

## Environmental Ethics: The Indian Perspective

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**Abstract:** The pursuit of enriching the human life materialistically and mindless effort to conquer the unconquerable Nature has become the most fatal threat to the human survival. Environmental Ethics is an extension of Philosophy to the domain of rectifying the relation between humankind and Environment. This applied ethics has evolved in the West few decades back but it is deeply implicit in Indian culture, philosophy and strives since the origin of Indian Culture and Civilisation. The Indian tradition of worshipping Panchattatva as Dieties, Panchavati, festivals, tree worship, river worship and other practices reflect our inseparable bond with the Environment. Our reverence and devotion to the environment draws inspiration from our Spiritual Philosophy that believes that entire creation is the manifestation of Supreme, non dual, purely conscious and entirely blissful **Brahma** and thus worship to the creation is similar to worship Brahma. Bhutan following the Indian prophecy of 'ten vyakten'(altruistic consumerism)and emerged as the sole carbon negative nation. River Ganga is regarded as living entity. Our National Anthem, National Emblem and National symbols emphasises that our intimacy with the environment is so deep that our culture, ethos and orientation find their expression through the different components of environment.

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### Review Paper

Environment envelopes uswith biological, physical, chemical, social and economical gradients that constitute our surrounding. The **harmonious coexistence and constant mutual interaction** of creaturesamongthemselves and with these multidimensional gradients of environment sustains, nourishes and propagates the Life Process in an incrediblymagnificent way. Unfortunately the advent of industrial revolution, industrialisation, mechanisation, overpopulation, arms race, massive urbanisation, crass consumerism, materialism, overexploitation of natural resources, massive deforestation, lost of biodiversity, pollution, Ozone depletion, global warming and climate change has tremendously exploited our environment. The precise harmony, orderliness and beauty that exist between the different gradients of environment including human beings has beingfacingan historical catastrophic damage. The mindless quest and efforts of humankind to conquer the unconquerable, invincible and overwhelmingly vast Nature has evolved as one of the greatest survival threat for the entire Life flourishing on our Planet. Therefore, now the**Environmental Ethics** is beingstudied, contemplated and implemented across the world to save Life Process from environmental catastrophe and to revitalise the harmonious relation between Man and the Environment.

Environmental Ethics is the **extension of ethics** beyond the human domain to the nature and other creatures. There are several ethical question arise when we exploit the

environment and Environmental Ethics tries to answer them.**Environmental Ethics studies the effect of human activities on Environment; the moral obligation thathumankind owes towards Environment and how humankinddischarges and ought to discharge that gratitude and obligations.**It aims to nourish strong value system so that the human action and their decisions maintain the precise balance and harmony with the Environment. Environmental Ethics has two majorperspectives – **Anthropocentric and Ecocentrism.**According to **Anthropocentrism**,human beings are the most capable species and centre of ecology, and hence have an indirect duty derived from their well being towards Environment to keep it hospitable for human survivaland well being alone.**Ecocentrism** is a holistic approachwhich believes that all the life forms have an inherent right to live and the environment preservation is the primary not derived responsibility of humanity. It holds that the integrity of theecological collection, that is, ecosystem, habitat, species and populations,is more important than the survival and well being of a particular species or element of the ecosystem be it be the human species.

The concept of Environmental Ethics was first appeared in a book by American naturalist Aldo Leopold in 1948 but its beginning is mainly attributed to the first Earth Day held on April 22, 1970.Thus, Environmental Ethics is a new discipline in the Westthat came into being **just few decades** ago, while in India it was the part and parcel of human lives since **Vedic tradition** originated some eight millennia or

more ago. Where in the West the debate on Anthropocentrism versus Ecocentrism is going on, **Indian tradition has embraced Ecocentrism and preached 'त्येनव्यक्तेनभुजिथा' (त्यागपूर्वकभोगकरो) or altruistic consumerism millennia ago.** Entire world appreciates **Bhutan** for still practicing this principle so meticulously that it emerged as the **sole carbon negative nation**. The citizens of Bhutan are so conscious and **altruistic** that their efforts have made their environment so pristine to absorb the carbon emission by other nations rather than adding their own to the world emission. Likewise, the Indian state of **Sikkim** has emerged a fully organic and eco-friendly state.

