, placing in jeopardy the communities of life on Earth. Environmental ethics, as a recognized field within philosophy, is now entering its third decade.

Environmental ethics is concerned with the moral relations of human beings with their environment. The environment is not merely a collection of living and non-living things but an intricate connection (link) between these various elements. Living beings absorb energy and material from the environment and convert these into living matter. After death, their bodies are decomposed back to the original matter. Water evaporates and becomes clouds and then precipitates back in the form of rain or snow. These linkages and exchanges define the essence of ecology. Immensely benefited by scientific revolution; human beings became oblivious of the fact that in the universe every creature has a rightful share in what is given by nature. Leopold, the father of the modern environmental movement, claims we must abandon the old anthropocentric (human-centered) conception of ethics and replace it with a non-anthropocentric (bio-centered)



ethics. Historically, most people in the Western thought ethics was concerned only about the needs and interest of human beings. Most people in the Western were worried about environmental degradation only because they feared that by damaging the environment we would ultimately harm ourselves. If the environment had any value, its value was entirely instrumental.

Ecological Crisis:

The modern western form of development has caused great harm to our life sustaining ecosystems and in the process causing great harm to both human and non-human beings. It has caused destruction of forests, pollution of air, water and soil, depletion of non-renewable resources, global warming, ozone layer depletion, etc. which has devastating implication for both human and non-human beings. It has caused and continues to cause extinction of thousand and thousand animal and plant species. It is consuming recklessly our planet earth's non-renewable natural resources producing huge quantities of harmful waste in the process, which is beyond the capacity of earth to convert into natural resources or harmless things. Our modern industries have created a potentially deadly phenomenon known as 'the green house effect'. Many of our modern industries rely on the burning of fossilized fuels. The gases like carbon dioxide, methane, fluorocarbons and nitrous oxide are given off in the atmosphere, which acts as a green house. Global warming could cause more hunger in poor countries and extinction of many animal and plant species and melt most glaciers of the Himalayas by 2030's according to a draft UN report published on 6th April 2007. Extreme climate changes caused by global warming could lead to heat waves, cyclones, droughts and floods across the world. Leading metrological scientists say that thermal expansion of the oceans as well as melting of large bodies of ice across the globe due to global warming is leading to sea level rise, which has devastating

implications for a number of small Islands as well as low-lying coastal areas across the globe.

Today, we stand at the threshold of the disaster in a manner never before faced by humans who, as the Tbilisi declaration states have used their power to 'transform the environment.' Looking at the present environmental scenario, we may even substitute the word 'transform' with words like – 'conquer', 'desecrate', 'plunder', so as to emphasize the fact that single factor – 'a human', distinguished through his distinctive power to reflect, to articulate and be wise, from all other things has been the very instrument of these ecological imbalances that threaten his existence. This declaration compels us to rethink seriously whether humans are responsible for environmental crisis. Various environmentalists confirm that the evolution of humans as intelligent and highly adaptive species have led to an ecology in which they have a position of dominance over all other species on earth. This fact, linked with human ability to modify or even totally alter the environment, has caused danger to extinction of many species.

Globally, the environment scenario is bleaker. Let us glance over some of the environmental disasters poisoning our earth and causing devastation to all forms of existence.

Global warming:

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Selfish-human relation with nature:

If we try to understand history of human civilization that is full of conflicts and war for power, it reveals human as not only an intelligent being, but also a ‘self-centered’, ‘egocentric being’. His behavior is not mechanistic, instinctive or predictable as is the case with many or most of the species of life. His acts are distinct, deliberate and predominately with an absolute ‘self-interest’. In fact, to understand the true nature of our present predicament of nature, we need to recognize the complex nature of humanity. We need to explore the hidden springs of actions that motivate humans to ‘act’ upon their surroundings. Human –born selfish tendencies, armored with God like powers, acquired due to science and technology have truly become ‘foes’ of nature’s well being.

