Environmental Ethical Values

Most of the Indian philosophy systems are founded on spiritualism and also known as “sanatana Dharma.” According to swami Ranganathananda this title is justified by “its dispassionate study of life and experience in their wholeness and totality and by a persistent effort to evaluate all bits of life and experience against the background of that ‘weltanschaung’ or world-view.”

The main aim of Indian moral philosophy is truth realization and the sages of India pursued this aim with passion and vigor, this high spirit of finding the truth with philosophical insights and practical experience transformed it into a living practical social philosophy. This practically is clearly visible among common masses of India when they use the technical terms of Indian philosophy like atman and Brahman etc, in their ordinary discourse. This social philosophy which has universal applications influenced Indian religious immensely. In religion it becomes a matter of experience not a mere concept or dogma. The test of religion is anubhuti, realization. Atma va are drastavyah – “The atman is to be seen (Brhadarangaya Upanishad).”

Unlike western philosophy, Indian philosophy does not have separate branch of moral philosophy as such Indian philosophy never considered moral philosophy in isolation with other means of enquiries. This point should not be taken for granted that Indian system lack moral philosophy and Indian systems are less interested in analyzing moral concepts. Indian philosophy always looked for direct experience of reality which is an integral vision in which there is no space for any compartmentalization. Knowing the ultimate reality is the sumnum bonum of which philosophy has. “The discussion of morality is carried out at two levels. At one level morality is concerned with the rules of conduct, prescriptions and prohibitions that are accepted in a society. It is the foundation of social, commercial life. At another level morality is not a socially binding force but a liberation force. At this level morality is the essence of being human and a part of man’s awareness of the entire cosmos, a point at transcendence, the ultimate limit, something close to self realization.”

As spirituality is the crux of Indian philosophy, the same is applicable to Indian moral thought also.. Ethical and spiritual values are most important aspects of any society. A progressive society cannot ignore values of ethics in its citizens. Ethics and spirituality are unifying forces of Indian society. According to swamy Ranganathananda, ethics and spirituality constitute the integrating principle in any society, primitive or advanced. He compares ethics and spirituality with the cement that holds together separate bricks so as to produce the integrated structure of a building.

Indian moral philosophy means the ethical views implied in the philosophical and religious tradition which is represented by Vedas, Upanishads, heterodox and orthodox schools in India. The values implied in all these systems is a continuous one. This thread of continuity in the midst of modernity is the remarkable feature of Indian philosophy. Although some ethical concepts change during the course of time of which India also witnessed such changes, Indian culture and practices still have connectivity to the traditions. The practice of ideals and concepts points out that Indian tradition and traditional values are still alive and having a practical element in it. The main reason for such liveliness is that Indian tradition and traditional values are still alive and having a practical element in it. The main reason for such liveliness is that Indian tradition is not static but dynamic and rational, always accepting the elements and modifying the old ones. In this way the tradition continues to grow and a tradition which is always dynamic and which always allows space for critical analysis, withstands the shocks of historical time.

The concepts and discussions in Indian ethics differs from western mode of ethics, it does not mean Indian ethics lacks relevance. “The controversy between rationalism and hedonism or intuitions and utilitarianism has no place in Indian ethics because the ultimate good it accepts rises above all controversies and antimonies. This might appear to be abstract idealism to the western mind untrained in any spiritual discipline. But the title “spiritual utilitarianism” should bring home to the
nourished and strengthened by our experience of culture. This is sad enough. But what is sadder still is that even spirituality is filled with unethical practices. "Our nation today presents the saddest point is that even spirituality is filled with unethical practices."

Ethical enquiries in India are known as jijnasa and this jijnasa may be brahmajijnasas or dharma jijnasas. These philosophical enquiries were the starting point of all knowledge. The concept of atman is a metaphysical concept, which crosses the boundaries of metaphysics itself. Atman is not the concept of metaphysics alone, but a real meaningful, existential concept which is to be pursued and discovered. Most of the Indian philosophical schools consider morality as a means to attain the goal of mukti or liberation. The value of moral life lays not only leading a noble life, but also attaining liberation. According to Indian thought liberation helps one to free from the cycles at birth and death. At the same time, Indian thought strictly prescribes that a man must perform his social responsibilities before taking up the path of salvation. Sainthood is not for those who want to escape from socio-ethical responsibilities. The great sages of India always remind that a man should perform firstly his duties towards the family and society. So Indian society is a network of relationships of which the sage also has his responsibility expected to give advice to those who are distressed.

