



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.828 (SJIF 2022)

Environmental Degradation and Society

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DOI No. **03.2021-11278686** DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2022-87314322/IRJHIS2203002>

Abstract:

The issue of environmental degradation is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it is as old as the existence of Homosapiens on the earth; it was realized in the times of Plato nearly 2500 years ago (E. Hambro: 1974). Regarding the emergence of the theory of environment preservation, it will not be out of place to take note of Ancient Indian Mythology. In the words of Dr. Robert Platt, "Our natural environment can be understood by only in terms of our life, history, and culture and conversely, our life history and vice versa. The literature of the Rig Vedic period demonstrates the importance of the deities and ecological awareness and great respect for the world of nature. There are several specific teaching on environmental matters contained in all these writings. The ecological activists have drawn much inspiration from the said literature. It is this literature that makes things in regard to the significance of the environment more vivid when it emphasizes, do not cut trees because they remove pollution, do not disturb the sky, and do not degrade the atmosphere; Destruction of forests is taken as destruction not only of the state but humanity as well. In fact, it is the environment and nature that make humanity as well as the state rich. Reforestation is an act of rebuilding the state and advancing its welfare.

Keywords: Environment, Degradation, Forests, Reforestation

Introduction:

The issue of environment degradation is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it is as old as the existence of Homosapiens on the earth; it was realized in the times of Plato nearly 2500 years ago (E. Hambro: 1974). Regarding the emergence of the theory of environment preservation, it will not be out of place to take note of Ancient Indian Mythology. In words of Dr. Robert Platt, "Our natural environment can be understood by only in terms of our life, history and culture and conversely, our life history and vice versa. The statement vividly indicates about the significance of socio-cultural and natural phenomenon in the field of environment (Robert platt: 1922).

Apart from Ancient Indian Mythology regarding environment attitude of the western world towards nature was also shaped by judeo- Christian tradition, 'God planned all explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no term in physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purpose available at www.renewamerica. According to Lynn White: Western Christianity reported human's from nature and created a dualism while the order religions saw divine spirit in every tree, river, animal and bird, White claims that western concept engorged exploitation and domination of nature for the benefit of man. This traditional western exploitative attitude to ecology gave birth to the protest movements like "Green peace having gained strength over the last four decade to protect the environment" (Lynn: 2006).

Environment in Ancient Period

The concept of environment is not a new phenomenon for the people of India. They inherited environment from their ancestors. In this context, Justice Kuldip Singh states:

"Environmental ethics has always formed an inherent part of Indian religious precepts and philosophy worship of nature-sun, moon, earth, air and water was not only primitive man's response to the fear of unknown but asore from the deep reverence show to the forces of nature which sustained and Preserved human life on earth"(Singh: 2002).

The literature of the Rig Vedic period demonstrates the importance of the deities and ecological awareness and great respect for the world of natural. There are several specific teaching on environmental matters contained in all these writings. The ecological activists have drawn much inspiration from the said literature. It is this literature that makes things in regard with the significance of environment more vivid when it emphasizes, do not cut trees because they remove pollution, do not disturb the sky and do not degrade the atmosphere; Destruction of forests is taken as destruction not only of the state, but humanity as well. In fact it is the environment and nature that makes the humanity as well as the state rich. Reforestation is an act of rebuilding the state and advancing its welfare. Protection of animals is considered a sacred duty of man. Undoubtedly, all these serve as an enormous source of concepts, principles, traditions and practices which are of deep relevance to the study relating to the future of humanity and also to the long term perspectives which is very essential to bring into the thoughts of the present generation.

