
ENVIRONMENT CONSERVATION THROUGH SPIRITUALITY

N. Kalyani

Journalist, New Delhi

ABSTRACT

The environmental degradation across the world is attributable to various anthropogenic, or man-made, factors, and it is having far-reaching effects.

Every life form including man depends wholly on the Earth, our home, and the environment on the planet. By destroying our environment we are destroying ourselves. If we wish to save humans and all life forms on Planet Earth from incalculable miseries born of environmental and natural disasters and cataclysms, we need to save our environment.

The key to our welfare and that of all life forms lies with us, the Homo sapiens. The thinking man has to protect mother earth and its environment and its vast and immeasurable biodiversity. In other words, the disturbed, acquisitive and greedy mind of man has to turn towards seeking calmness and tranquility that will get reflected in his actions that will be tempered likewise so that destruction of the environment will be replaced by protection of the environment.

Such a transformation and mutation of the hearts and minds of men is possible through spirituality. Through the spiritual practices of meditation, the transformation of minds and hearts will lead to a change in the thought processes of men. Then alone is environment conservation possible in a way that is sustainable.

Key Words: Environmental Degradation, Biodiversity, Spirituality, Meditation, Transformation of Mind and Heart, Sustainable Environment Conservation.

INTRODUCTION

The Earth and its environment are being degraded due to various activities of man. There are various causes of environmental degradation. Destruction of forests, poaching of wildlife, and pollution of air and water caused by industrialization, urbanization, and excessive consumerism are only some of man's actions that have played havoc with our natural environment. The severe consequences of environmental degradation are affecting all life forms including man across the entire globe without any geographical discrimination. The natural phenomena that are self-balancing and in equilibrium naturally are thrown out of gear and this leads to many terrible natural disasters. Protecting the environment now is no more an option before us but a necessity that we must engage in. We are witnessing, for example, the phenomenon of global warming leading to climate change and its impacts that have been terrible for human communities and for all life forms.

There is, therefore, a need to adopt all means to solve the issue. Besides education and legislation, spirituality can play a significant role in resolving the problem of environmental degradation and help in reversing the negative trend of environmental degeneration.

There is a need to adopt spiritual ways of living by practicing meditation and bringing balance, calm and clarity to the disturbed minds of men. As unbalanced human minds have led to an environment in disequilibrium, balanced and calm minds can lead to an environment that is clean and in equilibrium, and economic development that is sustainable.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Giving a mathematical equation to the issue of environment conservation and spirituality, Anil K Rajvanshi of the Nimbkar Agricultural Research Institute (2004),

says, "Nature Conservation + Spirituality = Sustainability". He points out that despite many development models being available for resource utilization and energy requirements, such as, for instance, the Taluka model that looks to the needs of an entire taluka (geographical unit), "... all the development models will become untenable if we do not put a cap on our greed for materials, resources and energy. Present economic models are based on increased consumption and encourage greed. Ever increasing choices available to an average person fuel the greed impulse since the fear of missing out is very high. Spirituality can help in keeping our greed for materials and resources in check and sustainable development can only take place when we use the resources for our needs and not for our greed as Mahatma Gandhi once said." (Anil K Rajvanshi)

In the contemporary world that we live in, there is a need for a healthy and sustainable mix of science, technology, ecological consciousness, spiritual principles and economic development. "All scientists and decision makers must have a solid grounding in ethics, ecology and public safety. Strategic vision for making educated men of virtue is the key to create a sustainable ecosystem," says Nandita Verma in her study, "Religion: A Saviour for Environment with Particular Emphasis on Hinduism" (2008).

As climate change is the biggest threat to life on planet Earth staring us, it was during the Conference of Parties (CoP) in 2015, of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), that the ReSpeCC was launched. The Commission for Environmental Economic and Social Policy (CEESP) of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, IUCN, in the specialist group on Religion, spirituality, environmental conservation and climate justice (ReSpeCC) declared (2016):

- Understanding the need to change the way we govern the planet, to grow a culture of solidarity, and to transform selfish negotiations into generous cooperation within a new global social contract;
- Stressing the need for a set of universal common values to which human beings as one family can subscribe within our great culture diversity;
- Noting that all spiritual traditions hold that greed and accumulation are unjust and unwholesome; and that happiness arises through wholesome generous co-existence, in accordance to our scriptures and collective wisdom.
- We call on all world leaders, faith leaders and all peoples of this planet:
- To unite for our common good, to collectively embrace a new paradigm where economics and politics serve life and sustainability; where our differences enrich us to live as one human family, mindful of what is needed now and those generations yet to be born.