Our present day society is in the grips of ethical deterioration. Nobody takes ethics as a serious matter. Ethical crisis has affected all section of the society cutting across, religious, caste, creed etc. the saddest point is that even spirituality is filled with unethical practices. “Our nation today presents a general picture of ethical and spiritual malnutrition. Vast sections of men and women have all but lost touch with the strengthening and purifying spiritual radiation of our own hoary culture. This is sad enough. But what is sadder still is that we have also largely failed to get ethically nourished and strengthened by our experience of socio-political action as a free people these two decades. These ethical opportunities have failed to develop in an adequate measure citizenship responsibilities and civic virtues and grace in our people young and old, in spite of our advantage of the close association with the western nations.”

Until recently, the development agenda of all the countries in the world mainly focused on exclusive planning in relation with economic growth without any concern for other factors. In this sense, development means economic planning encouraged the maximum exploitation of all natural resources irrespective of its resource base. Every one projected the countries economic prosperity as a sign of modern developed country. Concerns about environment being silenced by the voices for development. This helped to develop the notion that environmental concern is the luxury of the rich countries and environmental concern is anti-development agenda, which projected that this is against the poor countries. This was a plot played against third world countries cannot lead to development without detriment to the environment and natural resources. But even after having awareness about environmental concerns, we are not going in a right direction. Our understanding about ecological processes in broader perspective is limited and the systematic and clear analysis of the problem is absent. The reason for natural resources depletion is simplistically blamed against increase in population or such other factors.

This criticism is not viable in the sense that countries with less population are also facing environmental problems. Therefore, a broader understanding of environmental crisis and economic development is needed. The rapidly progressive activity throughout the country is seemed to have lost our traditional wisdom of preserving and worshipping nature. India is known to be the land of diversity, diversity in physical, ecological, social cultural and linguistics aspects. Despite this great diversity, India is facing challenges in environment. Environmental pollution is the most serious problem the country is facing today. Most of the industrial plants are using out dated and polluting technologies; pollution means the release of environmentally harmful contaminants or substances. So there is no point in arguing about ethical crisis in our society.

This ethical crisis is not a characteristic of our society alone. It is a question about the whole of humanity. So the solution must be having the elements of universal applications also. Regarding the universal element of values, there are three vantage points which need to be taken care of:-

1. Absence of new creation
Value creation and value fostering is the most important elements of society. Same values cannot be applied for all the time because a static value cannot be applied to a changing society. India is not a country which it were fifty years back. Each society is growing in tunes with the members of the society. So value creation is an important act. It does not mean that we should create values our of
nothing. We can create values only with the existing values. Ancient Indian sages were highly successful in developing value systems which were filled, with contents of universal application. Modern society failed in taking energy from these ancient values. Of course the concept of value system changed according to time-scale of history for example, in place of the traditional ideological like virtues, vice etc., we have, now the contemporary ideologies like social justice, human right etc., but it has not helped society in tackling serious ethical issues.

11. Proclivity in value interpretation
The strong bias in interpreting the value system in society is the bane of our country. This bias interpretation of ethical values is most visible in spirituality. Each section of society is interpreting the ethical value system in conducive to their welfare and aims at others expense. Religious frictions mainly arise from these biased value interpretation. This biased value interpretation limits the growth of universal value system like humanism, non-violence, love etc. and sectarian value group emerges stronger. The aim of all religions is to uplift mankind to newer heights of peace, harmony, social well being etc. but the upholders of religion use religion as a tool to capture power and manipulate everything. The contemporary society is witnessing a high increase in religious awareness but at the same time value erosion and value deterioration is high even among highly religious minded peoples. The purpose of all religious systems is to foster universal values for a harmonious society. But all religious leaders have forgotten this duty. So value interpretation is an important duty of society. Interpretation of values should have universal appeal and should surpass all religious barriers.

