

YOUTH, EDUCATION AND AWARENESS: KEY TO RESOLVE ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

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Environmental Protection is the biggest challenge that the world is facing today. We see environmental degradation where ever our eyes or mind can go, be it polluted river water, drying water bodies, smog filled air that we breathe which feels like we are living in a gas chamber, huge piles of waste in landfills turning into mountains, land turning infertile, plastic entering our bodies through food and air, harmful radiations, climate change and the list is endless. Was it always the case or has this problem emerged in recent times? We already know the answer, it is a recent development and this degradation is a result of our own deeds. This disaster is our very own creation, that too in recent years. Our ancestors lead life in a sustainable way, where they respected and worshipped nature and in return nature provided them with resources. So, there was symbiotic association between man and nature.

Even though our ancestors were not 'literate' in the technical sense but they were much more 'educated' than us when it comes leading a healthy life by maintaining a balance between man and nature. Tulasi Gowda, is a Halakki tribal women who possesses immense knowledge about plants and herbs, was given Padma Shri in 2019 for her contribution to the environment, she

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has planted one lakh trees. She is not literate, however she is much more educated than most of us, as she realised the value of nature. Saalumarada Thimmakka, a Padma Shri recipient, a 107 year old woman is also known as 'Mother of trees' has planted trees on the highway and thousands of other trees. So, our grandparents and great grandparents were living a life which is close to nature and with the nature. But now, it has become man versus nature. The more we study or become 'literate', the less we believe in our traditions and customs and start questioning every good practice, thus resulting in destructive practices of destroying the nature, thereby ultimately destroying ourselves and our future generations. Today our value system has changed, we rely on the western concept of development, where factories and infrastructure is the basis of calculating whether a country is developed or not. There is no denying to the fact that roads, transport, factories all are necessary, however development has to be done in a way where balance can be maintained, that is sustainable development.

Environmental education or awareness is the key to resolve this issue. This education can be in two forms, formal and informal. Formal education would form part of school curriculum and try to create environmental consciousness amongst students. Now-a-day's environmental education is made mandatory in all schools and students are sensitized about environment from a very young age. Other method is informal, that would be through

family and social behavior. Education is known to influence the attitude of people. With education a person first, realizes the intensity of problem, secondly, this would lead to change in attitude towards that issue and finally person would try to find out the solution for the same. Take for example, problem of waste management, to deal with this issue, first we need to understand the intensity of problem, that is waste (solid waste, plastic waste, e-waste, construction waste, biomedical waste etc.) is being generated in such huge quantities and there is no safe method for its disposal. It is either incinerated or thrown into rivers or dumped into landfills, only a very small percentage of it is actually and effectively recycled. It ends up polluting our air, waste and land and ultimately affect our health. Once this realization comes, it leads to change in attitude where we think about generating less waste, not using single use plastic, or not buying new smart-phone every year. Thereafter we think of solution and ways to reduce effectively dispose and recycle this waste without harming environment.

Once the feeling of oneness with nature and environment is imbibed in people, there would be no need to make any laws or regulations prohibiting activities causing environmental degradation. A living example of this can be seen in Bhutan, a small Himalayan Country in India's neighborhood. The Constitution of Bhutan provided that sixty percent of the land has

to be maintained as forest at all times¹, however ground reality is, forest occupy much more than sixty percent of landmass. It clearly shows that people there are abstaining from cutting forest not because it is against law but because it is part of their culture to respect nature and not to over exploit it, use only that much of natural resources as are necessary. Bhutan is probably the only Country in the world that is carbon negative, meaning thereby its carbon emission is less than permissible limit. But the problem is, air and water do not follow any boundaries. Pollution in the neighboring Countries of Bhutan is leading to increase in temperature and thereby melting of ice on mountains in Bhutan. This is a classic example to understand that environmental problems cannot be resolved at national level, it requires the support and willingness of entire world community as a whole. Any activity in one area will have consequences in other parts of the world as well.

Some very innovative ideas are used to create environmental awareness, like in Japan a newspaper is printed which has flower seeds in it. So, first people are supposed to read the newspaper and understand environmental concern, thereafter this newspaper is torn into small pieces and put in sand so that the seeds can germinate. This year the invitation cards that were

¹ Article 5 (3) Constitution of Bhutan, 2008 , available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bhutan_2008.pdf?lang=en last visited on 22 January 2022.

printed for celebrating 73rd Republic Day of India also contained amla plant seeds in them which could be sown.²

Awareness about a cause will lead to the path for finding its solutions, this can be seen in context of plastic waste. Plastic waste management is proving to be a herculin task. Over a period of time plastic production and consumption has increased many fold. However the problem is with its disposal and waste management. China is the highest producer of plastic and India ranks at number five in plastic production³. In India, by 2022 per capita plastic consumption is expected to be around 20kg.⁴ Also households are found to be the biggest contributor to plastic waste⁵, where segregation of waste is not done which adds to the problem.

