



## UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING RURAL ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS THROUGH A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

**T**he paper discusses the concept of rural cultural ecology which throws light on the relationship between man and the contemporary rural environment. The present rural ecological issues are no longer a local phenomenon but a global phenomenon. The rural environmental crisis should be addressed without manhandling the human environment as in the name of development majority of landscapes in both rural and tribal areas are getting extinct. Thus, this possess a severe challenge to the policy makers of retaining originality and through scientific approach the rural environment problems needs to be tackled.

**KEY WORDS:** Rural ecology, man – nature relationship,

### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades globalization and addressing rural environmental crisis is given paramount importance. It is argued that a new kind of cultural entropy-historical process is emerging which is termed as the global cultural pot. This global culture ends up in the process of cultural realization, on the one hand, has influenced local cultural and on the other hand created awareness for developing a sustainable environment. It is the globalization which has taken within it an agenda, some of the crisis which is today threatening in the world. Among this crisis are included decay of environment, ecology and the growth of some fatal diseases such as malaria and AIDS.

Safeguarding environment is a global issue but the severity of ecology and environment varies from community to community. For instance, the environment problem of urban communities relate to inadequate disposal of wastes or overuse of toxic substances, This kind of environment crisis is very acute in industrial cities.

But the other kind of environment crisis relates to the degradation of the natural resource base. In rural India, it is concerned with the degradation of land, water and forest resources. The village environmental crisis can break the country; there is decay of food, fodder firewood, fiber and water. The life of the 600 million odd rural people depends on the sustainable development of these natural resources. The environmental degradation of our village, therefore, occupies an important place in any discussion on rural sociology.

It is indeed a tragedy of fate that the villagers who possess the natural resources and who reside within the natural environment are deprived of the benefits of these resources. Any visit to the villages would show that the school-going children early in the morning leave their house for collecting fuel wood. For them collection of fuel wood is more necessary than to attend to school. One can find women engaged in fetching water from long distance

and half of their day thus spent on the management of portable water. The decay of forests has multiplier effect on the village people. They used to earn by the sale of fuel wood collected from their nearby forests; they made some money out of the forest produce. Besides, their implements were also made without any cost from the forest wood. Their houses were also built out of forest wood. The decay of forest, therefore, has multiplied their turmoil.

## **ENVIRONMENT, ECOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT**

The term 'environment' has become one of the most clichéd and backward-looking concepts in today's lexicon of development. Literally, environment means all that which surrounds us. It is an external condition which influences our development and growth. The surrounding not only influences our human development but also development of animals, plants—living or working. Environment is a totality which determines the way of the life of the people. In the Third World countries a debate is cropped up which is hinged on development versus environment. It is argued that development in end leads to degradation of environment or there cannot be development without exploitation of environment. The debate— environment versus development—has assumed national significance in our country. The environmentalists suggest that all programme of development should be cancelled as they lead to degradation of environment and ecology. Recently, the environmentalists have become lesser doctrinaire and have agreed to sustainable development, that is the development which also maintains the requirement of environment. As at present, in our country, there appears to be an agreement in the nexus between environment and development that we should make all efforts to attain development to the extent that it does not permit any degradation of environment.

'Ecology' is basically concerned with the relationship between plants and man. As a matter of fact environment is a comprehensive term which relates to man-nature relationship. It relates to plant, wild life, water, land and man-made things as pollution resulting from industry and other such technological development.

The context of environment, that is, degradation of land, forest and water resources in India's villages occupies a crucial importance. The village people have been living in the villages and they are much closer to natural environment compared to their counterparts in urban communities. The village life witnessing a fast transformation in is are be-coming towards; towns in their

turn are transforming into cities and cities are becoming metropolitans. An appropriate study of village community, therefore, involves an elaborate study of village environment, ecology, land use, water and fuel.

## **THE POLICY FRAMEWORK**

During the last three decades environment has quite definitely been put on the world's development agenda. Ever since the Stockholm Conference in 1972 the conscience of the world has been awakened to the limits of growth and the limits of development. The Second World Conference on Environment in 1978 established the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) with its headquarters in Nairobi. The creation of the Ministry of forests and Environment, in 1984, is a reflection of India's concern for the degradation of environment. In India, the Centre for science and Environment's first report on The state of India's Environment, 1982, The First citizen's Report is by far the most wide-ranging document available. The second and third Citizen's Report's (1985 and 1991) are even more comprehensive reviews. Many studies have been made to comprehensively review the state of environmental degradation, both by government and non-government agencies.