OBJECTIVES

To study the Environment Conservation through Spirituality

PLANET EARTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Planet Earth is home to man and millions of other life forms. The Earth is endowed with a varied floral and faunal biodiversity.

The Earth along with its environment sustains life. The water bodies, the earth and the varied flora all serve as habitats for and make food available to the life forms, from insects and birds, to reptiles and amphibians, and from aquatic creatures to mammals including man. Various natural processes and cyclical movements in the environment maintain and sustain life on Earth. Some of these are the monsoon and climate cycles and patterns, decomposition of waste, soil regeneration, food chains and predator-prey relationships.

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION?

When the natural processes proceed in their natural order there is equilibrium and balance. The predator-prey relationships in the forest, for instance, maintain balance in the ecosystem. The herbivores like deer consume grass and other vegetation. The carnivorous animals like tigers hunt the herbivores for their meal. And carcasses are

scavenged by creatures like vultures and worms. These are natural cycles that maintain equilibrium in the forest ecosystem.

When there is an external disturbance created to these processes and phenomena there is an imbalance that leads to various concomitant disturbances forming a vicious circle.

For example, deforestation is resorted to by man for utilizing the land for various alternative purposes such as housing facilities, agriculture and industries, besides other facilities. Deforestation creates a loss of habitat for the life forms that inhabit the forest. The wildlife will, therefore, either perish or retreat into the remaining forest area or move to another area at a distance, if it is possible. When wild animals like leopards, hyenas and tigers start moving to re-locate in other forest areas that may be at a distance from the original forest area which they inhabited, they may cross areas of human habitation, and may attack or kill humans. The remaining wildlife in the forest may also feel threatened and experience a space and food shortage. The loss of forest cover will also affect the area around in terms of temperature, moisture, rainfall and ground water level in the short and medium term, leading thus to further ecological disturbances.

CAUSES OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Environmental degradation is caused by a number of anthropogenic factors, or in other words, by man-made factors.

Habitat Destruction

Destruction of habitats leads to a destruction of the floral and faunal diversity that exists in them. Habitat destruction can be from deforestation, blasting of mountains, clearing of grasslands, blasting of coral reefs, and clearing of marshlands besides other such activities.

Use of insecticides and pesticides in agriculture

With a growing human population and increased demand for varied crops there has been a need for increased agricultural output obtained through intensive cultivation and greater use of chemical insecticides and pesticides. The consequence is that the consumers of such chemical-exposed grains, fruits and vegetables and other agricultural produce are victims of various diseases. Secondly, the killing of pests results in imbalance in the food chain in ecosystems. Thirdly, the chemicals in the insecticides and pesticides destroy the fertility, quality and composition of the soil and have long term effects on agriculture.

Developing Genetically Modified varieties of crops:

Increased global demand for agricultural produce has been responsible for the creation of genetically modified (GM) crops. Research is going on regarding growing such crops. Growing such crops may adversely affect the fertility of the soil, the seeds produced, and health of the consumers.

Use of chemicals in various products both edible and non-edible:

The use of chemicals because of man's wanton desires is seen in food and in cosmetics. These chemicals adversely affect human health, and also result in their reaching the water bodies or soil after they are discarded as garbage, and thus enter our bodies indirectly after becoming part of the water and soil.

Poaching of Wildlife

Poaching of wildlife has been cited as a reason for losing animals in the wild. Hunting (*shikar*) of animals in the wild was also responsible for populations of wildlife to decline. In the year 1972 the Wild Life (Protection) Act came into force. Legislation thus banned killing and hunting of wild animals in India.

Use of Plastic

Plastic is non-biodegradable and has led to it becoming a menace as it continues to stay whether in the land or water body. This leads to the clogging of water bodies, and difficulty in clearing landfills and managing garbage. The situation is severe because the use of plastic has increased exponentially over the years.

Inefficient Segregation and Disposal of Solid Waste

By not disposing of organic, plastic and electronic waste judiciously, after proper segregation, harmful chemicals from the garbage penetrate into the soil and reach the groundwater or get leached into water bodies.