Awareness about the harmful effects of plastic on our body and also our environment is very important to deal with this menace. At the same time people need to be aware about the legal provisions and responsibilities on citizens and manufacturers regarding waste segregation and disposal for effective implementation of rules. In India there are Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016 for plastic waste disposal. A study was

² Available at <https://newsable.asianetnews.com/india/believe-it-or-not-republic-day-2022-invitation-card-is-also-a-seed-for-a-plant-r6bnyq> last visited on 22 January 2022.

³ Available at https://cpcb.nic.in/uploads/plasticwaste/Annual_Report_2019-20_PWM.pdf last visited on 24 January 2022.

⁴ Available at <https://www.teriin.org/sites/default/files/files/factsheet.pdf> last visited on 24 January 2022.

⁵ *Ibid*

done in India to find out the level of awareness about plastic among different groups⁶. It showed students (Graduate) were most aware about the problems caused by plastic, rules made in by Indian government to deal with plastic waste, extended producer responsibility and also that Indian government is determined to eliminate single use plastic by 2022. This shows that awareness campaigns and curriculum in schools and colleges is proving to be most effective tool to sensitize people about plastic. There is 5 R's approach to deal with plastic waste that is, reduce- one should try not to use plastic product as far as possible, thereby reducing individual consumption; Refuse to avoid plastic packaging; Reuse- most of the people reuse plastic bottles instead of throwing it away; Recycle- the waste to give it a new shape instead of burning it or throwing it in landfills; Remove- that is to remove the plastic litter in our water bodies or land to make our surroundings clean. Indian government has launched Swachh Bharat Mission, which is a highly successful campaign to motivate people to keep their surroundings clean and not to litter. This main agenda of this initiative to is create awareness amongst people about cleanliness. As per the study, 'The student respondents show the most positive plastic consumption behaviour which correlate directly to the

⁶ Mathur, A. and Singh, K.D.P. (XXXX) 'Analysis of plastic waste management in India: study of law and behaviour', World Review of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development, Vol. x, No. y, pp.xx-xx.

higher levels of awareness regarding plastic pollution in this segment.’⁷

Consumerism and capitalism has lead to increase in the carbon emission and contributing to carbon footprint. Carbon footprint is an estimate of the amount of carbon dioxide produced by your daily activities over the course of a year. Carbon footprint is calculated by looking at your means of transport, diet, consumption pattern etc. Cultural devaluation is also one of the factors responsible for increased carbon footprint. Capitalist Countries want to gain more and more money, so they produce goods in bulk, then they force developing countries to open their markets for such goods. Today we find all kinds of international clothing and shoe brands in India which is result of New Economic Policy adopted in 1991 when World Bank pressurised Indian government to open up its economy. As a result of this trend we end up buying more clothes, shoes, etc than we actually require. We do this without realising the cost environment has to pay for it. It adds to our carbon footprint, but most of us are totally ignorant about it. Let’s understand it through an illustration, when a cloth is made during the production process it adds carbon to

⁷ Mathur, A. and Singh, K.D.P. (XXXX) ‘Analysis of plastic waste management in India: study of law and behaviour’, World Review of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development, Vol. x, No. y, pp.xx–xx.

atmosphere, then it is transported, it further adds carbon as fuel is burnt, when a person goes to shop to buy that cloth, he again travels through car, thereby adding to carbon. To create awareness about this issue carbon footprint calculator has been developed, where one can calculate the amount of carbon an individual is contributing to environment by simply accessing the calculator through internet. We have tradition of worshipping food thanking God for the food he has provided us before consuming food. Simple practice of going back to our roots and understanding the logic and rationale behind our cultural and religious practices will take us on a sustainable path.

Our lifestyle has a huge impact on our surroundings. In 2019 a study was published “ Issue with the Tissue”⁸ to establish the correlation between American toilet industry and cutting of forest in Canada. Thousands of trees are cut, thousands of gallons of waste is flushed down to make toilet rolls. Chlorine is used for it which pollutes the water and its manufacturing and transportation leads to huge carbon emission. This activity is totally avoidable, there cannot be any justification for cutting thousands of trees and wasting huge amount of water to make tissue paper, a commodity which will be used only once and thrown away after use. It is hugely irresponsible and unsustainable. It is better to look for alternatives to tissue.

⁸ Available at <https://www.stand.earth/publication/forest-conservation/charmin-toilet-paper/issue-tissue> last visited on 26 January 2022.

Countries need to take responsibility for their actions and act towards restoring the environment in the same condition as we received it from our ancestors.

