



---

## ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

**Pankoj Kanti Sarkar**

RESEARCH SCHOLAR

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL

The word 'environment' may be defined as the 'collective term for the conditions in which an organism lives, both biotic and abiotic'. Environmental ethics is a new sub-discipline of Practical Philosophy that deals with the ethical problems surrounding environmental protection. It aims at providing ethical justification and moral motivation for the cause of global environmental protection. At the level of ideas, environmental ethics challenges the dominant and deep-rooted anthropocentrism of modern mainstream ethics and extends the object of our duty to future generations and non-human beings. At the practical level, environmental ethics criticizes the materialistic, hedonistic and consumerist attitude of modern capitalism, and demands for a 'green lifestyle' that is harmonious with nature. Environmental ethics emphasizes upon the development of a sustainable ecology and society with the help of a reciprocal and holistic attitude, where all comprehensive aspects and parts of nature are preserved, protected and do coexist with harmony.

The last decades of the Twentieth century witnessed a world-wide environmental crisis. In modern time human beings are alienated from nature, the main cause behind this the development of science and growing of industries and human greed. In the name of development humans are destroying their natural environment. India is not free from that type of problems. Environmental issues in India become more serious every day. The major issue is population growth and pollution in India. For the cause of population growth and industrial development there are much pollution in the world.

The number of population growth and industrial development determines the total impact on the environment. Thus it can be said that environmental damage emerges from population, multiplied by the consumption unit per capita and environmental damages originating from per unit of consumption. This implies that large population with low levels of consumption can cause environmental damages as well as small population with high-level consumptions. This also indicates the state of technologies in industrialized and developing countries, because environmental damage per consumption unit varies greatly depending on the production and waste management technologies used by them.

### **Population:**

Population of India is 17.8% with the World's Population.<sup>1</sup> India, with 1,220,200,000 (1.22 billion) people is the second most populous country in the world,



while China is on the top with over 1,350,044,605 (1.35 billion) people. With the population growth rate at 1.58%, India is predicted to have more than 1.53 billion people by the end of 2030. Today we have a massive insurgence in global population and it is apprehended that this will have an adverse environmental impact. Some impacts are exemplified by the consequences of prodigious coal-burning resulted into widespread deforestation, poverty, poor sanitation, use of marginal farmlands, and soil degradation from excessive cropping, excessive lodging and uncontrolled industrial population. As population increases there will be an inevitable effect of economic activity. Such activity can be presented as a process of transforming materials and energy and a large part, which appears as waste, will be discharged to the environment.

The major effect of India's population explosion is "resource crisis". There are three Asian countries where 20% of the absolutely poor people are living in and India is one among them. Almost half of the total population in our country lives below the poverty line. Every year the population grows at the rate of 2.2%.<sup>2</sup> One fifth of India's population lives in the rural areas, and the migration into cities and towns is at the rate of 2% every year. This migration has led to urbanization and 40% of the migrant population lives in slums<sup>3</sup>. Dharavi, the largest slum settlement in Asia, is in our country. 40% of India's urban population lives one-room houses, which contains an average of 4-6 persons. Our food production is enough to feed this 40% of India's urban population. All the finite and non-renewable resources (land, water and fuels) are disappearing at an alarming rate due to over-exploitation and unplanned development. If India's population does not stabilize at this present stage then even a second Green Revolution would not be able to satisfy the hunger of Indians. In India 80% of the migrant population in the urban areas is not getting safe drinking water. They face the problems like urban slums, garbage and sanitation, which are associated with urbanization. Thus the "quality of life" becomes a critical question in India.

#### **Water pollution:**

Water is the basic necessity for all life and the most serious environmental health problems are related to water. Perhaps the largest of the environmental issues in India facing the people of India is inadequate or lack of access to vital fresh water resources. As India's industries get bigger so will the amount of water they require and the amounts are already beginning to spiral. The rivers are on the front line of pollution in India. Millions of people depend on them for their livelihoods but they are slowly being polluted and destroyed by sewage, chemicals and other agricultural and industrial waste. Ganga is the most polluted river in India. Water used in India is such that 93% is used by the agricultural sector and 3.73% by the domestic sector. 80% of the fourteen perennial rivers in India are polluted with sewage. Industrial effluents, agricultural runoff, dumping of toxicants into the river and other large water bodies are the cause of water pollution. The Ganges River Pollution is now at such a high level that the amount of toxins, chemicals and other dangerous bacteria found in the river are now almost 3000 times over the limit suggested by the WHO as 'safe'.