Industrial Smoke and Effluents

Noxious smoke and fumes from factories are released into the air, and solid wastes are emptied into nearby water bodies. In India, an estimated 1.5 million people died from the effects of air pollution in 2012, according to WHO data.

Discharge of effluents and garbage including plastic into water bodies leads to clogging of water bodies. Also the silting of water bodies like lakes leads to the destruction of lakes.

Automobile exhaust fumes

With increasing vehicular traffic there is excessive air pollution caused by the combustion of automobile fuels. Exposure to the nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide and other dangerous compounds, besides particulate matter in the air, leads to various diseases, in man, of the lungs, brain and eyes, besides other organs, including cancer.

Electromagnetic radiation

Exposure to electromagnetic radiation such as from mobile tower masts is dangerous.

THE NEED TO PROTECT PLANET EARTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Environmental degradation affects the life and health of all life forms including man. Planet Earth is our home and we need to protect the Earth and its environment for us to live, and for life to continue on the planet.

HOW CAN WE PROTECT THE ENVIRONMENT?

The protection of Planet Earth and its environment requires a multi-pronged approach of education, legislation, culture and spirituality.

Education and Research

Education enlightens and creates awareness among the people of various environmental issues and of the need to come out with cleaner and greener solutions to combat them. Education sensitizes people on protecting nature, and avoiding what can destroy nature and what can lead to the misuse or abuse the natural resources. Research in various aspects of nature, natural resources and environment furthers our knowledge and our conservation efforts.

Legislation

Legislation can help as a deterrent to various activities leading to environmental degradation.

Culture

Various traditional cultural practices work in favour of conserving and protecting the environment. For instance, sacred groves are areas of protected forests that owe their safeguard to the beliefs and practices of the local communities. Similarly, many trees and animals such as the peepul tree, tulsi plant, tiger, and peacock are considered sacred. Various Indian festivals also celebrate the idea of protection of birds, animals and plants.

For example, during the Tamil festival of Pongal, the cow worshipped and fed, the sun is eulogized and worshipped, and birds like the crow and the sparrow are fed with joy.

Spirituality

Spirituality refers to the science and art of balancing the mind, and bringing focus and clarity to the mind in its role of thinking. Spiritual practices seek to help the mind work in conjunction with the body and heart and soul in the most effective and efficient way so that excellence marks all human activities and work -physical, mental and spiritual. Spirituality can help in environment conservation.

SPIRITUALITY

The heart is the centre of our being. It also describes us as the individuals we are. Spirituality may perhaps be viewed as an esoteric subject. However, as a practice, it revolves around the mental practices that can help in restoring calmness and balance in the mind, bringing clarity and focus to the mind, and making the heart the basis of the thinking process of the mind. There is a transcending from thinking with the mind to thinking with the heart.

The Indian tradition of yoga includes various practices for the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development and well-being of a human being. Yoga etymologically means union. In other words, it is about synchronization and creating an in-phase condition, so that it leads a practitioner from a mental state of distraction and disturbance to one of steadiness, tranquility and harmony.

There are many branches of yoga such as *karma yoga*, *gyana yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, *hatha yoga* and *raja yoga*. While *hatha yoga* deals with the various bodily exercises for physical stamina and flexibility, *raja yoga* has for its practice, in the main, meditation for steadiness, balance, clarity and tranquility of the mind. According to the great yoga exponent and scholar, Patanjali, there are eight limbs of practice in yoga, referred to as 'ashtanga yoga'. These eight limbs are *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*, in that order. According to BKS Iyengar, the yoga sutras, or aphorisms, of sage Patanjali show "how we can transform ourselves through the practice of yoga, gradually developing the mind, body and emotions, so we can become spiritually evolved. The Sutras are also a wonderful introduction to the spiritual philosophy that is the foundation of yoga practice."

While *yama* and *niyama* deal with morals and ethics, *asana* is all about postures, or what is loosely translated as physical exercises, *pranayama* about breath control, *pratyahara* about control of senses and *dharana* about concentration. *Dhyana* refers to meditation and *samadhi* is the outcome, namely, the state of perfect balance. Thus, as established by Patanjali, yoga is a comprehensive practice that can be done methodically.

