**Social Issues**

**Environmental Ethics: Issues and Possible Solutions:**

Ethics are concerned with what is wrong and what is right, irrespective of the culture and society. Environmental ethics deals with issues related to the rights of individuals that are fundamental of life and wellbeing, their protection and preservation for future generations and the rights of all living creatures that inhabit the earth. In other words, environmental ethics try to define the moral basis of environmental responsibility. This essentially involves three things:

i) To ensure that the earth remains hospitable. This is the anthropocentric view, wherein it is held that nature has value only when humans utilize it. It is also referred to as the developmental ethic, the basis of the idea is progress, wherein a healthy environmental depends upon a healthy economic growth for which there is unlimited potential;

ii) To consider nature to have an intrinsic value apart from its use as a resource to humans. Also known as the preservation ethic, this view holds that nature exists for all species and that a healthy environment can provide more raw materials and ensure economic growth vis-à-vis an unhealthy degraded environment.

iii) To work towards a balance of resource use and resource availability, also known as the conservation ethic. The focus in this case is on development, preservation, population control and minimization of waste.

Recorded history reveals that man has been continuously struggling to manage his environment in order to improve his well being. Following the industrial and scientific revolutions, mans’ capacity to manage and improve increased greatly. The spread of diseases via the environment (through infected food, air, water etc.) have been virtually controlled and without any undue interference and alteration in nature. To this extent mans’ management of societal needs seem to be in consonance with nature. However, the advents of industrialization and subsequent rapid development have, especially since the past three decades, brought to the forefront the deadly effects of on environment.

Nature has provided mankind with a protective cover as also a supportive resource base, but both stand impaired today. This is primarily the result of the lifestyle dominated by greed and mode of development followed by mankind characterized by indiscriminate and over exploitation of the resource base, industrialization and urbanization that has undermined the ecosystem, leading to degradation of the environment. The negative impact is unmistakable in the form of global warming, ozone depletion, toxic pollution and an erosion of biodiversity. Moreover, the focus of the prevailing pattern of development is ‘infinite growth in a finite environment’. This naturally leads to reckless exploitation of natural resource. As a result, the renewable resources such as oil and coal are fast getting depleted, while renewable resources such as timber and fish are being used at a rate for greater than the rate of their renewal. As such the future of mankind is distinctly bleak.

Although the pattern of environmental problems is varied in the industrial developed countries and the non-industrial developing countries, the issue of protecting the environment is a serious one for both. While in the former these problems are intimately linked with production and consumption, in the latter they are associated with burgeoning population and poverty. Thus, in every society, preserving the environment is of utmost significance.

However, till the 1980s the success of the technological civilization obscured the fact that continuous degradation of the environment was taking place. E.g. while mechanized agriculture and chemical fertilizers and other farm inputs greatly increased production, these also led to the growth of algae in lakes and water sources and the poisoning of entire animal, bird and insect populations. Further, technological and other modern inputs greatly strained the marginal lands and the temporary increased output finally led to desertification, wherein the land was rendered completely incapable of production In fact, the World Watch Institutes 2003 State of the World Report noted that expanding human habitation, pollution and over exploitation could even bring humanity on the verge of extinction. About one-fourth of the agricultural land in the developing world is seriously degraded and cannot be used as cropland; 30% of the world’s forest cover is fragmented or degraded and 50% of the wetlands have disappeared in the last hundred years. A continuation of current trends would put in question the survival of more and more human communities. But there is hope. Such trends can be checked but would need concerted effort and diversion of funds at the global level.

However, in terms of environmental ethics the basic issue is that of the distribution and utilization of the Earths’ resources. In the world today there exists a clear divide between the rich and poor, whether it be nations, communities,or families, there are the haves and the have-nots. Also the use of natural resources and wealth shifts from the wilderness (forests, grasslands, wetlands etc.) to the rural sector and then onto the urban sector implying an unequal distribution of wealth and access to land and its resources. Thus, disparity in the resource consumption patterns highlights the need for equitable distribution. In fact, the first report on the Status of India’s Environment (1985), emphasized that excessive consumption patterns of the rich which left the poor poorer were responsible for India’s environmental problems. It also pointed out that tribals, women and marginal sectors of society dependent on different natural resources were being left out of economic development. In fact, according to the report, “the following 8 propositions were of great relevance to ethical issues related to environmental concerns.

1 Environmental destruction is largely caused by the consumption of the rich.

2 The worst sufferers of environmental destruction are the poor.

3 Even where nature is being ‘recreated,’ as in afforestation, it is being transformed away from the needs of the poor and towards those of the rich.

4 Even among the poor, the worst sufferers are the marginalized cultures and occupations and, most of all, women.

5 There cannot be proper economic and social development without a holistic understanding of society and nature.

6 If we care for the poor, we cannot allow the Gross Nature Product to be destroyed any further. Conserving and recreating nature has become our highest priority.