---

### **Air Pollution:**

Without water we can leave one or two days but without air we can't live one moment. Pure and fresh air is essential for our survival. But India now has one of the worst qualities of air in the world. Delhi, the capital of India is the fourth most polluted city in the world. Without a doubt the main contributor of air pollution in India is the transport system and the smog of industries. In the big cities like Delhi and Mumbai, millions of old and very dirty diesel engines churn out millions of tones more sulphur than their Western equivalents partly because of being old and partly because of the diesel. As a result, the asthma rate for children in some of the larger cities is now at %50 and rising fast. The Hindu tradition of cremating the dead body by using wood exacerbates this situation. Women and children are the most affected by the heavy concentration of smoke in unventilated areas. It causes serious diseases like chronic eye irritation, bronchitis and respiratory infections. Environmental effects due to increasing consumption levels of fuels like coals, lignite, oil and nuclear etc. are a growing concern for the environmentalists. The combustion of these fuels in industries has been a major contributor for air pollution.

### **Deforestation:**

The story of deforestation is another of the highly serious environmental issues in India. India is witnessing a rising demand for forest-based products. This is causing deforestation and encroachment into forest protected areas, which leads to a severe loss of natural resources. It is predicted that almost 5.3 Million hectares of forest have been destroyed since the independence. Most of trees chopped down for housing, industrialization and river projects. It is estimated that the number of Mangrove Forests have more than halved in the last 20 years.

The government soon recognized the importance that these forests hold for the conservation of soil and put forward a range of policies trying to curb the destruction; of course, nothing has really changed and thousands of acres are destroyed every year with nothing in the way of 'replacement'. Poor management and abuse of power are again the increasingly sad cause behind the mass deforestation of India, some call it greed. Protected areas are largely declassified so that commercial activities can take place but new areas are not reclassified. Poaching is another factor, people actually coming in and stealing trees and one of the final blows to the forest of India who already seem to have lost the battle is the invasion of foreign tree species such as Eucalyptus etc.

### **Plastics and other waste:**

Use of plastic is more dangerous for us. Plastic isn't in any urgency to degrade but the people of India don't seem to recognise this as they throw every unwanted item onto the floor wherever they are. Of course, the victims of this environmental issue in India are the future generations and the animals. The holy cows that are so integral to Indian life are slowly being killed from the huge amount of plastic bags they



consume that eventually rap around their insides. Some areas are simply fed up with the lack of Government intervention and are using these initiatives.

India's economic development may have got worldwide attention, but it has already been turned out to be the worst enemy for wildlife habitats. Areas in and around national parks, tiger reserves, wildlife sanctuaries and even world heritage sites and biosphere reserves have been destroyed. Essential forest habitats are being lost to mines, logging, hydro-plants and irrigation schemes, power plants, orchids, tea plantations and agricultural development. Legislation aims at to stop encroachment is either circumvented or ignored. The Acid rain, DDT, other pesticides and deforestation have covered almost 50 percent of Indian lands as degraded wastelands.

### **Conclusion:**

India has already solutions to these problems, and one of those is to educate the mass. Increase the literacy level among the overall population, especially among the women will slow the birth rate. This will make India globally sustainable and provide a solution to the world community. India - with its growing numbers of trained men and women could be a considerable advantage and make significant contributions - worthy of its national status, if our scientific communities along with our culture and civilization purposefully address the challenge of working together to solve the global environmental problems. If we are to solve environmental problems we must establish the principles of environmental ethics which is the basis for environmental morals.

To have an integrated understanding of Environmental Ethics we need guidelines for preservation activities and these guidelines are what we commonly refer to as environmental ethics. We need to identify two aspects of environmental ethics. One aspect is the principles of environmental ethics, the theoretical framework. The second aspect concerns our everyday activities and this is the practical application of environmental ethics, or environmental moral. Therefore, we need to work towards a new and clear understanding of environmental ethics which involve the integration of the theoretical framework and the practical application, environmental moral, i.e. aspects of environmental ethics.

It is used to be said, "Think globally, and act locally" but at this present time we need to integrate these two norms. Through local activities we gain wisdom and this wisdom can be the origin for thinking globally. At the same time through global thinking we gain insight into the guidelines for local activities. This we can call intelligence. Thus, through forming an international network for environmental ethics and education we can integrate the theoretical framework and the practical application in environmental ethics and education, enabling us to develop environmental morals and environmental educational materials at both the local and global levels.

