

## **ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN INDIA AND THE ROLE OF TEACHER**

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### **Abstract**

Environment is everything that is around us. It refers to the circumstances or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant live in harmony with one others. Ethics have an important place in all areas of life. These are the moral codes that govern a person's behavior. Environmental ethics is a branch of environmental philosophy that studies the conceptual foundation of environmental values and is related to the relationship between the human and the environment. It studies the effect of human activities on environment. The entire Indian civilization imbibes with harmonious relationship, coexistence and mutual care and concern with environment. Our scriptures manifest congenial relationship with the environment as the essence of life. All the scriptures (Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, and Puranas etc.) directly or indirectly point out the interdependence of human being and environment. Their protection and nourishment have been regarded as a sacred duty or a ritual, which is to be performed by every person. But in the present time, due to lust and lack of awareness, we have caused great harm knowingly and unknowingly to the environment. If we want to protect our environment, we have to create awareness and develop values about the environment. School system provides a platform where learners may be given education about the importance of environment. A number of approaches and strategies may be used to develop environmental ethics so that they may regard it as their sacred duty to protect it. Teacher is the central figure who may play an active role in this regard. The present paper describes how Indian culture moves round the environment in a friendly manner and what role a teacher may play in imbibing appropriate environment related values among the learners.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Indian Culture, Role of Teachers

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## **1. Introduction**

Environment is everything that is around us. It refers to the circumstances or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives in harmony with one another. It provides everything which human beings need for their sustainable development. Every human has the right of decent life but unfortunately, the advent of industrialization and urbanization has tremendously exploited our environment.

Ethics have an important place in shaping the behavior of individuals. Basically, the word ethics has been derived from Greek word *Ethos* which means ‘sets of beliefs, spirit and character’. These are the moral codes that govern a person’s behavior. It tells a person what is right and what is wrong. When a person is in confusion or at crossroad where he has to decide where to go, ethics come for rescue and help the person in taking right decision. They describe all the ways people might act and help them to choose the most appropriate one.

Environmental ethics is a branch of environmental philosophy that studies the conceptual foundation of environmental values and is related to the relationship between human beings and the environment. It is a system of moral values and knowledge of nature so that we may understand the result of over exhaustion of natural resources and need to conserve the resources for future generation. It also recognizes the rights of plants and animals and realizes the intrinsic worth of nature. Environmental ethics extend morality to the non-living world.

The contemporary interest in environmental ethics emerged during the early 1970, when for the first time Earth Day was celebrated on April 22, 1970. It was only after 1972’s Stockholm Conference that the western world came to know that this earth comprises not man alone but plants and animals too. It is now accepted to be a major academic discipline throughout the world.

### **Environmental Ethics in India**

Environmental ethics may be a new discipline in the West that came into being just few decades ago, but in India, it is the part and parcel of human lives since Vedic tradition. Indian tradition of ecological heritage is preferable to western oriented environmental ethics. It is not because India

is having the oldest civilization, but because unlike West, Indian ecological tradition is not an outcome of environmental crisis. In the West, academicians started to think about environmental ethics when crisis emerged and environmental issues started to mount, but Indian ecological heritage is the real outcome of man's communion with nature. Indian perception of nature is a thing to be experienced, not a thing to be experimented.

The entire Indian civilization imbibes with harmonious relationship, coexistence and mutual care and concern with environment. Our scriptures manifest harmonious relationship with the environment as the essence of life. The essence of the teachings in the form of Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis and Dharmashastras is to protect nature and its elements, i.e., air, water, soil, land, vegetation and animals. In Indian culture, a dutiful attitude has been developed towards various aspects of nature like trees, earth (prithvi), sky (aakash), air (vayu), water (jal), rivers, sun, mountains, etc. It is regarded as a sacred duty of every person to protect them. Therefore, causing harm to nature in any form (may be cutting of green trees or polluting water) is regarded as a sin. It is the mandatory duty of everyone to protect them and safeguard their sanctity. The society, as a whole, has developed a code of conduct (maryada) to protect nature and live in coexistence with local and regional environment.

Since ancient times, for the people of India conservation of nature has been an intrinsic aspect of the Indian psyche and is reflected in the daily lives of people. The worship of plants, animals, and rivers has been a part of the Indian culture and tradition. In Indian culture, the earth has a sacred role, the role of a mother who nurtures and preserves. Our great seers foresaw the danger of environmental crisis since the ancient time, even when there was no chaos, and prescribed many rules for the conservation of environment in relation with religion, so that men may follow these rules in the fear of God.

In India, there have been certain practices exclusively for environmental conservation like maintaining certain patches of land for grazing of animals and for other environmental friendly practices. In many parts of Kerala, hundreds of small jungles are dedicated to snakes. From historical time, many plants such as peepal tree, banyan tree and khejdi tree have been considered sacred in India. Many species of plant such as tulsi, neem, coconut, palm, champa,

lotus, sandal wood tree etc. are considered sacred by various communities. Ancient sages inter-mixed various environment related practices with life style of the people. Although these practices are related to religion but play an important role in the conservation of the environment. Environmental ethics are inbuilt in Indian culture. Love for the environment can be assessed through ancient paintings, arts and sculptures. Various animals and birds (like bull, lion, snake etc.) have been given equal status of God. Their beliefs and practices can be seen on the painting of various caves in Madhya Pradesh displaying the harmonious co-existence of birds, animals and human beings. Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata or treaties all preach about the holy relation between man and nature. For the people of India, starting from a stone to the animals, everything of the environment is to be respected.

