



11th National Conference on Nature, Culture, Language and Literature: Narratives and Critical Practices held on
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Need for a Paradigm Shift from Anthropocentrism to Cosmocentrism

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ABSTRACT

Ever since humans appeared on the earth, they have been interacting with the environment for fulfilling their subsistence needs. But this interaction reached unsustainable proportions after the industrial revolution, an offshoot of the mechanical world-view, which impoverished the earth and with it, a vast majority of the people. Humans have devastated and destroyed the earth to the point of no return. Thus ecological crisis has its roots in man, in his vision of himself, of the whole of creation and their interrelationships, in his value system and priorities, all of which relate to the religion-moral dimensions of the crisis. So our response to the ecological crisis must find a social expression that impinges on structures as well as values in our society.

Solutions need not only be technological but demands a change of our mindset, attitude, approach and lifestyle. This demands proactive interventions and strict policies and plans at the international and national levels which are sustainable and far-sighted. There is an urgent need for making people aware of this environmental responsibility. In short, there is an urgent need for a paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to cosmocentrism.

Keywords: environmental crisis, social crisis, paradigm shift, eco ethics, cosmocentrism

1. Introduction

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Till about three decades ago, the resources of the world were thought to be unlimited and if at all there was a depletion of one mineral or fuel, it was assumed that scientific advancement would certainly discover a substitute or even something better. However, in 1972 a report entitled, “The Limits to Growth’ shook the world into awareness that all was not well. On the basis of the trends observed at that time, the report forecast impending disaster¹. E.F. Schumacher in 1973 popularised the unpalatable truth that continuous growth and finite resources were incompatible. He observed that as fossil fuels are not made by men and that they cannot be re-cycled; once they are gone they are gone forever. He asserted that the folly of the modern industrial system. It destroys the very basis on which it is built and depends on irreplaceable resources². Human have caused an irreparable damage to the earth by their irresponsible way of life.

Pope John Paul IV in 1971 made a reference to the ecological crisis as a ‘tragic result’ of uncontrolled human activities: “Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation”³. This one crisis that underlies both the social and environmental crises arises from the way in which human beings use and abuse, the peoples and goods of the earth. Poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization are linked with environmental degradation. These are not separate crises but one crisis that is a symptom of something much deeper; the flawed way societies and economies are organized. This paper analysis the roots of this crisis and comes out with practical solutions.

We have only one earth to live in, to care for and to share with others, especially with our future generations. But because of the unrestrained exploitation and destruction of the rare resources of Mother earth for quick profits, the unchecked life of luxury and consumerism especially in the developed countries, causing the emission of enormous chemical wastes and industrial toxins, and the disproportionate use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, unethical experiments to produce genetically modified vegetables, fowls and animals to flood the consumer markets, our earth and its environment are terribly polluted. Air, water and food on which we depend for our sustenance and subsistence are all tampered

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with. The earth is dangerously deformed and becoming increasingly unfit for the sustenance and continuance of life.

2. Crisis in our environment and society

2.1. The historical roots of the ecological crisis

This planet evolved around 15 to 20 billion years ago. First life came about around 4.5 billion years ago. Humans are the latest arrival on this earth. The first human beings must have appeared some 20 million years ago but the earliest fossil of Homo sapiens is only 70,000 years old. Within a short span of time, they got multiplied and would reach seven billion by 2010⁴.

If we reduce the age of the earth into the life span of a person 46 years old, modern man appeared just four hours ago, agriculture was discovered during the last hour and the industrial revolution began a minute ago. In this one minute, human beings have exploited and damaged the planet and its resources to the point of no return⁵.

Ever since humans appeared on the earth, they have been interacting with the environment for fulfilling their subsistence needs. But this interaction reached unsustainable proportions after the industrial revolution, an offshoot of the mechanical world-view, which impoverished the earth and with it, a vast majority of the people.

Looking back into the past 400 years of Western civilization, we come up with six basic factors that fundamentally shaped our present social and economic structures⁶.

- the worldview of ‘world as a machine’
- the rise of secular materialistic values
- the advent of subject/object dualism

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- the industrial revolution
- the creation of free market capitalism
- Globalization, liberalization and the resultant consumerism

2.2. The humans solely responsible

Humans have destroyed the entire ecological community altogether because of the crisis of human society, its set of values and ethos. Thus ecological crisis has its roots in man, in his vision of himself, of the whole of creation and their interrelationships, in his value system and priorities, all of which relate to the religion-moral dimensions of the crisis⁷. So our response to the ecological crisis must find a social expression that impinges on structures as well as values in our society.

The mode of development, being followed and blindly enforced is at the heart of today's ecological crisis. This is intimately linked to science and technology as instruments to dominate over and exploit nature⁸. A capitalist, consumerist economy, industry and social organization promoted by the affluent countries and the powerful elite in the Third World countries determine the quality of environment we create. Consumerism ends up with accumulation of wealth and this drastically affects the poor and the earth. Today 82.7% of the world's income goes to the richest 20% of the people (the affluent consumers). By contrast, the poorest 20% get only 1.4% of the world's income.