The study of ancient Hindu culture reveals that several Hindu Gods and Goddess have animal and birds as their associates. Having regarded to the teaching of Hindu epics it may be said that environment has been a vital aspect of Hindu way of life. The Hindu society was very much

conscious of the adverse effects of degradation caused by indiscriminate destruction of plants and forests. The Devi Karcham of Durga Saptasi clearly states that so long as the earth has mountains, forests, trees, plants etc. Human race will continue to survive. Further, to maintain the quality of water and to avoid water degradation, Manu advised not to contaminate water by urine, stool or coughing, non-pious objects, blood and poison. Tattariya Aranyak, directed environmental ethics and advised not to cause degradation of water by urinating and defecating spitting in water or taking bath with clothes on. It also prescribed the individuals to pray mother earth to grow trees, space and the earth itself endowed with the merits of supreme divinity.

It would not be out of the place to refer here the philosophy of Jainism. This religion is in ecology of a sustainable life style and of reference for life. The entire emphasis of this religion is on the life in consonance with ecology. This religion presents a world view that stresses the interrelatedness of all forms of life. The creatures are to be respected. It emphasizes upon the doctrine of equality of all souls. An important principle of Jainism is expressed in Sutrakrtaanga (1.11.22) as follows. "A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated."

Environment in Medieval Period:

During the medieval period - early as well as later, the concept of environment conservation existed. However, this concept was neither very clear nor popular among the people during the early medieval period, but it became more clear and forceful in the reign of Mughal Empire. Regarding the period of Muslim rulers, we come to know from the primary and secondary sources of the history of this period that the environment was given due importance by the state as well as the common people. This clearly, shows that they were great lovers of nature. They took delight in spending their free time in the lap of nature. However, they never tried to make any attempt for environment conservation. Of course, they contributed in a significant way by founding the gardens, the orchards and even green parks, roundabout, near their places. If we go through the history of the period of Jahangir and Shahjahan in particular we will find many such beautiful features near the royal palaces and also central as well as provincial head quarters. It is interesting to note that public places on the banks of rivers, streams and brooks in the valleys and dales which they used as holiday resort and the places of entertainment especially during the summers. The famous Mughal garden which dot every nook and corner of the country even today are thus a pleasant culture, heritage of the imperial Mughals (Economic and Political Weekly:1988). Here it is pertinent to state that the Mughal garden that constitutes the most beautiful sight of the Rashtrapati Bhawan today reminds us not only the beauty of nature, the worth of environment rather of the love of the Mughal Emperors towards nature. This also speaks of the concern of the Mughals with the environment that how they had realized and felt convince that to keep the environment without pollution makes not only the people

but the empire healthy and rich, physically as well mentally.

From time to time, the discussion on environment in India with particular reference to the historical aspects would remain incomplete if the contribution of the Bishnois denomination is not examined. The Bishnois is a small community in the state of Rajasthan, even today in some part of Haryana, who practiced environment as a part of their religious ceremonies and duties. The religion was an offshoot at in the 15th century. They believed that if trees were protected, animal life would survive for a longer period. Therefore, he formulated 29 injunctions. The chief among them were ban on the cutting of any green tree and killing of any animal or bird. If we go through the Vedas deeply we come to know that not only the Rishi's and Muni's but even the common people believed in protecting the objects of nature particularly the trees and plants, as they thought their this efforts will make the environment rich and if the environment was pollution free then the inhabitants of that region will be healthy, physically and mentally. Consequently, this must result in developing a healthy society in a healthy environment.

It is really a matter of great concern that during the period of Sikh gurus in the Punjab, we notice that a special concerned and interest was shown by the Sikh Gurus, especially Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji and soon after him by the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Guru. All of them emphasized on the need of pollution free environment in other words environment protection. The history of Sikhs vividly displace that the most of the Sikh Gurus were deeply concern with the environment not only of the please where they dwelt, instead they with the environmental conditions of the whole of Punjab. When our any Sikh Guru got constructed a new town or a place and developed the same, he always kept in mind that pollution free environment will make the place rich and sound and the inhabitants of that place would be always happy because of the beautiful environment they created for their livings.

