

Sustainable Environment and Society: Issues and Challenges in India

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• Introduction

Environment is generally equated with nature wherein the physical components of the planet Earth viz. land, air, water, etc. support and affect life in the biosphere. In ancient times, primitive man's environment consisted of nearly the physical aspects of the planet Earth like land, air, water and the biotic communities. But with the passage of time, civilized man extended his environment through his social, economic and political functions. Various combinations of environmental factors have not only affected but conditioned racial characteristics in different parts of the Earth's surface. Environment influences and conditions the thoughts, ideologies and cultures of human beings. Even the social, economic and political behaviour is influenced to a certain extent by man's perception of environmental factors and his responses to these factors. The frequency and magnitude of extreme natural environment decides his reactions and responses to these events.

The emergence of socially organized human communities, human civilization and farming practices changed the existing almost friendly and cordial relationship between man and his natural environment. Gradual but continues effort in farming practices resulted in gradual increase in human population and in the number of domesticated animals. More and more virgin lands were cleared through felling of trees, using more advanced tools and weapons and through burning of forests. This was done in order to increase the agricultural land, so that the increasing number of human beings could get sufficient food. People also moved from areas of greater concentration of people to other areas in search of new fertile land. This led to spread of human population which ultimately destroyed the natural ecosystem.

In our country, environment has been accorded a very high place in the scheme of things. Our poets, philosophers and saints have always emphasized that human beings can find happiness only by living in harmony with nature. But with the leaps that science has taken in the modern times, and coupled with man's greed for power, prosperity and prestige, man has caused untold damage to the environment. Man has used development as a means to exploit nature to its maximum not caring a bit for the damage it has done and is doing to humanity.

- Objectives

The paper intends to explain the environmental forces and the role of human beings towards conservation of environment and betterment of society at large. Sustainable development and environment is the need of the hour, so that sustainable society can emerge and sustain the human beings on this planet Earth.

- Towards Sustainable Environment

The Indian theory of nature and ecology is influenced by the theory of creation which accepts that every element, objective and living being in the universe is created by the same supreme being and man has no special dominion over nature. To Indians, relationship with nature and animals is not that of dominance and subjugation but is rather, a relationship of mutual respect and kindness. Indian culture in the ancient and medieval times, provided a system of moral guidelines towards environmental preservation and conservation. Environment in Indian thought is not conceived as physical lifeless entity, it is a living mechanism. To highlight the importance of our environment, various rituals have been institutionalized. In oral tradition of India, environment has been viewed as a living being which breathes, feels, protects etc. Various environmental components have been given special positions giving each a kind consideration as environmental forces.

The popularity and importance of forests in India can be gauged from the concept of the five-grove culture, which is called Panchavatti. Many sacred groves contain water resources such as ponds and streams, and the vegetative mass that covers the floor of a grove can absorb water during rainy seasons and release it during times of draught. Trees improve soil stability, prevent topsoil erosion and provide irrigation for agriculture in drier climates. Sacred groves preserved over the course of many generations represent native vegetation in a natural or near natural state and thus, are rich in biodiversity and harbour many rare species

of plants and animals. The forces of the modern world are depleting sacred groves and weakening the traditions that protect them.

Conservation is the preservation of some level of biodiversity that is essential for the functioning of the ecosystem and the survival of mankind. Rainwater harvesting is the most cost effective and efficient way of water management. India has a rich legacy of water harvesting technology which our forefathers have left behind a dying wisdom which we should probably look back at and learn from.

- **Towards A Sustainable Society**

People in the world today have awakened to the need for taking tangible steps towards the existence of a sustainable society. A need for sharp decline of population in developing countries has been felt along with rational use and minimum waste. Materials must be recycled and reused and determined efforts must be made to conserve the life-support system and aid to its regenerability. We must follow a basic philosophy of blending environmental and economic needs into a connected whole, so that human beings work in harmony with nature.

If there is any one common issue that can bring the nations of the world together, it is the thread to our ecological security. To fight and face this, there is a strong need for common concerns, approaches and strategies. A common code is to be followed at different levels – individual, societal, community, national, regional and global for the developing of a cult of sustainability in development.

The major challenge facing the human race today is the move towards sustainability. If we continue at the present rate in India, we will continue to have agriculturists who are still living in medieval times and a small number of rich people living a lavish life. We must make quick and rational moves to bridge the gap between the two groups. Only then can we be sure of making a sustainable society where we have equity with social justice, environmental conservation, economic efficiency and local self-reliance.

An influential code of Ecology needs to be developed and followed on the following principles :

- (a) Providing steps and measures to protect and being regenerability of the life support systems for rational utilization of all available resources that includes developing and protecting renewable resources, conserving non-renewable resources, prolonging their

lives by recycling and reuse, decreasing waste and seeing that more wastage does not occur in pursuit of making profits on the whole.

- (b) Making efforts to bring about a fair sharing of resources that are available along with the means and products of development between nations of the world.
- (c) Creating an awareness of the hidden social, economic and environmental costs of consumerism and overuse of resources with particular reference to its impact on developing nations.
- (d) Willingness to adopt sustainability as a way of life by getting work from less and in association with others.
- (e) Making measures to meet all the essential needs of society and logical legal desires by combining economic and environmental necessities for eradicating poverty.
- (f) Stopping and reversing the buildup of ornaments to propagate sustainable peace, security and environment.

But all these steps towards a sustainable society changes need to be brought at the individual level. If all individuals take up these measures of the code of ecology in time, the change will be noticed at the societal and government levels too. Today, environment is no longer some concern about wildlife, deforestation and pollution, but it is a question, a conflict about the patterns of development that human race has followed till date and the kind of people we have developed into, and how we must change to survive. If a balanced and sound development is desired, then man's lifestyle and priorities may have to be defined and refined with respect to the needs concerned with energy, food, water, shelter, education employment and the like. We must limit or decrease wastage in our daily lives. Efforts must be generated towards development patterns that do not alienate humanity from environment but bring it to terms with it. Developmental objectives, processes and outcomes ought to be accompanied with human needs and the acceptance of sustainable development in view of the regenerating potentials of the environment and its resources at the local, regional, national and global levels. Environmental legislation must be made on the lines for guiding, regulating and controlling human behaviour and actions on the individual and institutional basis. This must be done for the rational use, management, protection and improvement of the environment and its resources. Environmental ethics is the ethical relationship between human beings and the environment in which they live.

Environmental ethics must be developed in each person, to command him as a force within to make decisions and take action on the different aspects of the environment which are not harmful to the community. Environmental ethics is a must as they aid in sharpening the judgment of a person and teach him for the sake of materials and political gains. Suitable strategies for developing environmental ethics must become a priority in the light of new environmental issues and problems in the contemporary society.

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