Classical western philosophy and mechanistic conception of nature in physical sciences have strongly proposed “**Anthropocentrism**” and practiced “**dominionism**” over nature. Presently most of the environmental thinkers largely blame these trends for the ecological crisis we are facing today, like pollution, depletion of resources, the problem of endangered species, factory, farming, destruction of wilderness, etc. They consider these problems as outcome of human handling (or can we say manhandling) and human activity within nature depends upon our knowledge of the interrelationship between humanity and nature.

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summarize as –a. ignorance, b. greed, c. aggression and d. arrogance.

a) Ignorance: Aldo Leopold’s expression of doubt on scientific knowledge, as mentioned in our discussion, on reappraisal of science and technology implicitly refers to human ignorance. Presently, it has become more evident that inadequate understanding of the nature and its laws has become a potent cause of environmental disasters.

b) Greed: It can be expressed visibly in the form of ‘economic gain at environmental losses. It is easy to see this principle at work in all cases of exploitation of natural resources, e.g. cutting of trees for various human needs. No doubt a society at a below subsistence level cannot be expected to have strong environmental priorities. Yet human greed is most often a sufficient explanation of ecological vandalism.

c) Aggression: For centuries, the earth suffered from the ‘inhumanity to humans’ in endless series of riots, wars, violence, battles and the totality of modern warfare. “The First World War was marked by chemical expertise (particularly in Germany) in the manufacture of high explosives, and by the use of chlorine as a weapon as the trench warfare.

d) Arrogance: Christian theology, Marxism and scientific notion of ‘mechanized universe’ has encouraged ‘dominion over nature’. As Hugh Montefiore puts it, ‘man has dominion over all nature’. This clear teaching of Bible has been endorsed by centuries of Christian tradition. He adds, “Man is made in the image of God and the beasts are not”. With such a belief, is it possible to avoid cruelty to animals?

Indian perspective on Man-Nature Relationship. In Indian Philosophy, virtues are connected in the course of their development not only to the mundane world but also to the supernatural. The progress of an individual is incomplete without the progress of the society and morality lay, according to the Indian tradition, not in striving for one’s own progress, prosperity and



happiness but in the progress, prosperity and happiness of all, that is the entire human as well as non-human life world.

Sarve' pi sukhinah santu sarve santu niramayah I

Sarve bhadrani pashyantu ma kashcit dunkhamapnuyat

II

The Buddhist Perspective:

The theory of Noble Truths (Arya-satya) namely those of concerning suffering, it's origin it's removal and the way to remove it constitutes the core of Buddha's understanding of human life. Like the seers of Hinduism, Buddha also accepts ethical perfection to constitute the core of liberated life which any person could realize through it's eight fold noble path, namely the path of right faith, right-resolve, right-speech, right-action, right-living, right-effort, right-mindfulness, right concentration. Buddha tells us not only not to kill or harm any living creature but also to have loving kindness or good will for all beings including your enemies (Meta). He says "May all beings be happy and secure, may they be happy minded. Let none deceive another, let him not despise another in any place, let him not out of harm or resentment wish harm to another." Let a man-overcome anger by love; let him conquer evil by good. For hatred, does not cease by hatred at any time, hatred ceases by love." Returning good for good is very noble, but returning good for evil is nobler still." Good men melt with compassion even for one who wrought the harm." Silently shall endure abuse as the elephant in the battle endures the arrow sent from bow for the world is ill natured." Self-indulgence and self-mortification are equally ruled out in Buddhism. In his first sermon at Saranath Buddha said there are two extremes, monks from which who leads a religious life must abstain. One is a life of pleasure devoted to desire and enjoyment: that is base, ignoble, unspiritual, unworthy, unreal. The other is life of mortification; it is gloomy, unworthy unreal. The perfect one, Monks is removal from both these

extremes and has discovered the way which lies between them, the middle way which enlightens the eyes, enlightens the mind, which leads to rest to knowledge to enlightenment to Nirvana"(from Mahavaniaga quoted in H.Oldernberg's *Buddha*, Motilal Banarasidass Publisher,pp-127). It is clear that modern western civilization is devoted to the former kind of extreme.