Environmental ethicists state that we do require a sustainable development which would be the outcome of science and ethics. It has been claimed that science without ethics has no use for us, for our future generation. Science or scientific



development must be encoded with sound ethical code of conduct so that we can maintain sustainable development without degrading our nature.

Environmental ethics can solve environmental problems and save the world but first we must recognise the essential normative nature of environmental problems and their solutions. Environmental ethics as a normative philosophical inquiry about how humanity should ethically live on our finite planet, we must contribute to our comprehensive and effective response to the urgent environmental problems. Humanity will not be able to save the world from environmental catastrophe unless and until the normative nature of environmental problems is recognised. Environmental problems are essentially and irreducibly normative in nature because for the following reasons.

- > Environmental problems are the result of human behaviour, and human behaviour is the result of human values which is usually socially inculcated.
- > Our detrimental behaviour to the natural environment in modern industrial society is the result of the specific modern values, such as, limitless economic growth and competitive materialism, so that changes in these values will be necessary if we are to resolve our environmental problems.
- > Science alone will not be sufficient to solve environmental problems since they involve more than empirical causation and consequences, the foci of science.
- > Since technology applies scientific knowledge without examining or arguing about existing social values, the community's public political process of discussion, debate and decision-making among value alternatives will be necessary to lead to the solution of environmental problems according to such political values as: justice, fairness, equality and democracy.
- > Political theorists who study political values have an important role to play in environmental studies despite the latter are domination by environmental scientists producing the misleading impression that our environmental problems are purely empirical. The other elements of normative discourse environmental ethics, aesthetics and theology will also be important to the value changes needed to the mitigation, or amelioration of our environmental problems, let alone, their solution.
- > Finally, environmental problems, producing the widely admitted global environmental crisis, will be the catalyst for the transformation of the current hegemonic modern social values, practices and institutions, making normative discourse with its critical and prescriptive functions vitally important to both environmental studies and the aim of saving the world.

In a way of conclusion it can be said that we believe that we are practical people. We also believe that to live a practical life without an ethical vision to guide us, is to live a life of moral impoverishment. In most of the developed and developing countries the decisions that govern both environmental quality and economic



development originate from a common important point i.e. “the system of production”. With this linkage it becomes possible to define ethical norms and conduct which harmoniously foster both environmental quality and economic development. What we need is not so much a new environmental ethic but a new environmental ethos i.e. an outlook, which is as fully appreciative of the natural world as, is consistent with our need to survive in it, and which registers horror at any activity which causes the needless or unnecessary destruction of non-human nature. This will therefore serve as a guide to sustainable development and a responsibility to prevent environmental pollution. Because we think that we are not bound to solve all the problems in the world; our duty is only to avoid creating problems. We must not be responsible for evil to others; we must not harm others; if we harm, we must repair the damage. This is called the *Ethics of Responsibility*.

### REFERENCES:

1. Costanza, R. *Sustainability or Collapse: An Integrated History and Future of People on Earth* Edit. MIT and Dahlem University Press, 2007
2. Goel, P.K. *Water Pollution* New Age International Publication: New Delhi 1997.
3. Goodland, R. *the Urgency of Environmental Sustainability; Where Next: Reflection on the Human Future* edit. Poore, D. Paris UNESCO, 2000.
4. Guddie, A. *The Human Impact on Natural Environment* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) Oxford, Black well, 1990.
5. Gunn, A. ‘Can Environmental Ethics Save the World?’ in Frederick Ferre and Peter Hartel, edit, *Ethics and Environmental Policy: Theory Meets Practice* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994.
6. Manivasakam, N. *Environmental Pollution* National Book Trust: New Delhi, 1984.
7. Nawab Parvez, India: A test for Global Sustainability, A Seminar organized by University of California, Irvine June 1997.
8. Passmore, J. *Man’s Responsibility for Nature* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) Duckworth, London 1980.
9. *Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, Chemicals in Products* London, RCEP, 2003.
10. Sen Amartya, *Environment and Sustainability*. An interactive session with the members of Nature Environment and Wildlife Society (NEWS) in Calcutta on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2001.
11. *World Commission for Environment and Development: Our Common Future* Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1987.

<sup>1</sup>[http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php/European\\_population\\_compared\\_with\\_world\\_population](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/European_population_compared_with_world_population)

<sup>2</sup> Nawab Parvez, India: A test for Global Sustainability, A Seminar organized by University of California, Irvine June 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.