Modernization, mechanization, industrialization, capital-intensive and labour saving techniques of production, hyper consumption of luxurious items etc. are the hallmarks of the modern concept of development. Commodity production and capital consistently values self-interest (greed) above social interest and environmental interest. The ethics of autonomy, which centre on the individual, ignore the essential relationality of a human person in community and the integral relationality to nature. Coupled with narrow anthropocentrism

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and androcentrism it supported an ethos of individualism and enthroned man as master of all creation and as superior to women.

2.3. The technocratic paradigm controls everything

Modern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up prizing technical thought over reality, since ‘the technology mind sees nature as an object to be exploited, as a cold body of facts, as a mere given, as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as a mere space into which objects can be thrown with complete callousness⁹. When human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its own power.

Ethical and cultural decline have accompanied the deterioration of the environment. Men and women of our postmodern world run the risk of rampant individualism, and many problems of society are connected with today’s self centred culture of instant gratification.

2.4. Our common home in great peril

a. climate change and pollution: The modern throw away culture and the resultant accumulation of waste and pollution result in health perils for the poor and cause millions of premature deaths. Thus our earth has become an immense pile of filth. We waste a lot of paper. Our development model is mainly based on the use of fossil fuels. Tropical forests which can mitigate this pollution are also destroyed at a rapid scale. Change of our climate is a global problem. It causes crisis in the environmental, economic, social and political fields. This results in environmental refugees – both animals and humans. The habit of wasting and discarding by developed countries and wealthier sections of society has reached unprecedented levels.

b. Water contamination and scarcity: Many people do not have access to safe drinking water. Frequent droughts affect agricultural production. Corporates try to privatize water and have

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made it a commercial commodity, controlled by market laws. To get safe water is a universal human right. Cost of food will escalate due to water scarcity. Multinationals have started controlling our water bodies and water resources. This will soon become a major cause of conflict.

Greater scarcity of water will lead to an increase in the cost of food and the various products which depend on its use. Control of water by large multinational business may become a major source of conflict¹⁰.

Although India receives an average rainfall of 1170 mm per year, it is estimated that only 6% of rainwater is stored. Micro irrigation practices like drip and sprinkler systems have to be promoted in a big way for efficient use of water for agriculture. Both in urban and rural areas, digging of rainwater harvesting pits must be made mandatory for all types of buildings¹¹.

C. Loss of biodiversity:

There is an uncontrolled and unchecked plundering of the resources of the earth. This results in the disappearance and annihilation of several species which our science even has not discovered so far. Human activity is the main cause for these extinctions.

“Who turned the wonder world of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of colour and life?”¹² The end point of all pollution due to deforestation, agricultural runoff with fertilizers and pesticide residues and industrial effluents is the ocean. Wrong fishing methods and techniques using cyanide and dynamite too deplete the resources of the sea. The rise in sea temperature due to global warming also aggravates this. This results in the rise in sea level and increase in extreme weather events.

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D. Decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society:

Environmental degradation has several social dangers as manifested in displacement of people, migration, unemployment, unequal distribution and consumption of natural resources, energy and other services, social exclusion, increase in violence and emergence in new forms of social aggression.

Environmental degradation and deterioration of the human environment are both related. Environmental crises and issues cannot be adequately addressed without taking into consideration the human and social degradation. All these finally affect the most vulnerable people on this planet.

“Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest”¹³. The North has unjustly exploited and looted the wealth and resources of the South for their selfish gains and development. Most of the countries in the South are rich in natural resources. The growth of the North is mainly built on the resources of the South. Hence, there is an ecological debt between the North and South.

3. Towards proactive solutions:

Response to ecological crisis is eminently an ethical task. The unjust division of human society and rupture of eco-wholeness point to the degradation (chaos) of the universe (cosmos), the home (oikos) common to human and all other living beings. We confront a dual crisis today: degradation of the natural environment and impoverishment of a vast majority of the voiceless people. The response can only be the restoration of earth community by securing the well-being of humankind on a thriving earth. Ecological integrity and social equity are thus two sides of the same coin. Ecological health and economic justice constitute eco justice. Development can only be truly sustainable, when equity is made its leading edge. Sound ecological development must at least meet the challenges of basic needs,

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sustainability and equity and other technological challenges of increasing the resource use efficiency and the productivity of nature and man-made processes¹⁴.

3.1. The need for a change of mind

Solutions for the ecological crisis, besides being technological should start with the change in human mindset, worldview, attitude, lifestyle, behaviour and patterns of consumption.

There is no better future without environmental protection including sustainable and integral development. Accordingly, we need to change our lifestyle, means of production and ways of consumption. Human beings, having intelligence should respect the laws and limits of nature and nurture the equilibria existing in the world. Our production must be less polluting. Humans have to adopt a non-consumerist life style.

“Everyone’s talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God’s creation”¹⁵. Thus, we need to move from anthropocentrism (more from androcentrism) to cosmocentrism.

3.2. Wealth for the future is a healthy earth:

All our resources are limited. They belong to not only this generation but to all generations – past, present and future. Our earth is for all generations.