The report (May, 2012) of Department related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Environment and Forest stated that – '**Environment in ancient India was not an entity isolated, apart and independent from humankind**'. Since the ancient times, the relationship between people and environment or ecology had been one of harmony, coexistence, mutual care and concern, hence the Indian Civilisation has been regarded as an 'eco-friendly' civilisation. The attitude of care and respect is intricate in the Indian way of life which was very comprehensive, well integrated with the environment and ecologically sound. In India **Culture and Nature** are altogether interwoven. The traditional, philosophical, mythological, religious, socio-political and medicinal books, discourses, rituals, arts and facts, and literature along with **folk culture** reflect the deep reverence that Indian society holds for Environment.

The oldest testimony of human reverence and love for nature can be found in 10,000 years old world's oldest cave painting at Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh displaying the harmonious co-existence of birds, animals and human beings. The seals carrying the images of bull, elephant etc were found in abundance at Indus Valley Civilisation sites. This underlines the inseparable relation that Nature and Human beings are sharing since thousands of centuries back.

Indian tradition looks upon planet Earth as a living entity and is regarded as Mother. Our environmental concerns are deeply rooted in our **driving Philosophy** which is based on the intuitive realisation that **the entire creation is the manifestation of a non-dual, purely conscious, entirely blissful Supreme Being 'Brahma'**. This Supreme divine being is manifested into five primary elements, namely, Prithvi (earth), Jal (water), Agni (fire), Vayu (air) and Akash (space). These five divine and subtle elements constitute everything in the cosmos hence they are worshipped in India as **the Essence Of Life**. These Panchattatva, that is, Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space are the sources of physical body, mind, intelligence, awareness and consciousness in the entire creation. Along with these fundamental elements, we

also worship Sun, Moon and all other planets of our solar system as Deities. Such is the comprehensiveness, all inclusiveness, broadness, Panpsychism, pantheism and spiritualism of our Indian Culture.

Our civilization came into being around the river valleys, Indus Valley Civilisation is the oldest civilisation still surviving. The seven sacred rivers of India – Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Narmada, Kshipra, Godavari and Kaveri, bear the vibrant glory of our **Civilisational continuity and coherency**. Holy river **Ganga** has been assigned the **status of Living Entity** and efforts are on to give the **same status to River Narmada**. In Indian context, Rivers are not merely the flowing mass of water but are regarded as life nurturing, life bestowing and life propagating **Divine Mothers**. A great ecological, social and spiritual significance has been attributed to the Rivers in India. The Rivers in India are believed to be such divine manifestations that they can evolve divinity in humanity. The traditional water harvesting and water conservation techniques reflect the human understanding about preciousness of water and their scientific temperament.

The importance of trees and forests can be traced from the tradition of **Panchavati** that is still in practice throughout the country. Panchavati implies 'Five Groves', that is a grove consisting of five trees. These five trees are Banyan, Peepal, Ashoka, Bela and Harda. These five trees have been chosen on account of their precious philosophical, medicinal and environmental aspects. These trees get replaced by other trees depending upon the local climatic and other geographical conditions. It is believed that a house becomes inhabitable only when it is surrounded by Panchavati. The sacred **grove tradition** is still prominently found and various massive groves have been transformed into rich ecological repositories in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra.

In the Bhishma Parva of Mahabharata, Earth is referred to an 'ever yielding cow' – 'if Earth is well looked after, it becomes father, mother, children, firmament and heaven, of all creatures'. The epic Mahabharata also compares tree to the universe and says that he who 'worships the ashvattha or Peepal worships the universe'. Peepal tree is a symbolic representation of Universe with a single trunk and multiple branches that reveals the manifold manifestation of **a single Life Force**. The Peepal tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment was regarded as Bodhi tree which symbolises Universal Consciousness. The tradition of tree worshipping finds its practice in Harappan culture and still widely followed nationwide. The legendary Philosopher of Tamilakam, Thiruvalluvar, talks of Nature **as man's fortress**. If man destroys it, he would remain without any protection. Kautiliya in Arthashastra, suggested to develop