If we go through the history of the period of Guru Amar Das and after him of Guru Ram Das, we come across about the construction of Baoli in Goindwall and Sarowar at Amritsar. These two places were decidedly surrounded by green vegetation like trees, plants in large number, green grass, flowers and trees of fruits. These objects of nature made these new founded places more beautiful. As a result the followers of the new sects started gathering there and finally began to live there as permanent inhabitants of those places. Because of the pollution free and beautiful environment the minds of the inhabitants of these places became pious simple and evils free. It may be concluded that the pollution free environment always makes the society and its people free of evils. We can sight her more examples to substantiate the point that how environment that is pollution free helps in creating an environment and conditions which attract a large number of people to settled down in a particular locality or region. Kiratpur Sahib, Bhangani Sahib, Paonta Sahib and even Anadpur Sahib are such other places which were not only founded but also inhabited by the Sikh Gurus in their

repective times. However, it is to be mentioned that these places, though are important religious point of view today, but these became attractive and birth living places because of the vegetation and environment that was provided by Sikh Gurus. Undoubtedly, these places were developed in such manner that their development constantly continued, without any break and always attracted large number of people to go there and settled down their permanently. In fact it was the pollution free environment and their natural beauty which was responsible for it.

Similarly, Guru Arjun Dev got dug a well in Chheharta village in Amritsar district; he was to help the villagers of that area, who had been suffering on account of drought villagers of that area. Baba Buddha, really a respected character in the Sikh history, was known to have been retire to a forest; there several species of the animals use to live in harmony. The bani of Japuji Sahib also consider the earth or soil as mother, water as father and air as teacher (Pawan Guru Pani Pita Mata Dhart Mahat). Nevertheless, despite having such a rich culture and religious heritage to protect environment and vegetation, at that time the Hindus in particular had forgotten their ancestors concerns with ecology. The western exploiting attitude towards nature had substituted our culture under the impact of modernization and mimicking of western way of life. As a consequence lush green forests had been denuded, rivers have highly degraded with industrial wastes, many plants, birds and animals were on the verge of extinction. The process of devastation is taking place in the name of development and modernization. Even today, the young generation in particular does not care for the natural objects/features which make the environment pollution free and vegetation, so rich that it makes the society, in particular individuals healthy physically as well as mentally.

Environment in Modern period:

In the modern times, the development of mankind by shaping and keeping the environment pollution free as well as according to the need of the individuals has introduced a number of problems. The development has laid extraordinary emphasis on the environment and accelerated its impact. It is global and covers every spectrum of environment. In the above backdrop, degradation in environment can be noticed as a complicated outcome of the forces connected with several interrelating factors. Though it is very difficult to enumerate all the factors, but some of the main factors that led to growth of this global problem is speedy growth of population, migration, urbanization, poverty, deforestation, illiteracy, development of industry, agriculture, technology etc. In reality unplanned activities of individuals are also inflicting harsh and irreversible damage to the environment. The socio-cultural roots of the present environmental crisis lay in the paradigm of unscientific materialism which has been ruthlessly practiced by mankind. In the lust of fast development, mankind is constantly consuming the earth's measurable resources like top soil, water and forests far faster than the natural process can regenerate them. Generation after generation, man became more and more concerned with the standard of living that maintained on material objects and

lead to irrational consumption of natural resources. It drove human being at distance from human spirit as well as nature. Prof. George Wald sums up the reasons and effects of the problems in these words, "Three billions years of life, three million if man like creatures, ten thousand years of civilization and mere 200 years of industrial revolution have brought us to the brink of disaster"(M.K. Satapathi: 2007).

The Concern for human environment is as old as the Indian Vedic and epic age. Even in the earlier times Greek and Indian civilization the concern for environment protection and ecological balance was manifested in human behavior and reflected in the nature itself. It seems to be curse of modern man continuously to confront new possibilities of self-destruction. He emerged from World War II and armed with nuclear weaponry that soon gave him the power to obliterate all human life. And now he has come face to face with a new man-made peril the poisoning of his natural environment.

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