

The Spiritual Dimension of Environment and its influence on Sustainable Development

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Abstract: Environment is a multidimensional concept. The physical, economic, social, cultural and other dimensions have been discussed by many authors. The spiritual dimension of environment has also been discussed to a certain extent. An attempt is made in this paper to throw some light on this dimension. Sustainable Development is also discussed here and possible relation between these two is checked into. Spiritual dimension of the environment and sustainable development seem to be closely linked.

Index terms: Environment, Dimensions, Spiritual dimension, Sustainable Development

Introduction

'Environment' is commonly referred to as the immediate surroundings, which is the physical environment. The study of environment is known as 'environmental biology'. This and its synonym 'ecology' means the study of environment, but the latter was more used in academic field earlier. 'Ecology' is derived from the Greek word "oikos" which means 'house', and the term 'ecology' was coined by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 (Egerton, 2013). Early in human history, Ecology was of great practical interest, and people knew their environment and lived in perfect harmony with it. But technological achievements slowly pulled man and nature apart, and added with the advanced economic systems and human interventions, the value and serenity of nature seemed slowly fading away from human minds (Odum and Barrett, 1971). Humans considered nature and whatever it provided, as taken for granted. This rift could possibly be patched up through a spiritual approach, thus creating a love and respect towards nature. In short, an attitude change seems to be the need of the hour.

The multidimensional concept of Environment

The picture that comes to a common person's mind is always the physical dimension of environment. For example, if one asks a primary school student about his or her idea about environment, he or she will be immediately replying to you about the physical environment. This is because as far as a small child is concerned, environment is what is seen in the immediate vicinity, as is seen on his or her way to and back from school and so on. Even to a grown up, response may not be different either. This is because people are always in association with their immediate surroundings. In the physical environment there is the constant interaction between the abiotic or non-living components and the biotic or living components. It is actually this interaction which maintains the ecological balance. But there are also other dimensions for environment, because environment is a multidimensional concept.

For example, spiritual, social, economic, cultural, and many more dimensions are there for environment. Humans have been closely studying nature from the beginning. Stone age religion aided the first ecological investigation of nature (Garreau, 2010). The social dimension is also evident from different aspects. Environment and society are highly interactive. Nowadays, human societies influence the environment considerably than the past times. In fact, human societies are ecologically embedded (Cudworth, 2005), and environments are often socially embedded. Ecologists believe that economic growth is possible only at the expense of the environment and by harming the environment. This is true to a certain extent, but may not be always so. These arguers state the example of developing countries for this aspect (Siebert and Siebert, 1981). Likewise, cultural dimension is also a reality. According to the anthropologist Herskovits, culture is the man-made part of the physical environment (Altman and Chemers, 1984). According to these authors, people and cultures influence the physical environment and vice versa.

Spiritual dimension of Environment

Ecology and spirituality are interrelated in different ways as is evident from literature. Spiritual ecology can lead to the reduction and solving of many ecological crises. Sustainable development is actually enabled by a spiritual outlook of the environment (Baker and Morrison, 2008). Environmental crises are increasing. In order to tackle these, an understanding and loving approach to nature is needed, wherein the spiritual dimension comes into play and help. Christianity always stress on the relationship between the creation and the Creator. This reverence and love for nature because it is the handwork of the Creator, underlies the basic theme of the Holy Bible. Ecological theology and Environmental ethics environment (Baker and Morrison, 2008) are closely knit in Christian teachings. Theology, Cosmology and Spirituality are closely connected which also makes theology live, and it urges for ethical behaviour.

His Holiness Pope Francis in his encyclical letter by name *Laudato Si* (Letter, 2015) considers earth as 'our common home' and it is said that the challenge to protect this common home actually brings the whole humanity together, paving way to sustainable and integral development. The feeling is that the humanity as a whole, work together in the building of this common home. The encyclical is full of this spiritual dimension of environment, and discusses widely about the various environmental crises including pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity. His Holiness urges an urgent appeal to all for a new dialogue to protect the environment. In the Holy Bible it is clearly stated that God is the Creator of the whole Universe. All religions reflect a spiritual dimension of environment, and protecting the environment is thus a matter of deep feeling and moral responsibility.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is the type of development by which future options are retained while at the same time development is not curtailed. If such a development should happen in the world, all human activities should be in tune with the principles of sustainable development in a nation, all the nations should join hands in this regard, and the standards of education, behaviour and lifestyle should also be modified accordingly. In a common usage, Sustainable development means 'keeping the cake and at the same time eating it'. Here the stress is on the concern for future generations. Whatever resources are there on the earth, is not for one's own use, it is also meant for our children – the future generations. Unplanned development is the main reason for the escalating deterioration of the environment.

The Brundtland Commission defines Sustainable development as “the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987). Avelino and Rotmans (2011) are of the opinion that a multidisciplinary approach is needed to explain Sustainable development. Sustainability has three dimensions according to Hardi and Zdan (1997) - economy, environment and society, and the interactions between these three are important too. The concept of Sustainable development is based on the concept of socio-economic development in line with ecological constraints, and the concept of long-term usage of resources to ensure the quality of life of future generations. Sustainable development could be achieved only through a balanced development of its three pillars – social, economic and ecological aspects (Tomislav, 2018). All the conferences starting from the 1972 Stockholm conference seem to emphasize on this. Thus, the socioeconomic pillars of Sustainable development are important (Paul, 2008).

Spiritual Dimension of Environment and Sustainable Development

The Spiritual dimension of environment does not in any way support sustainability nor Sustainable development. This need a little bit of discussion. It is already established that Sustainable development could be achieved only through a balanced development of social, economic and ecological aspects (Tomislav, 2018; Paul, 2008). Baker and Morrison (2008) are of the opinion that spiritual outlook of the environment may help in solving many of the environmental issues. There is the 'Environmentally Motivated Spirituality' and 'Spiritually Motivated Environmentalism' according to these authors. The latter provides motivation to love and respect nature and to work for the cause of the environment. The spiritual approach will definitely build up sustainable approaches to environmental problems. The spiritual approach towards environment will truly support a positive attitude towards nature, environment and its conservation.

Conclusion

The love and concern for the environment, the feeling which paves way for its conservation, the urge for sustainability and sustainable development, all these are the properties of human heart and soul. This state of human mind-set up can be attained only through spirituality, and this is what people are imbibing from religion. Respect, reverence, responsibility, and care for the environment comes because of the spiritual dimension of environment. Therefore, it could be said that spiritual dimension of the environment and sustainable development are closely linked.

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