## **EXTENT OF ENVIRONMENT DEGRADATION**

The environment degradation at the village site has gone to the largest extent. We shall refer to some of the aspects of environmental degradation in the following section;

### **(1) Land degradation:-**

India's land has an extraordinary capacity to produce, but at the same time nearly one-half to one-third if fast becoming an unproductive desert. The land is becoming unproductive because of several factors. There has been excessive use of chemical manures. The canal water has created waterlogging resulting into saltiness of land. Looking to the man-land ratio one can easily understand that in the context of population explosion land has become scarce. The increasingly becoming scarce land and its unproductive nature resulting from developing has given us a deficit farm produce.

### **(2)Water management:-**

There has been callous degradation of our water resources. Suredra Lawrence informs that at level of water management there has been large scale environment degradation. On a broader plane the water level has gone very low. The canal water has created waterlogging and salinity.

### **(3)Excessive Use of Fertiliser:-**

In order to get more and more farm produce, there has been excessive use of fertilizer. The use of pesticides and

fertilizer imposes threat to human health, to the genetic stocks and reduce the natural soil fertility in the long run. The absence of an integrated land and water use policy for the country is taking a heavy toll on these basic natural assets.

#### **(4) Degradation of Flora and Fauna:-**

There is rich diversity of flora and fauna in our country. These aspects of nature maintain our ecosystem. But the flora and fauna have constantly been indiscriminately exploited. This has affected in the disappearance or scarcity of some of our divers flora and fauna. The fragile environs of island ecosystems have been subjected to pressures of various forms including migration of people from the mainland.

#### **(5) Decay of Forests:-**

Perhaps, the greatest loss to our rural communities has been the decay of forests. Explaining the extent to which there has been degradation to our forest wealth Surrender Lawrence says that our forest wealth has been subjected to overgrazing, overexploitation both for commercial and household needs. There has been encroachment of mining in the forest area. Besides, several developmental activities such as roads, building, and irrigation and power projects have been in the forest area. Though the data are not updated, surrender Lawrence is perfectly right when he observes:

#### **(6) Decline in the Domesticated Animals:-**

Our domesticated animals include a large number of cows, buffaloes, bullocks, sheep and goats. These animals depend for the fodder on the green pasture lands and the forests. Looking to our large size of domesticated animal population we have hardly 3.5 per cent of our geographical area under grassland. For an animal population of about 500 million, the grassland is more than meager. The degradation of grassland is caused by water and which wind erosion, salinity, alkalinity and river action.

#### **(7) Mines and Minerals:-**

It must be accepted that our building and ornamental stones, besides the precious metals such as zinc, lead, copper, etc., are a waste material. It means that once and for all. These natural materials after their exhaustion leave the land waste. It cannot be used for cultivation. Nor can it be used for afforestation. Surely, there is economic value of mines and minerals but from the environment point of view it leads to terrible degradation of our natural resource base.

#### **(8) Pollution:-**

As a matter of fact environment is a very wide term which in a loose way includes every conceivable thing on earth. But operationally, we could limit it to resources which support develop or enrich human life. Pollution, viewed from this respect, is also a part of environment. There are various forms of pollution; for instance, water pollution by industrial and domestic wastes, air pollution, that is, smog and soil pollution in the form of excessive erosion. Thus pollution has three major forms: (1) water pollution, (2) air pollution, and (3) soil pollution. As a matter of fact, water, air and land are the basic commodities of life and these are continually getting polluted in the wake of population growth, industrialization and urbanization, on account of discharge of sewage, industrial effluent, stack emissions, dust, smoke, solid waste on the one hand strain on the existing resource on the other.

### **CAUSES OF ENVIRONMENT DEGRADATION**

There has been a definite degradation of rural resource base including land, water, fuel and pollution. Compared to the urban life, the losses of rural society are lesser but the degradation in the village community is directly related to their sources of livelihood. The village people traditional eked out their living from forest wood and minor forest products. With the degradation of forests, the village sources of subsistence. have dried up. Some of the forms of degradation are directly related to the implementation of development programs. The construction of dams -major or minor-has rendered the cultivable soil as a saline soil. These dams cause multiplier effect on the village life.