111. Absence of value re-interpretation
India is the country which had oral tradition for centuries before the advent of print media. Every word uttered by the guru was taken in mind by the disciple and the process of memorization was so great that this tradition continued for centuries. Guru was an ideal teacher who interpreted the sacred texts in simple manner. The discourse of Indian philosophical texts was so intimately connected with common man. Moral teaching to the society was done with the help of philosophical texts and there was no difference between life and thought of the people. The gurus or moral teachers practiced what they taught to the people. The interpretation of the ethical values imbibed in the philosophical texts was done smoothly and even sometimes re-interpreted according to the situation without losing original meaning. This re-interpretaion of ethical values is clearly evident in the Ramayana. In each language there is the Ramayana, told in a different form without losing the original meaning.

So value re-interpretaion is the most important aspect of a social society. Each society should have the mechanism to interpret or re-interpret the value system for a healthy relation among the people. In contemporary India, this mechanism of value- re-interpretation in gradually declining. The society is always in search for role models who were considered as the upholders of ethical values. History shows that there was a Harischandra in ancient India and there was Mahatma Gandhi in pre independent India. But in present day society such role models who are capable of showing the right paths in times of crisis is very less. Gandhi believed that religion and politics are for serving the God by the service to humanity. But present day society proves that religion and politics are for serving its leaders and create disharmony among people.

To tackle ethical crisis in relation to environment one need to have an overall analysis of what went wrong. It is clear that young minds of India do not have formal training about moral education in relation with environment. Man as a moral being has the duty to preserve environment as part of his moral obligation. India as a country which had inheritance of universal values should take the lead role in providing ethical oriented environmental education. In traditional India where the Guru Kula system was prevalent, each student received much understanding about one’s nature and each student was taught to respect all other forms of life. With the emergence of modern social system we neglected the merits of traditional system. Thus created a vaccum in moral education. To fill this vaccum there needs to be a re-orientation towards in moral education. To fill this vaccum there needs to be a re-orientaito towards Indian perspective of environmental ethic and environmental education.

K.P. Sarabhai and M. Raghunathan point out some basic understanding about environmental education which is of interest to environmental ethics also. 7

- People have a basic concern about that well being of those around them and their resources.
- Individuals would rather act constructively than destructively in terms of environment, or anything else.
- Knowledge and formal education cannot be equated.
- As environmental and development issues are concerned, the choices do not fall into easy categories of right and wrong.
There are several alternative paths equally valid, which may lead to the right goal, if such a goal is clear. Of these, point 1 and 2 can be dealt by ethics of care. These points clearly elaborate that implementation of ethical formulations in environmental education will definitely help to improve the situation. With regard to point 3, it is clear that India is a country which inherited treasures of wisdom in environmental care through the ages. This wisdom of environmental management should be revived. This is the most important task. A strictly formulated guideline on environmental ethics which is attached with one’s way of life is really an invaluable treasure. India is sitting can a treasure mine which should explode and knowledge of wisdom should spread everywhere. The great rishis wishes that.

“Ano bhadrah kratavo yanthu viswanath”
“let noble thoughts flow to us from everywhere”

Right from the ancient times Indians welcomed auspicious thoughts from all over the world. This wisdom of welcoming all noble thoughts is the essence of Indian Philosophy. The meaning of the term ecology denotes the relationship between plants and living beings and their environment. Indian concept of ‘prakriti’ adds something more to it. It also means the balance of qualities.

Modern ecological science which is preserving and conserving of natural environment needs to look at Indian systems of philosophy for guidelines. Nobody can question and invalidate Indian ecological heritage which is having the experience of ages. The environmental awareness or consciousness is spread in Indian systems of thought. Although this eco-consciousness is not contained in a systematical manner, one can easily grasp the wisdom of environmental consciousness in any Indian Philosophical text.

REFERENCE NOTES:

2. Ibid., p.37.
8. Rig veda, 1.89.11