Life is all suffering, an evil to be avoided. The root of this sorrow and pain is the insatiable desire (Trishna) to live. Buddhism aims at the extinction of this thirst for life and attempts to provide a royal road to deliverance from the consequent "vicious cycle" of samsara. Thus, a fresh impetus was given to ethical conduct. Buddha had firm belief in the intrinsic greatness of man's capacity to work out his own salvation by his own unaided righteous exertions. Buddhism is a religion of "earnest unswerving effort which looks to no God or Gods and asks for no extraneous help, except that of one's own purity of conduct and unselfishness". Buddha refused to solve the ultimate problems of God and existence as being of no practical use.

Love to all sentient beings is the keynote of this new gospel. Man must always in all his actions keep to the "golden mean"...the Middle Path, which is Eightfold: right Belief, right Aim, right Speech, right Action, right Means of Livelihood, right Endeavour, right Mindfulness and right Meditation. Again, this Noble Path of "virtuous and thoughtful life" has Four Stages: The first is the stage of Conversion. A person takes this preliminary step, when through good company and good deeds; he comes to perceive the Four Noble Truths about Sorrow, its Cause, its Suppression and the Right Path. His delusions and doubts destroyed, he enters upon the second stage, where "he succeeds in reducing to a minimum, lust, hatred and delusion". This leads on to the next stage, which when once reached, will never cause the faithful disciple to return to this world. Finally, the monk reaches the last stage, the



Stage of Arhat-hood, where he gains the right insight and enters up on the quiet of Nirvana. The Arhat, the “sage” of Buddhism, is “free from all error...he only experiences right desires for himself and tender pity and regard and exalted spiritual love for others”. He cultivates “good-will without measure towards the whole world”. He has completely broken all the Fetters has “put an end to all delusion and sorrow” and remains “unvexed, unmoved and unruffled”. All his karma thus, exhausted, the wise man is extinguished like a lamp and goes out altogether.

E.F.Schumacher in his book “Small is Beautiful” rightly claims modern economics promotes a culture of multiplication of wants considering consumption to be the sole purpose of economic activities, production of more and more wealth replacing human labour by machine work where it is possible but Buddhist economics promotes a culture of reduction of wants through purification of human character, which is “formed primarily by a man’s work”. “Work, properly conducted in conditions of human dignity and freedom, blesses those who do it and equally their products”. The modern economist fails to see that” work and leisure are complementary parts of the same living process and cannot be separated without destroying the joy of work and the blessing of pleasure”.

The Jaina Perspective:

Jainism also accepts that ethical perfection constitutes the core of liberated human life ie the life of an arhant. Right conduct (*samyak charitra*) based on right faith (*samyakdarshana*) leads to right knowledge, which leads to liberation. The right conduct through which one can get rid of the bondage of karma and reach the goal of life consist in disciplining one’s life through the five vows (*Vrata*) namely non-injury (*Ahimsā*), truth (*Satya*), non-stealing (*Asteya*) self-control (*Bramhacharya*) non-possession (*Aparigraha*). It is important to note that the vow of ahimsa tells not only

not to harm any being in thought, words and deed but also positively provide help to any suffering being. The Vows are the same for both the layman as well as for the ascetic except that *Bramhacharya* is restricted by the vows of chastity and *aparigraha* to contentment in the case of layman.

We have argued in the Second chapter that split-level theory is the most satisfactory ethical theory about Man-Nature relationship. Split-level theorists could be divided it to those who claim that ethically human trivial needs over-ride animal trivial needs and those who claim that it does not. The Seers of Classical Indian Philosophy would consider it to immoral to deprive the enjoyments of animals for our enjoyments, though it would not be immoral to deprive their basic needs to meet our basic needs.