Raja yoga is the highest of the yogas, and it includes various practices for the purification of the mind, and its fortification, and efficient functioning. Meditation is the main component of *raja yoga* through which the goal of yoga, the attainment of balance of mind, is achieved.

Meditation helps to purify the mind. The human mind in its current state is vacillating, full of disturbing ideas and thoughts, and lacking focus. By meditation, we focus our mind on one object or idea or suggestion and let the mind stay on it. Thus instead of going in a multitude of channels, the mind's energy and focus stay with one idea or, in other words, in one channel. The mind is thus able to derive strength in its primary role of thinking and contemplating. Through the regular practise of meditation, the mind acquires clarity, and becomes calm and balanced.

With such a mind, man can achieve better efficiency and excellence in all his activities and work. When the mind is calm and pure and in a state of balance, various traits such as anger, greed, selfishness, violence, acquisitiveness and hatred depart naturally from the thinking process of the mind. And, instead, values such as peace, love and compassion take root in the mind of man.

SPIRITUALITY CAN SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT

In the study of the various causes of environmental degradation, we find that it is greed and acquisitiveness that have guided man and his activities leading to the “rape” of nature.

Through the practice of meditation, and the calming of the mind, there is a refinement of the mind and the development of finer qualities.

In the Ashtavakra Gita, or the song of Ashtavakra, there is a dialogue between Ashtavakra, a sage of ancient India, and the rishi raja of Mithila, King Janaka, the father of Sita, the consort of Lord Rama. According to Ashtavakra there are five traits that can help man solve his problem of life. When Janaka enquires as to how to acquire knowledge, achieve detachment, and attain liberation, Ashtavakra says, “If you are seeking liberation, my son, avoid the objects of the senses like poison and cultivate tolerance, sincerity, compassion, contentment, and truthfulness as the antidote.” And Ashtavakra then goes on to suggest to Raja Janaka how he should meditate.

It is indeed through the development of values such as forgiveness, sincerity, kindness, simplicity, purity and truth in man that the crisis of environmental degradation can be solved, for it is greed and acquisitiveness that lead man to acquire greedily, and covet more and more of Planet Earth's limited natural resources.

Meditation can help effectively in regulating our temporal and mundane activities and bringing balance and focus in our life. Satish Kumar, a peace and environment activist, and editor of Resurgence & Ecologist, UK, writes, “Meditate and pray. Our lives have become too busy and too stressful. Pressure of work, pressure to succeed, pressure to achieve, pressure to cope with excess information - pressure all around. To restore the balance we need to take some time during the day for personal replenishment, for the development of soul qualities, for reflection and for our proper relationship with the natural world and the Creator to develop and grow. Every day, for at least half an hour, we need solitude, stillness and silence, so that the rest of the day is built on a foundation of spiritual tranquillity.”

The development of positive human values like love and respect is a natural consequence of meditation and spiritual practices. And the values like love and respect grow seamlessly to embrace all of humanity, and go further to include all life forms and all of creation. And thus there is the growth of love and respect for nature and the environment too. As a result, instead of greedily seeking, by the very definition of love, there is a letting live attitude that the human being adopts. Nature conservation and environment protection are, therefore, the direct and sure results. According to Vir Singh, “Lovecology, literally, is love plus ecology. Lovecology is a unique union of love and beauty emanating from nature. It exhibits a living relationship between humans and love-nourishing nature. Lovecology is a dimension of eco-philosophy. Nurturing eco-philosophy is inevitable to restore balance of our planet and of our Cosmos.”

And like love brings together everyone, dharma, or righteousness upholds everything. According to Vandana Shiva (2016), “Because dharma holds and sustains the Earth family and, within it, the entire human family, it embodies the principle of unity – of humans with the rest of Nature, and of humans across our diversities. Dharma arises from the interconnectedness of all life, and embodies our duty to care for all humans and all species alike. The opposite of dharma is adharma, the violation of rta, of the ecological laws of the planet, and of the duty to care for fellow humans irrespective of gender, race, caste, age or class. Whatever separates us from Nature and each other, every action that leads to the disintegration of societies and ecosystems, is adharma. Dharma guides us in choosing between right and wrong by assessing the impact of our actions on Nature and society, using tools and instruments that we shape, choose and use. Tools and technologies are not self-referential. Our assessment and choice of them should be based on higher values. If the choice we make contributes to ‘holding

together', to integration, the choice is a dharmic choice; if it leads to ecological destruction and social displacement, it is adharmic."