We are passing through a very crucial time. A number of conservation movements have taken place to save the environment, prominent among them are- Chipko Movement, Bishnoi Movement, Save Silent Valley Movement, Jungle Bachao Andolan, Appiko Movement etc. In these movements people made their life at stake and were ready to sacrifice everything for the sake of environment. Chipko Movement was initiated by women of Garhwal area, when they found that contractors were cutting green trees recklessly. They just clinged themselves and hugged the tree, although some had to sacrifice their life but the movement became flambeau in itself. In Rajasthan there is a community called Bishnoi, who regard trees and animals as human beings and are ready to go to any extent to save them. 'Save Silent Valley' and 'Jungle Bachao Andolan' were carried out in Bihar and Kerala respectively. These movements were so popular that adjoining states also joined them. 'Apiko Movement' was initiated in Karnataka against the use of commercialization of natural forests. 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' and 'Tehri Dam Conflict' are against the construction of dams over the rivers. Very recently the holy river Ganga has been given the status of a living being and attempt are made at war level to protect the sanctity of the river. These are only a few examples narrating the vibrant life style of Indian people.

Indian constitution clearly imposes fundamental duty on every citizen to protect the environment. Article 51-A (g), says that "it shall be duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers, and wild life and to have

compassion for living creatures”. Article 48-A of the constitution says that “the state shall endeavor to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country”. Environment protection is part of our culture and tradition, so the awareness regarding knowledge of constitutional provisions regarding environment is the need of the day.

The entire environmental crisis in present day society is mainly due to so called modern society and India is no exception of global phenomenon of environmental degradation brought about by rapid industrialization, urbanization, and other developmental activities. In the present time, due to lust and lack of awareness, we have caused great harm knowingly and unknowingly to the environment. Festivals are an integral part of rich and diverse cultural heritage of India but every festive season comes with pollution. Various types of pollution like water, air, noise and soil due to various festival activities are generated all across the country. For example- we celebrate Deepawali with great enthusiasm but burning of crackers causes so much damage to the environment that cannot be compensated by any other means. Similarly, Holi, Ganesh Chathurti, Durga Puja etc. are some of the festivals which are celebrated across the country. When celebrations are over the idols are submerged into the rivers or water bodies causing life threatening challenge to sea life because idols are generally made from the material which is not easily dissolvable in the water. Most of our religious practices are incomplete until and unless we make sound pollution. A list of so many activities may be cited causing serious damage to the environment. Until and unless awareness is created at the grass root level, we would go on polluting the environment in similar fashion.

### **Education as a tool for environmental conservation**

If we want to protect our environment, we have to create awareness and develop ethical values about the environment and an attitude of caring and sharing of natural resources. Education is the best tool through which we can inculcate environmental values among the people. As rightly said by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru that the future of India is shaped in the classroom, where teacher is the central figure. Environmental education aims at developing in people the knowledge, attitude and skills necessary to protect the nature. It teaches a man how to interact with the surrounding world. It is education only, which may develop desired values among learners. Therefore, Supreme Court of India (2004) made it mandatory to all educational institutions to introduce

environmental education as a compulsory subject so that learners may become aware about the interdependence of human beings and environment and may take necessary steps to protect it. In a document NCTE (2004) emphasized the importance of environmental education for pre-service and in-service teachers training programs. National Policy on Education (1986) also emphasized the need of environmental education in order to create a consciousness about the environment in all ages and all sections of society. The need of the hour is not just to create awareness about the importance of environment and our interdependence; rather learner should be sensitized also. All the modes of education (formal, non-formal and informal) should try their best to inculcate environmental values among learners since childhood.

### **Role of Teacher**

Teacher is the central figure of teaching and learning process in the classroom. In schools, quality environment education depends more on the qualification, teaching experience and preparation of teacher than on school curricula. A teacher plays an important role in shaping and molding the habits manners of the children. Therefore, to gear up the environmental education programme, it is essential that teachers should have the awareness skills, commitment, ethics, values, and an attitude to environmentalize their curricula. Today there is a great need to preserve and protect our environment, as degradation of environment may result into a number of problems and teachers are the one who can provide link in delivering environmental knowledge and create awareness among the students regarding the problems associated with environment.

Apart from usual classroom teaching, teachers can play significant role in providing opportunity to observe local environmental features, problems and phenomenon and changes in community. Teachers may also co-relate the environmental issues while teaching other curricular subjects and organize out of class activities based on learning on immediate environment. Teachers may integrate various environmental situations into their teaching methods, for example- discovery method, observation method, project method and surrounding natural area may be undertaken to teach the content. Similarly, a number of co-curricular activities may be organized on various environmental issues, like- essay writing competition, news bulletin, extempore, discussion etc. on topic related to environment.

## Conclusion

Now we have come at a juncture, where no other option is left except preserving and conserving the environment. If we want to survive than we have to take care of the environment. Our ancient forefathers were so intelligent that they integrated environment with the day to day life activities of the people. Worshipping of all the natural phenomena was the only reason thought by them to save the environment. Although we have caused so much harm but still time is there we can check our activities and make them environmental friendly. It is the duty not only of policy maker or government but each and every member of the society who breathes in the air.

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