We have inherited a safe and sound earth and environment; thanks to our previous generation. We have the duty and responsibility to hand over this earth, unpolluted, uncontaminated and resource filled to our next generation. More than economic resources, ecologically safe earth and environment is the only wealth we need to pass on to the coming generation.

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“The environment is part of a logic of receptivity. It is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next.”¹⁶ We should not be leaving to the coming generations, debris and filth.

3.3. Eco justice includes social justice:

Cry of the earth and cry of the poor are both interlinked. One cannot be addressed without the other. Ecological protection begins with safeguarding the resources on which the poor people depend for the sustenance and survival. The worst victims of today’s ecological crisis are the dalits, tribals, women and the poor. Their life and lifestyle are closely associated with nature and natural resources. Any effect on the environment immediately and fully affects them. Ecological restoration begins with the protection of the lives of the poor. Thus eco justice includes social justice.

“Whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule”¹⁷ Concern for the environment needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society. Every act of cruelty towards any creature is ‘contrary to human dignity’¹⁸ A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings. Peace, justice and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes, which cannot be separated and treated individually without once again falling into reductionism¹⁹.

The protection of the environment is in fact ‘an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it’²⁰ In this, it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions.

3.4. Inter-relationship and the intrinsic value of nature

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Berry Commoner's first law says, "Everything is connected to everything else"²¹. In nature everything is related to everything else by the ecological concept of food chain and food web. Human beings are also part of this interconnected, interrelated and interdependent cosmic reality. To be is to be related. To be human is to be interhuman and to be related to every being in this cosmos. Nature is a web of relations. Denial of relationality is denial of being in this cosmos. Nature is a web of relations. Denial of relationality is denial of being.

Ecological relatedness of every being is a value for itself and for others. Each reality has its own unique value, irrespective of its usefulness to human beings and as such it must be respected. The cosmos is a geo-physical and biospiritual reality to which human beings must learn to relate in its totality. Human beings reach their full stature in relation to the entire cosmic process. There is a comprehensive interdependence and communion which binds all reality and every phase of the story together. In a relational perspective the purposive nature of every being in relationality is recognized. It is respect for the integrity of nature which rebounds to the well-being of man. A sound liberative eco-ethic can be built only on the value of the intrinsic relationality of humans and nature. Our reverence for life is part of a perspective which recognizes both the intrinsic and inalienable dignity of the human and the intrinsic value of nature within the greater relationality and interdependence of all beings.

Any human choice, decision, economic activity, technological discovery which does not respect this fundamental inter-relatedness of the entire cosmic whole and which violates the total integrity of the whole is morally wrong. It results in disastrous consequences for man as well as for nature. Human beings should always act and behave with the consciousness of being part of this interrelated and interconnected cosmic reality.

A human fellowship, not just between us, the human community, but extended to the entire ecological one as well, should include the biotic and even the entire cosmic community. For this, we must deal with nature as a 'subject' with intrinsic value, not as an

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‘object’ for merely instrumental use; our relationship with her must be an ‘I-thou’ not an ‘I-it’ one²².

“Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection... Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Human beings must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature to avoid any distorted use of things”²³

3.5. Lines of approach and action:

1. Actions at the global level: Our earth is common to all people. Our atmosphere, air, water, land and sea have no boundaries and dividing walls. So any ecological action should have a global perspective. Initiatives have to be global and restorative actions begin from the local level.

Recent world summits on environment have not lived up to expectations because, due to lack of political will, they were unable to reach truly meaningful and effective global agreements on the environment. The principles in the 1992 Earth Summit, proclaimed in Rio still await an efficient and flexible means of practical implementation. Rio +20 in 2012 had a wide ranging but ineffectual outcome document. National interests are placed above the global common good. Enforceable international agreements are urgently needed. Global regulatory norms are needed to improve obligations and prevent unacceptable actions. An agreement is immediately needed on systems of governance for the whole range of so called ‘global commons’. There is a need to devise stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions, with functionaries who are appointed fairly by agreements among national governments and empowered to impose sanctions.

2. Dialogue for new national and local policies:

People should mobilize themselves and urge the government to act. Local legislation can be more effective.

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3. Transparency in decision making: Any developmental project has to be transparently discussed with the stakeholders with the results of an eco-audit. Decisions on implementation have to be taken in transparent consultation with the people especially with the victims.

4. The need of the hour is the politics which has integral and far-sighted approach and is capable of handling the crisis effectively.

5. From consumerism to conservation: Today's market is built on uncontrolled and extreme consumerism. Market can survive only if consumerism flourishes and is actively promoted. It is built on needless buying and spending. Human lifestyle has to be need and subsistence based and not luxury based. Hence, there is a need to move from consumerism to conservation.

6. Environmental education should be incorporated into not only school curricula but in all places and aspects. Students and people have to be conscientized on how human actions and behaviour cause environmental degradation and must be trained to lead a simple and healthy life in tune with nature. Reduce, reuse and recycle must be the watchwords for ecological conservation.

4. Conclusion:

We need to protect our Mother Earth, atleast from the selfish motive of safeguarding ourselves and our future. This demands a paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to cosmocentrism. This is need of the hour. This demands a change in our mindset, values and lifestyle.

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