Youth is the real asset for any country, they shape the future of the nation. So, it becomes extremely important to make them environmentally conscious and aware so that they inculcate good lifestyle, attitude and right approach towards environment from childhood itself. Children are like wet clay which can be moulded in any form that you decide to give them. Schools have started creating environmental awareness amongst students from early age. Best manifestation of it can be seen in anti-cracker campaign during Diwali. Children are now told in schools that bursting crackers is harmful to environment, it pollutes air and thus affects our health. As a result not only children are not bursting crackers on Diwali but they stop their parents and neighbours, relatives and other society members also from using crackers.

Recently we have seen many child activists who are demanding their right to clean environment from world leaders. Greta Thunberg, a Swedish child activist challenged the world leaders and warned them against robbing present and future generation from clean and safe environment. Similarly Licypriya Kangujam is a young environmental activist from India. The question arises why so many children are raising their voice against policies affecting climate change and environment? This is

because youth have special responsibilities and concerns towards environment. Young people will live longer so, they will be affected more by the environmental decisions that are taken today by their elders. Therefore they have to bear the consequences of the decisions taken today, be it carbon emission, climate change or nuclear radiation. Therefore young people can play an active role in protecting and improving the environment, it creates a direct impact on changing the youth behaviour and attitude. They can influence behaviour of their parents and relatives, as seen in illustration about Diwali crackers. Also good habits can be inculcated in them from the start, like many schools encourage students to plant a tree on their birthday, thereafter it becomes the responsibility of that student to look after that tree. It brings a feeling of love towards trees and nature and also helps in increasing the green belt. By giving environmental education youth can be made to adopt environment friendly practices, save resource like water and electricity, encourage them to recycle waste. United Nations has also taken several initiative for youth, like online courses, awareness campaigns for schools and colleges, garbage music band⁹ etc. In garbage band young people are taught to convert waste material into musical instrument. Some other success stories of youth taking environmental initiatives are :Kenyan Girl Guide Alice Moraa has trained over 5,000 young

⁹ Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/building-musical-movement-trash> last visited on 30 January 2022.

people to change their plastic habits and is working to implement proper garbage disposal mechanism in Kisii county.¹⁰ Strathmore University student Pankaj Varsani has launched a “plastic-free month” at his University and is working with students from other universities to scale up the plastic challenge badge.¹¹

If we look at all the causes for environmental destruction, like pollution, deforestation, urbanization, commercialization etc., we find one common element in it, that is it all are result of human activities. There are two set of ideas that shape social behavior. One is about materialism, commercialization and fast economic growth and the other is about protecting and conserving the environment. In fight between the two, first one always wins. Traditionally , there is a basic difference between eastern and western ideology, that is, western ideology is at materialistic, utilitarianism and commercial. On the other hand eastern ideology is focused on spirituality, inner peace and soul connections. In Indian tradition we see our trees, mountains and even animals as Gods, as our savior. We make relation with them, therefore a symbiotic association is formed. If we revisit our past, go back to

¹⁰ Available at <https://www.unep.org/pt-br/node/25048> last visited on 30 January 2022.

¹¹ Available at <https://timesofoman.com/article/77270-international-authorities-join-forces-to-fight-plastic-pollution> last visited on 30 January 2022.

Vedas. It can help us to get monoculture of protecting environment.

Vedas and Environment

Vedas are the source of all knowledge. Vedas tell us the path to establish a healthy and cordial relationship with nature. It is written in Vedas that, universe is the creation of supreme power, Earth has provided everything for everyone, Earth has provided for even those who are yet to be born, no species should exploit the other.¹² It gives message of sustainable development, where nature allows us to use its resources as per your need, but humans should not violate or exploit Earth, then only there will be harmony and cordial relations between man and nature. Nature has its ways of taking revenge, in form of floods, draught etc. We all remember the incident in Mumbai when during heavy rains and cyclone sea was throwing back garbage and waste on shores that has been dumped into the sea. Also who can forget disaster in Kedarnath which took so many lives. It seems like nature is returning to us the kind of treatment we give to nature. In Bhumi Sukta of Atharva Veda it is said that Earth is our mother and we are her children, so, how can we think of polluting it. A strong bond with nature is built. It's an ethical and moral connection. So, that whenever Earth is harmed we feel the pain.

¹² Ishopanishad, Final Charter of Shukla Yajurved (1st shloka)

In Artharvaveda it is given that truth and vast cosmic divine order, everything is manifested inside the Earth, by its selfless dedication. Earth is our constant companion, let her expand her beauty and vastness and provide us a healthy life.¹³ So we need to take care of earth, it is our mother, it is our constant companion of mankind, earth was with our ancestors, it is with us and it will be there with our children, it nurtures us, takes care of all our needs, so, how can we even think about hurting it, exploiting it and polluting it. We have a duty to protect and preserve it.