7 The Gross Nature Product will be enhanced only if we can arrest and reverse the growing alienation between the people and the common property resources. In this we will have to learn a lot from our traditional cultures.

8 It is totally inadequate to talk only of sustainable rural development, as the World Conservation Strategy does. We cannot save the rural environment or rural people dependent on it, unless we can bring about sustainable urban development.”

As an example taking the case of the use of forest resources we must appreciate that fuel wood collection by poor, rural folk alone is not responsible for their degradation. In fact, it is the unlimited consumption, of industrial products indirectly obtained from the forest resources, such as paper, rubber, plywood, packaging etc. that contributes more towards forest degradation.

Those who suffer the most by the degradation of the primary natural resources are indeed the poor, the womenfolk in rural areas and the tribal people who are dependent on land, forests, grasslands or streams, rivers and ocean waters. They are most seriously affected by degradation of the ecosystems. Unsustainable pressures on land and natural resources are exerted much more by urban dwellers, who are far removed from the resources that sustain them but who consume larger quantities of resources and energy than the simple rural folk.

A possible solution to this problem of environmental ethics lies in evolving environment awareness programmes designed specifically for the urban dwellers to appreciate the above mentioned imperatives. Also similar environmental awareness programmes should also be made out for rural adults and children from within their sphere of life experiences and supporting their local traditional knowledge systems. In fact, the latter should be made the basis for modern concept implementation.

A case in point has been that vast stretches of forests, grazing lands and aquatic ecosystems comprised the common property resources in India till such time as exploitation by the British to meet their own requirements took over. E.g. several forests were declared as ‘Reserved’ and used to grow timber trees needed by them for ship building. This alienated the people from preserving these resources and thus a lot of forest was destroyed and turned to wasteland. Well-defined rules were earlier made and implemented at the *‘Panchayat’* level to protect conserve and preserve the natural resources and any wrong doings were immediately dealt with and punished. Common property resources were protected by the community. However, these practices have been replaced by unsustainable practices the result of changing land use and inadequately planned development strategy.

Environmental ethics are also concerned with the ownership of resources. It may be pointed out that at the global level the rich developed countries of North America and Europe own and use greater resources and energy and generate more waste than the developing countries. Further, in order to meet their high consumption requirements they buy from the resource-rich, but economically deprived nations at low cost. This practice depletes resources and requires immediate adoption of better trade practices and awareness among the developed nations of the consequences.

Another significant issue of environmental ethics is the issue of rural-urban equity. Urban and industrial expansion is not only consuming rural land, but resources generated in the rural sector, such as food and raw materials, are being used to sustain urban life and living. Thus, either way the rural sector stands depleted. This imbalance must be checked with the encouragement of household, cottage, and small scale industry which would not only help contain the exodus of rural population to the cities but also initiate regional development.

There is also the issue of gender equity. It is generally the men who control and manage the resources, although it is the women who actually use and conserve them. However, gender equity is absent and women not only lack education but are also denied any opportunity, Their role in environmental preservation and conservation cannot be denied. A perfect example has been the ‘Chipko Movement’ whereby the womenfolk by embracing the trees brought to a halt the unmindful cutting of timber trees in the hills of Uttarakhand and Garhwal. Being the traditional fuel collectors, the women realized that commercial exploitation of the forest not only receded their resource use areas but led to serious soil erosion and flash floods. This brought forth to the world that the forests were literally the support system of the local communities and extremely significant to soil conservation and for sustaining the natural water resources. It was also seen that the replacement of the indigenous species (oak and broad-leaved trees) by quick growing commercially lucrative trees (pines for timber and resin) has been an ecological and social disaster that depleted the natural forest resource base of the local hill communities.

**Sustainable Development**

The unsustainable use of resources is certainly unethical. Continued over-use and misuse of resources and energy would ultimately jeopardize the survival of future generations. Preserving biodiversity and ecosystems is the moral duty of the present generation in order that future generations can sustain themselves. We must also realize that humankind is a part of and shares the Earth with the total community of living things i.e. plants and animals. But man through his exploitative lifestyle has driven several species of plants and animals to the point of extinction.

Thus, global unsustainability is essentially the result of two factors:

*i) the rapidly increasing population and the consequent increasing pressure on natural resources and life support systems of the Earth, and*

*ii) the declining physical resources of the Earth, the regeneration of which is unable to match the pace of mans’ indiscriminate use.*

For the sake of human survival itself there is an urgent need to shift focus to holistic sustainable development. Sustainable development has been very aptly defined as “ development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. It is imperative therefore, to shift from a wasteful consumption based society to a sustainable low waste society. Qualitative growth must be achieved within the limits of the supporting capacity of the ecosystem. Planning processes for the more judicious and effective use of resources and energy,

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development of less resource-intensive sectors, efficient environment management through policy intervention, are some strategies to achieve development goals without environment/ecological degradation.