#### **1.State Responsibility:-**

The state in India is a class state. It gives priority to the vested interests of the elites, leaders and persons belonging to higher classes though the state is armed with legislation to protect the natural environment, at the operational level all legislative measures are thrown asunder. There is a coalition between the forest officials, political leaders and the mafia. The role of state has become suspicious. The state, in its enthusiasm for development, has not considered seriously about the decay of environment. The schemes initiated for the rural of ecosystem have yielded nothing substantial and huge sums of money are wasted.

#### **2.Class Interests:-**

One very serious reason for the degradation of environment is the class interest. The high class people demand much from forest. There are traders who are

engaged in the export of the carcasses of wild animals. This affects the population of lions, elephants and other animals. Much furniture is required for decorating the drawings rooms and shopping complexes. Demands from natural resources are so fantastic that it results in the decay of natural resources are environment. It must be observed that it is the class interests which is largely responsible for the loss of environment. Commenting on the responsibility of elites and rich people in the degradation of environment, Madhav Gadgil observes:

### **3. Inefficient Exploitation of Resources:-**

Whether the elites, government officials or traders, all exploit the natural resources in a very inefficient way. The forests are axed ruthlessly. The mining is very unscientific. As a matter of fact, the exploitation of natural base is highly characterized by indiscipline and inefficiency. The approach to nature, from all points of view, is wasteful. The tragedy is that both the elites and the masses put the blames on each other for the degradation of environment.

### **4. Fragile Environment:-**

When there is exploitation of natural resources, whether forest, flora, fauna or water, we must understand that the environment which we find today is very fragile nature.

### **5. The residents of rural areas:-**

Last but not least, the villagers are also responsible partly for the degradation of environment. It is alleged that part of forest his cut down by the villages themselves. Ether they sell it in the market are use it for there own consumption. They also became a party to the argued that if the classes are held responsible for the degradation of the forests, the masses of the people are equally responsible. Than seldom stand up in the protection of their natural resources. If the class people are hanged for the crime of environmental decay, the masses should also be hanged for the same crime.

### **6. The Iron-Triangle:-**

If we get a glimpse of our rural India, we would find that there are a few pockets in the country which have witnessed a large quantum of environment degradation. Among these are included the industrial belt in western Maharashtra, the areas around Coimbatore in Tamilnadu, metropolises like Delhi and Chennai, and tracts of green revolution in Punjab and Haryana. The degradation of environment is traced to some forces. These forces have been explained by what is called as the 'iron-triangle'. This term is used by Americans. The iron-triangle is explained by the following categories of people who benefits from the exploitation of the resource base:

## **PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT FOR THE PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENT**

It is often questioned whether there is an environmental movement in India for the protection of environment. The fact of the matter is that ours is vast country which is divided by cultural regions, castes and languages. We very often forget that these ethnic influences also affect environmental politics. In India we faced various movements to safeguard environment like every state in India including Karnataka had environmental movements chipoko movement, Kaiga project movement, narmada bachao andolana etc .

### **THE GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE**

The state is also aware about the protection of environment. As stated earlier, according to official policy environment problem is classified into two broad categories: (1) those arising as negative from conditions of process of development, and (2) those arising from conditions of poverty and underdevelopment. The government has made enactments for about 30 areas of environment. Some of the major enactments are given below:

- (1) Wild life (protection ) Act, 1972.
- (2) Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980.
- (3) Water ( prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974.
- (4) Air (prevention and Control of pollution) Act, 1981.
- (5) Environment (protection) Act, 1986.
- (6) Public Liability Insurance Act, 1991.
- (7) The Motor Vehicle Act, 1938 (amended in 1988).

The central and state governments have made many legislations to protect the environment. So far as the government policy is concerned the enactments show the intention of the government. But it is striking to note that there are only a few enactments which concern the protection of rural environment. Water protection is an important area of rural life. But at operational level nothing substantial has been done. In the similar way, the forest and wildlife protection is ensured by legislation. The hides of precious wild animals get a clandestine foreign market. What is required is an institutional involvement of the village people in the protection of environment. The environment movement should be organized at the grass root level. It should then further be vertically linked with the central level movement. Only such a movement can protect the environment at the village level.

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