

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION: NATURE AND DIMENSIONS

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Abstract:

Environmental degradation has added new problems more particularly, in the developing countries. India which is a developing country is facing environmental problems because of the negative effect of a developing economy and from conditions of poverty and underdevelopment. Development can take place at the cost of environment only until a point. In fact, development without concern for environment can only be short-term development. In the long run, it can only be anti-development can go on only at the cost of enormous human suffering, increased poverty and oppression. Thus, we in India are faced with the need for accelerating a pace of development for alleviation of poverty which is to a great extent responsible for many of our environmental problems. If the entire picture of environment degradation is looked at from the Indian perspective, we may find that the overall position is not very encouraging. In fact, India has been described as a pollution loving nation. Every sad or happy occasion finds expression in one type of the pollution or other. The birth or the marriage of a son is celebrated by bursting crackers thus resulting in air pollution and thus by displaying amplified orchestra band giving rise to noise pollution. Again on the occasion of death as Prof. Diwan Rightly points out "we pollute our rivers by disposing dead bodies." We have been termed as "lovers of cleanliness" but prefer to throw rubbish and other household waste to the public streets. This is the picture at home. When we come out of our houses, what is the scenario? It has been estimated that nearly 70 per cent of our available water is polluted. The Ganga and the Yamuna, the two of our sacred rivers are the most polluted. The same is true of other rivers. Waste matters and effluents from industries of all types are being dumped into the waters used for drinking and thus pushing the nation towards an ecological disaster. In fact, waste disposal problems are getting worst day-by-day posing serious environmental health and safety risks.

Keywords: *Environment, Degradation, Pollution, Protection.*

Introduction:

New Awakening: Right from mother's womb, one needs unpolluted air to breath, uncontaminated water to drink, nutritious food to eat and hygienic conditions to live in. These elements are *sine qua non* for sound development of human personality. In the absence of these seldom all the

faculties of man grow to their fullest extent. Man in order to survive, adapts itself to its environment but he rarely pays due attention for its improvement, either because of his indifference towards it or because of his lack of ability to improve or change it or because of his ignorance of it. The Governmental organisations too, had

paid scanty regard for it. On the contrary, in the name of the development and progress through industrial and agricultural revolutions, environment is being affected adversely day by day.

However, in the decade of seventy, for the first time, the attention of the world was drawn towards environment. In the year 1972, from June 5 to 16 under the auspices of U.N.O. a conference was held at Stockholm (Sweden) known as the Stockholm Conference on Environment and Development, 1972. The declaration of the conference was divided into two parts besides the Preamble. The first part had proclaimed seven truths about man in relation to his environment and the second part had laid down twenty six 'principles'. The following principles out of the twenty six are significant:

1. Man has the fundamental right of adequate conditions of the life, in an environment of quality that permits a life of dignity and wellbeing, and bears a responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations.
2. Natural resources of the earth including the air, water, land, flora and fauna and especially representative sample of natural ecosystems must be safeguarded for the benefit of present and future generations through careful planning and management as appropriate.
3. States shall take all possible steps to prevent pollution of the seas by substances that are liable to create hazards to human health, to harm living resources and marine life, to damage amenities or to interfere

with other legitimate uses of the seas.

4. States have the sovereign right to exploit their own environmental policies and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.
5. States shall co-operate to develop further the International law regarding liability and compensation for the victims of pollution and other environmental damages caused by activities within the jurisdiction or control of such states to areas beyond their jurisdiction.

India did participate in this conference and Mrs Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, declared a remarkable environmental policy for the country, but the real and new awakening came only after the Bhopal Gas Tragedy on December 4, 1984. People, voluntary organisations and Governmental agencies came to realise that for the survival of human race, and for that matter the life itself on the Planet earth, the protection of environment is of utmost significance.

Component of Environment:

It is rather difficult to define what environment really means. This is an expression of very wide amplitude as it takes into account all those factors which directly or indirectly have bearing upon the natural surroundings of human beings. In fact there is so close relationship between man and his environment that apart from it man is an abstraction; in reality no such being could exist. Dr. T.N. Khoshoo defines it as the "sum total of all conditions and

influences that affect the development and life of all organs.”

The United States Council on Environmental Quality provides that “man’s total environmental system includes not only biosphere but also his interactions with his natural and man-made surroundings.” The

Encyclopaedia – Britannica defines environment as “the entire range of external influence acting on an organism, both the physical and biological, i.e., other organism forces of nature surroundings an individual.

The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 in Section 2(9) defines environment as follows:

“Environment includes water, air and land and the interrelationship which exists among and between water, air and land and human beings, other living creatures, plants, micro-organism and property.”

Environment is, thus, a very complex phenomenon. In order to understand it one has to understand ecosystem, ecology and biosphere.