It must be understood that in order to achieve sustainable development we need:

i) to prevent excessive depletion and degradation of all natural resources

**ii)** to use energy more efficiently

**iii)** to shift from polluting fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy as derived from the sun

**iv)** to stall the pace of renewable resources to the rate at which they can be regenerated and replaced

**v)** to curtail all wastage of non-renewable resources and to recycle and reuse materials

**vi)** to reduce waste and pollution generation to levels at which they can be biodegraded and rendered harmless

**vii)** to slow down and ultimately stabilize population growth, and

**viii)** to reduce poverty that leads people to use resources unsustainably.

Thus, it is clear that sustainable development is closely linked to the carrying capacity of an ecosystem. It is therefore, important to attain a symbiotic relationship between the consumer (humans) and the producer (ecosystem). Respect for all life and the processes that sustain it is significant as it is this respect that can control excessive exploitation. How much is enough is the question that needs to be answered, for every living thing must get its share of resources from its environment. The Earth does not belong to us, we belong to the Earth. We must learn to understand, co-operate and work with the rest of nature, “ to sustain the ecological integrity, biodiversity and adaptability to Earth’s life support systems for us and other species”. Before interfering and altering nature to fulfil our needs and requirements we must adopt ways which are the least harmful. No specie or human culture should become extinct through our actions.

In fact, each individual has the responsibility to evaluate any harmful consequences of his lifestyle. Nature itself is a big teacher. We must therefore, learn from it and from the communities closest to nature the art of living in harmony. Simple living is really at the core.

**Consumerism and Waste Generation**

It is customary to divide the countries of the world into developed and developing countries. While the former are characterized by a high standard of living, industrialization and urbanization, the latter are characterized by fast growing population, poverty, low levels of development and standard of living, agriculture based economy and too many people. It is interesting to note that while the developing countries of the world are home to 80% of the worlds population, they survive on just about 20% of the income. On the other hand the developed, industrialized countries that make up about 20% of the world population consume 80% of the worlds resources and also generate 80% of the waste. This is directly related to the pattern of economic development and consistent increase in consumption. Developing countries, including India are fast moving towards this pattern which is unsustainable in terms of depletion of natural resources to meet the increasing requirements. This is also widening the inequalities of consumption in different societies.

Any item we use cannot be evaluated in terms of money alone \_ the real cost is the raw material and energy that has gone into its making and the waste generated in the process. If one is to think in terms of the products we use each day, over a life-span the over-utilization in each family, city or a country the impact on the environmental incredible and very high.

Consumerism is related to the constant buying of new and latest goods with little concern about their origin or consequences of their manufacture and disposal. Consumerism, therefore, directly interferes with the sustainable use of resources. While some new appliances may be more productive and energy efficient, discarding and not reusing or recycling materials obviously leads to waste of the energy and material already used in the manufacture and production of what is being discarded. E.g. ‘two hundred billion cans, bottles, plastic cartons and paper caps are thrown, away each year in the developed world.’ In fact, disposable items, encouraged for use of advertisements, enhance consumerism.

Todays consumer-oriented society generates a lot of waste. The complex processes used to manufacture consumer products leads to the production of vast amounts of waste which is not disposed effectively. As such solid, liquid and gaseous waste products pollute the environment land, air and water and this is now a major environmental issue. Among rural communities not only are smaller waste quantities generated but effectively used and recycled. However, the problem of waste management in the urbanized and industrialized areas in a serious environmental issue. If waste production continues unabated and waste disposal procedures remain uneconomical and in effective, all natural resources, the environment and the health of all living things stands endangered. There is a need for a serious re-think. We cannot deny that generation of some waste is inevitable in any society, but at least it should be minimized. Residual waste can often be converted into a useable resource.

In urban, industrial communities the waste generated primarily includes paper, plastic, tin cans, bottles, mineral refuse, hospital waste etc. while that from rural communities includes agricultural wastes, dead animals, human and animal excreta, fertilizer and pesticides etc. Considered to be of no value at all those wastes have been for long discharged into the land, air and water, a practice which has led to disastrous effects. Waste today can be used better in that it is being now used to produce energy, to recover useful materials from industrial waste e.g. heavy metals and chemicals, to make compost form domestic waste, to produce biogas from sewage etc. In fact, appropriate use of technology can well make a waste produce of one industry into a raw material for another leading to immense conservation of resources. This is the need of the hour and to fulfill over duty in preserving and conserving the earth’s resources adopting the principle of reducing, reusing and recycling waste would go a long way in safeguarding our environment. This is a major social responsibility.