Therefore, it is through the development of spiritual values by the practice of spiritual methods such as meditation and purification of the mind and mental attitudes and mindsets that we can individually help in protecting and conserving the environment, Nature and natural resources. By a cumulative effect the entire human race will then seek to move in a direction of sustainable development based on environment conservation and well-being of all men and all life forms that co-exist with us, sharing our Planet Earth. It is, therefore, the re-igniting of our little flames of spiritual quest in our hearts that is of import and of urgency.

CONCLUSION

We are witnessing the massive environmental degradation and abuse of nature and natural resources all over the world, and through this paper we have gone through some of the causes of this scenario and the need to resort to spirituality and spiritual practices for a calming of man's ever-active and greedy mind, making him turn into a compassionate human being and a Nature-oriented *homo sapien* which would lead thereby to a sustainable natural environment and development.

By adopting some small steps we can try to implement such a turn in mankind.

First and foremost, there is a need to educate and create awareness among the masses on the great gift that humankind has in the form of Planet Earth. We need to recognize the importance and beauty of the Earth and all that makes up the planet and all that inhabits it. And then comes the need for humans to be sensitized about the vital need for environment protection and nature and natural resource conservation.

Such an education and awareness needs to start at childhood. Starting with the family, the teaching system and scholastic learning process too should incorporate this effectively.

Likewise, the exposure to spiritual values and practices which inculcate values of nature and conservation must begin at a very young age. Spirituality and its practice can be both universal and secular. Inculcation of spiritual values serves to create human well-being, societal harmony as also ecological balance. If the foundation is laid in childhood, one's entire life and lifestyle will be oriented towards conservation and sustainability based on spiritual values. The application of the triad of reduce, reuse, recycle can make all the difference to our environment and Nature and natural resource utilization.

The balance of mind and inner guidance available through meditational practices and spirituality can bring forth human beings imbued with such values as tolerance, kindness, empathy, love and compassion.

Engaging in even a short period of meditation can help the practitioners live without aggressiveness and competition, without greed and hatred, without violence and vanity.

Through systematic and guided instruction in spiritual education and practice, there can be a more wholesome and a holistic approach to life and sustainability.

REFERENCES

1. Krishna, Nanditha and Amirthalingam, M. (2014). Sacred Plants of India. Penguin, India.
2. Krishna, Nanditha (2014) Sacred Animals of India. Penguin, India.
3. Yogananda Paramahansa (1998). Autobiography of a Yogi. Yogoda Satsanga Society of India.
4. Iyengar, BKS (2010). Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Harper Collins, India.
5. <http://www.iucnredlist.org/> 29 September 2016.
6. Wild life (Protection) Act, 1972 <http://envfor.nic.in/legis/wildlife/wildlife1.html> 29 September 2016.
7. <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/94/7/16-020716/en/> 30 September 2016.
8. Singh, Vir (12 August 2016). Lovecology: Nature-Beauty-Love Relationship. The Speaking Tree, The Times of India, 14.
9. Shiva, Vandana (January/February 2016). Dharma of Food. Resurgence & Ecologist, UK, 16-17.

10. Dastur, Mahazareen (July 2016). Genetic Modification: Here to Stay? TerraGreen, TERI, New Delhi, 22-28.
11. <https://www.iucn.org/content/update-ceesp-specialist-group-religion-spirituality-environmental-conservation-and-climate> 1 October 2016
12. <http://www.resurgence.org/satish-kumar/articles/caring-planet.html> 30 September 2016
13. <http://www.nariphaltan.org/nature.pdf> 3 October 2016
14. <https://www.iucn.org/content/update-ceesp-specialist-group-religion-spirituality-environmental-conservation-and-climate> 3 October 2016
15. <http://www.iitk.ac.in/infocell/announce/convention/papers/Context%20and%20Human%20Resource-04-Nandita%20Verma.pdf> 3 October 2016
16. <http://realization.org/p/ashtavakra-gita/richards.ashtavakra-gita/richards.ashtavakra-gita.html> 1 October 2016
17. http://www.wwf.org.au/get_involved/change_the_way_you_live/recycle_reuse_reduce/3 3 October 2016. [nariphaltan.org/nature.pdf](http://www.nariphaltan.org/nature.pdf)