Ecosystem:

Although that man has annihilated on the earth but for his substances he is and will always be dependent upon other things especially the nature. The food which he eats comes from cereals formed of soil, air and sun light. The soil which produces of green plants and animals transforming rocks and sun light energy into the organised network with the help of tiny organisms which maintain its health and fertility. Thus, man cannot escape from his physical environment. The physical environment includes plants, animals, lights, temperature, water, gases and earth.

An assemblage of species of plants and animals inhabiting a

common area and having effects on one another is known as a biotic community. A combination of such biotic community with the physical environment is known as an ecosystem. According to United States Council on Environmental Quality, the Inter dependence of living and non-living parts, Le, man, animals, plants, forests, takes, soil etc. make an Ecosystem. Combinations of ecosystems or sometimes larger ecosystems which occur in similar climates and share similar character and arrangement of vegetation are known as biomes. In other words, a biome is a unit resulting from the interaction of a regional climate, animal and plant life and substrate. The examples of biomes are the Arctic tundra, Prairie grass lands, Deserts, coniferous forests, deciduous forests, Tropical forests, Fresh water and Marine biome, etc.

An ecosystem does not remain constant. Changes occur in it continuously in one form or the other and it is significant that a small change even in one part of an ecosystem is felt throughout the system. However, the system tries to maintain stability as far as possible. The stability of the system depends on its diversity. The more interdependencies in an ecosystem, the greater the chances of resisting the change; for example, a tropical forest is in much better position to maintain stability than the Arctic tundra region with limited plant and animal life. It is the drastic change in the ecosystem that affects the environment.

Ecology:

The term 'ecology' was coined by combining the two Greek-words, "pikos"- meaning 'house' or 'dwelling place, and logos, meaning 'the study of.

It means the relationships between the organisms and their environment. The word ecology was first used by a German biologist, H. Reiter in 1868, although it is not certain whether this word was coined by him or not. Earlier, in 1859, the term 'ethology' was used by a French Zoologist, Isidore Geoffroy St Hilaire for "the study of the relations of the organism within the family and society in aggregate and in the community". In 1894, English naturalist St. George Jackson Mivart coined the term hexicology' for this kind of study. However, the term ecology' was preferred to the remaining two other terms and is being used by the people all over the world.

It may be defined as the study of eco-systems to determine how they are organised, how the creatures within them inter-act and how total systems function¹. It may thus be described as the science involved in the study of organisms in relation to their environment. According to the United States Council on Environmental Quality, "Ecology is the Science of the intricate web of relationships between living organisms and their living and non-living surroundings."

According to the dictionary meaning ecology is a branch of biology dealing with relations of living organisms to their surroundings, their habits, modes of life, etc.

With regard to its content, in 1963, scientists agreed that the existing definition of ecology is not suitable; it is too vague and too broad. Ecology should be defined as the study of the structure and function of ecosystem "or" the study of structure and function of nature". It has also been defined as "interactions of form, function and

factors. These three interacting. Aspects that is, form function and factors integrate together to construct the triangle of nature. Thus the present day ecology is the study of the biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) component of nature, their interrelationship and the orderly manner in which they function to give rise to a definite system.

Genesis Of The Problem

In order to achieve sustainable development environment protection constitutes an integral part of developmental process and it cannot be considered in Isolation. Peace, development and Interdependent and indivisible. Today we environment are confronted with IN perpetuation of disparities between and within nations, a worsening of poverty, hunger, ill-health and illiteracy, and the continuing deterioration of the ecosystem on which we depend for our wellbeing. However, Integration of environment and development concerns and greater attention to them will lead to fulfilment of basic needs, improved living standards for all, better protected and managed ecosystem and a safer, more prosperous future."

There is a close relationship which exists between a healthy environment and economic condition of the community at large. The problem of environmental pollution is the problem of both developed and Sunder developed or poor nations. As far as developing nations are concerned, "poverty and lack of development" constitute an essential element of the problem of environmental pollution. In fact, the poverty is the worst form of pollution. The poor people who do not have means to get one meal a day,

clothes to cover themselves and shelter to live in. cannot possibly think about the environment protection. For them any method by which they can survive is the best, least caring about its effect on the environment. They are not educated and hence they are not having enough awareness to know or understand the problem. On the other hand, the developed countries have problems of their own. Over production, nuclear radiations, over exploitation of resources, industrial wastes in different forms, industrial accidents and the living style of the people are some of the contributing factors for environmental problem in the developed countries.

The present century, particularly, in the later half has seen a lot of growth and economic development in almost all the countries. The methods of economic development, which mankind has followed, are also creating environmental problem. With the industrial and technological development, mankind has not only improved the economic conditions but also altered the natural ecological balance. Industrialisation, urbanisation and erosion of biodiversity have affected the natural environment adversely.