Vedas guide us in every sphere of life and it is amazing to discover that Vedas which were written thousands of years ago, contain advice about things and events that are happening now. They gave us warnings also but we seldom listen to it. For example, Rigveda shloka contain advice/ warning that forest shall never be cut.¹⁴ However we have not followed this advice and are also bearing the consequences of it. Large scale deforestation lead to the forest fire in Amazon rain forest which was called as lungs of the Earth; in recent years we have witnessed so many floods which are again result of deforestation. Deforestation also results in reduced rains, which leads to failed crops and as a result there is shortage of food and water both. Planting a single tree by each person can solve so many problems. Another example is of Shloka

¹³ Bhumisukta, Shloka 1.1:12th Book of Artharvaveda

¹⁴ Rigveda 8th Book, Shloka 1.13

in Matsya Puran telling us that ten pounds are equal one reservoir, a son is equal to ten reservoir and a tree is equal to ten sons¹⁵. Meaning thereby tree is equal to ten sons, it provides you with oxygen, resources like timber, fruits etc. Also it means that your children will survive only for one generation but one tree will take care of many generations. This is the kind of importance that is given to natural resources and it is very scientific calculation. Trees are a great resource for us and that's the reason we have tradition of worshipping trees.

In Rig Veda we find reference to importance of clean water¹⁶, where it is said uncontaminated and pure water not only cleans our body but also washes away sins and bad tendencies of humans. Clean water detoxifies our body, mind and soul. In Hinduism there is practice of taking bath in holy rivers to wash away you sins, especially in Ganga river. This must motivate us to keep our rivers clean. However the state of these rivers is deplorable, their water is black and they are used as dumping ground for waste. Rivers which were the lifelines are themselves dying now. Several initiatives have been taken to clean rivers especially Ganga, but it will be a herculin task. Clean water is called as disease destroyer and disease conquering in Atharva Veda.¹⁷ However now since we have failed miserably to keep our rivers clean, this dirty water is causing several diseases like

¹⁵ Matsya Purana [154:312]

¹⁶ Rig veda, 10th Book, Shloka 9.8

¹⁷ Atharva veda, 3rd book, Shloka 12.9

cholera, Hepatitis etc. This should act as an alarm for all of us to take initiatives to willfully abstain from polluting environment and cleaning our rivers. In Yajurveda it is said, do not degrade quality of air¹⁸ as clean air is very important for our health and is a source for our good health and long life¹⁹. So, it becomes our duty not to pollute air.

Vedas give us a clear message that life of man and nature are interconnected, man cannot alienate himself from nature. We are part of this interwoven system, so if we pollute the environment we are harming ourselves. On the other hand if we successful in healing the environment, then we can save our future and also the future of the coming generations. Vedas are the source of all knowledge and they can guide us to deal with and come out this crisis.

Indian philosophy and tradition show attachment towards environment. In our traditional way of life our needs were limited, we were self-sufficient and were also providing for the poor and needy. We are deeply religious people with strong sense of culture and tradition. Every custom that we follow , every practice, every ritual has a scientific justification. Take for example the simple practice of eating in a plant leaf while sitting on the ground. It helps us twofold, it is good for digestion of food and this plant leaf can be thrown away, which will decompose on its own and act as

¹⁸ Yajurveda, 5th Book, Shloka 43

¹⁹ Rig veda, 10th Book, Shloka 186.1

manure for plants. As long as this balance with nature was continuing we lived in a clean and healthy world. We need to establish peace with nature, for that it requires, active participation with nature, bonding with nature and finally connection with nature, which means we should not remember environmental cause only on special occasions like Diwali, where we refrain from bursting crackers, but make it a part of our day to day life to lead a sustainable lifestyle, like, use public transport, social responsibility, environmental awareness, develop a bond with nature of love, care and affection.

Our environment is the source of our survival, we need to take care of it. It is facing many challenges of air pollution, water pollution, soil pollution, waste management, deforestation, urbanization, climate change etc., Not all of this destruction is reversible. However hope must always live and efforts must always continue. The key to address this grave environmental crisis is to first understand and realize the intensity of the problem. This can happen only by creating awareness among the masses about the severity of the situation. State alone cannot protect and preserve the environment, it requires active participation of its citizens. State can only make a law, but law will be implemented properly only when people realize its utility and not otherwise. Youth can play a very important role in both creating this awareness and also in safeguarding environment. If young children are sensitized about environment right from the start

though education, whether formal or informal they will inculcate this habit of living an environment friendly life and this habit will continue for lifetime. Not only this, they will pass on the same values to their children. Emphasis has to be given to environmental education for children right from the start. We need to revisit our roots and go back to the traditional way of life. Take inspiration and motivation from Vedas which are rich source of knowledge and start respecting and valuing our nature more. Earth is our mother, so, we need to respect it and also teach our children to do the same because our survival depends on wellbeing of Earth.