abhyāraṇya, forests and animal sanctuaries. He also prescribed the post of a Forest Superintendent and penalties for poaching and causing damage to forests. Our village set up regarded fields, orchards, ponds, forests, groves as its inseparable treasure that made villages **self reliant and self sustainable** with the supply of nutritious food, fuel, pasture lands, wood for multifarious activities, medicines, herbs and healthy environment. Indian tradition deeply believed and embraced the **Philosophy** that **human habitation is just a minor portion in the vast kingdom of Nature and every Law of Nature must be respected and followed over and above human interest and economic considerations**. People's initiatives to protect environment took the form of great movements like –**Save Silent Valley Movement** to protect evergreen tropical forests of Palakkad in Kerala; **Chipko Movement** initiated by women of Uttarakhand against deforestation; **Jungle Bachao Andolan** in Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand; **Narmada Bachao Andolan**; **Appiko** Movement in Karnataka against deforestation. In 18<sup>th</sup> century, the **Bishnoi Movement** by started by Amrita Devi in Rajasthan against the destruction of trees in which 363 people sacrificed their lives. The Bishnoi tree martyrs followed the teachings of Guru Maharaj Jamba ji, the founder of Bishnoi faith, who preached the principles forbidding harms to trees and animals. Even today the extremely diverse and rich folklore of India is **amarvellous reservoir** of knowledge, experiences, wisdom and practices regarding environment across the nation.

Traditionally the agriculture fields were not regarded more important than orchards, forests and groves. The cities, towns, villages were established and developed in harmony with the Nature. The activities were governed by directions and position of sun and moon, seasons and direction of wind flow. Our festivals are associated with trees, seasons, agricultural activities and with Nature and environment in general, like we have festival of Basant Panchami, Teej, Pongal, Onam celebrating seasons and agricultural harvests.

The Constitution of India imposes a constitutional obligation on the state to protect and improve the environment and safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country through **Article 48(A)**. **Article 51 (A)(g)** imposes a constitutional obligation on the citizens of India to protect and improve the natural environment, including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for all living creatures.

There is **adichotomy** developed between environment conservation and economic development. Though India faces the challenge of economic growth when its 2.4% of the world's land has to meet the aspirations of 18% of world's population, still for India environmental sustainability is one of the most important issue. India is working on **Swaccha Bharat Abhiyaan, subsidised LED**

**lightsand** also helping Malaysia to implement this scheme, India 2030, **Rally for rivers**, massive afforestation, ambitious solar mission, building roads from garbage and many more visions. India has pledged that 40% of the country's electricity would come from non-fossil fuel-based sources, such as wind and solar power, by 2030. India has also ratified COP21 Paris Agreement on Earth Day in 2016 and agreed on spending \$6 billion to increase the forest cover from 12% to 29% of country's land by 2030.

The India's **National Anthem and National Emblem** clearly displays India's commitment and its traditional intense kinship with the Environment. The National Emblem of India, which is the Lion Capital of Ashoka at Saranath, is a sculpture of four Asiatic lions standing back to back symbolising power, courage, pride and confidence; on a abacus with a frieze carrying sculptures of an elephant, a horse, a bull and a lion – all in moving state and are being placed between the chakras to display them as moving the chakras. Here the lion signifies the achievement of enlightenment while other animals symbolises the other aspects of Buddha's life. The whole scripture sits upon a **lotus** that exemplifies the fountainhead of life and creative inspiration. Our National animal **Tiger** symbolises power; the national bird **Peacock** symbolises elegance; the national tree **banyan** symbolises immortality; the national flower, **Lotus** symbolises purity and our national fruit **Mango** symbolises the tropical climate of India. Thus these components of Environment are the **representatives** of Indian culture, philosophy, vision, strive and ethos. Our inherent environment ethics put an additional responsibility on us to protect, preserve and nourish the environment, our cultural heritage and traditional knowledge, and help the world in environmental ethics, conservation and sustainable development.