Air pollution has now become a major killer with three million people dying of it every year. Carbon emissions doubled in three decades. Global warming is now a serious threat. US carbon emissions are 16 per cent above 1990 levels making it a major polluter. Forty per cent of world population now, faces chronic shortage of fresh water for daily needs. Half the world's wetlands have been lost and one-fifth of 10,000 freshwater species is extinct.

Contaminated water kills around 2.2 million people every year. Since 1990, 2.4 per cent of the world's forests have been destroyed. The rate of loss is now 90,000 sq. km. every year. Now two-thirds of the world's farm lands suffer from soil degradation. Half the world's grasslands are over-gazed. India is 25 per cent short of its fodder needs. 800 species have become extinct and 11,000 more are threatened. Almost 75 per cent of the world's marine capture is over fished or fully utilized. In North America, 10 fish species went extinct in the 1990s. Of the 9,946 known bird species, 70 per cent has declined in numbers. The world added 800 million people since 1990. In 2000, global population was 6 billion, up from 2.5 billion in 1950. In 10 years, the world will have to feed and house another billion."

Indian Scenario

In India, as elsewhere in the world, uncontrolled growth and consequent environmental deterioration are fast assuming menacing proportions and all Indian cities and majority of the population are afflicted with the problem. Global warming, ozone depletion and toxic pollution are some of the negative effects of existing development strategy.

Today, most of our rivers are polluted. Deforestation of most of our forests is increasing day by day. Leakage of poisonous gases and other harmful gases, liquids and solid wastes from the industries has almost become a regular phenomenon of the present day. The problem of noise pollution, particularly, in big cities is at alarming stage. Land erosion through winds and water has become the common feature.

According to a World Bank estimate, India loses a whopping \$ 80 billion annually on account of sickness and death from pollution and economic costs attributable to resource degradation. The loss due to poor environment is pegged in excess of \$ 20 billion a year by conventional calculations and \$ 80 billion in purchasing power parity (ppp) terms, according to the World Bank Annual Environment review released in October 1998. According to the World Bank, deteriorating water quality due to poor sanitation, industrial effluents and pesticide run-off, lack of clean water, poor solid waste management and air pollution are the key environmental problem in South Asia.

However, the fundamental question before us today is whether we can allow the destruction of the environment leading to the destruction of all living creatures including human beings on this planet. The answer is obviously-No. Despite our brutal exploitation of our forests, indiscriminate quarrying, pollution of rivers and other water resources, rapid increase of air and noise pollution, it is still possible to protect the deteriorating environment through proper policies and management." And the recent developments in the area environment protection prove this point.

India's Concern For Environmental Protection

India too has shown its concern over the continuing degradation of the environment. For the better management of its natural resources, the proper protection and conservation of the environment for all being of our future generation, the maintenance of a

proper balance between economic development and the consequential environmental degradation, the Government of India has framed a national policy on Environmental Protection, Here an attempt is made to outline the basics of the national policy as well as the regulatory mechanism developed for implementing the same. It may be pointed out here that during pre-1970 era India did not have a well framed policy for protecting the environment. The UN Conference on Human Environment held at Stockholm, in 1972 proved a turning point in drawing our national concern for protecting the environment. In pursuance of the Stockholm mandate, India was constrained to set up a National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination (NCEPC) in the Department of Science and Technology.

Thus NCEPC was established as an apex advisory body in all matters relating to environmental protection and improvement. The Committee was to plan and coordinate while the responsibility of execution remained with the various ministries and agencies of the Government. The committee was assisted by the Department of Science and Technology and an office of Environmental Planning and Coordination was set up under the overall supervision of the Chairman of the committee. However, the committee could not discharge its functions properly as it failed to receive the desired cooperation from the Government.

Conclusion

However, from above observations it should not be understood that in ancient India there

was no concern for environment protection and that this concern is only of recent origin. In fact, the concern for Environment Protection in India can be traced back to the period between 321 and 300 B.C. The ancient Indian law on Environment protection is found in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. It was in the society to protect the nature. The people worshiped the objects of nature. The trees, water, land and animals gained important position in the ancient times. The cultural and religious heritage of Indian shows a deep concern for the protection and preservation of the environment.

The foregoing overview of Indian environment picture unmistakably reveals that the degradation is clearly visible. The major environmental concern of India were air pollution resulting from industrial development; water pollution from domestic and industrial effluents; noise pollution from scientific and technological developments; soil erosion, deforestation, desertification and loss of wildlife because of imprudent and unplanned use of land and resources; and ugly landscapes, urban sprawl, and city slums resulting from a burgeoning population. Thus, India's environmental problems unlike the developed countries are more complex and peculiar. However, the basic point that needs to be emphasised here is that the bulk of environmental problems that we are facing today are man created and hence any protective measure designed to safeguard and improve quality of environment must be man centred.

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