Gandhian solution to our Ecological crisis., We have argued that neither Gandhi nor any of the great seers and teachers of classical Indian Civilization would approve the present form of development of modern Western Civilization, which has caused and continues to cause extinction of thousands of animal and plant species and great violence to our life, sustaining eco-systems in the form of polluting the essential requirements of life like air, water, land etc., global warming, depletion of non-renewable natural resources etc. which has catastrophic consequences for our future generations as well as for our entire life world in the long run .In his *Hind Swaraj* he argues that modern to Western civilization is essentially and irreligious false civilization in the sense that self-less ethical life of love which constitutes the essence of religious life has no place in it and what it considers to be the ultimate goal of life is essentially false. He provides an alternative vision modern western civilization. This essentially involves retelling the fundamental ethics of classical Indian civilization in the context of our present technological age. This vision does provides an out line of the form and content of a non-violent form of



development which provide the surest and perhaps the only solution to our impending catastrophic ecological crisis.

His conception of village *Swaraj* and *Swadeshi* i.e., rural self-rule and economic self reliance with reference to vital needs with a critical culture of Truth and non-violence constitutes the core of his alternative to modern western form of development .He did not want to taboo everything above and beyond the bare necessities but they must come after the essential needs of the poor are satisfied. But his ideal life is an enlightened selfless ethical life of simple living and high thinking. E.F Schumacher rightly sees the close relation between non-violence and simplicity. As physical resources are every where limited, people satisfying their needs by means of a modest use of resources living in highly self sufficient local communities are less likely to get involved in large scale violence than people who depend on high rate of use and world- wide systems of trade. He rightly says “Non-renewable goods must be and only if they are indispensable and only with the greatest care and the most meticulous concern for conservation. To use them heedlessly or extravagantly is an act of violence, and while complete non-violence may not be attainable on this earth, there is nonetheless an ineluctable duty on man to aim at the ideal of non-violence in all he does” (E.F Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*, p-50).

Gandhian thought which is based on the fundamental ethics of our classical Indian civilization does provide a solution to the impending ecological crisis. Contrary to popular belief, Gandhi is not against use of machinery as such, although he is against the complete replacement of body labor by machine work. He is not against the use of machines to make physical work more joyful. He would not be against development using machine based on the principle of universal non-violence, which our great teachers and seers explicitly say to be the base of all ethics. He is not against factory

production using sophisticated machines if it is necessary for the benefit of the people, although he would prefer such factories to be nationalized. Unlike the culture of development of modern civilization, which treats nature as an adversary to be conquered, the Gandhian approach to development considers Nature as our friend and benefactor.

Like every biological life humans too originate from organic material and hence the members of ‘organic environment’. But with their advance and progress in civilization, they have distinct lives. Possession of knowledge of social and moral norms, political and legal framework, has enabled human to be the members responsible for a ‘cultural evolution’. Humans can be designated as ‘organisms in nature’, being in continuum with various species of life and as ‘persons in culture’ for ‘unique’ being hood that is not shared by any other species in nature. Unlike other organism, humans are active, and responsible, participant agents of environment. Environmental interests can be taken care of, if, and when necessary, by ‘humans’ alone, mainly by not alienating themselves from their biological origin as ‘organisms’. They as ‘person’ need to develop eco-friendly, sociocultural order to function in the direction of transforming our existing social, political, educational and economical goals to overcome the practices that culminate into ecological crisis

Conclusion:

For Gandhi, Truth is the ultimate goal of life and Non-violence is its means: “to realize God”, “to realize liberation”, “to realize Truth” essentially means the same as to realize ethical perfection.” He sees clearly that such a life is truly a life of lasting happiness of the highest kind. He sees clearly that the fundamental ethics of all great religions are essentially the same and true. We have argued that we should create a mass Satyagraha to provide the world a rational culture of development based on the principle of universal non-violence, which perhaps only could save the world from



the impending catastrophic ecological crises, which has in long run devastating implication for the entire life world, including the human species. Our classical

Indian civilization has the moral and spiritual resources to create such a movement to save our planet earth, which has enough to meet our needs but not to meet our greed.

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