

Environmental Aesthetics apropos a Plea for Human Survival

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I. Man and Environment : An Indian Perspective

Man is ordinarily a chemical species who lives in an environment that is broadly divided into five major zones : Lithosphere, Hydrosphere, Biosphere Atmosphere and Exosphere (Figure.1). The changes in and around him are chemical and biological in nature. Around

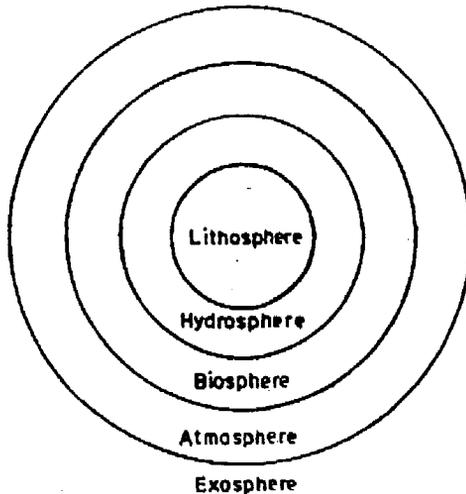


Fig.1 Our total Environment

8th c. B.C. Indian thinkers outlined the physico-chemical theories of cosmic evolution and observed that there are five basic elements of nature-earth (*Ksiti*) water (*ap*), fire (*tejas*), air (*marut*) and sky (*vyoma*) and these elements fit into the modern concept of various spheres of the total environment as earth corresponds to lithosphere, water to hydrosphere and biosphere, air to atmoshere and fire to exosphere. The ultimate ground of cosmic evolution is nature (*prakriti*). B.N.Seal writes :

The manifested world is traced in the Samkhya to an unmanifested ground Prakriti which is conceived as formless and undifferentiated, limitless and ubiquitous, in-

destructible and undecaying, ungrounded and uncontrolled, without beginning and without end. But the unit of Prakriti, is a mere abstraction, it is in reality an undifferentiated manifold, an indeterminate infinite continuum of infinitesimal Reals.¹

The ancient Indians saw nature as the source of all attractions because of its recurring rhythm. Its beauty is pristine and it appeals directly to the human mind which results in a controlled aesthetic response to a range of new and often intimidating sense experiences, thereby developing a feeling of love for nature.

The constituents (*gunas* literally 'strands of a rope) of Prakriti are threefold : intelligence (*sattva*), energy (*rajas*) and mass (*tamas*). The starting point in the cosmic evolution is in a condition of equilibrium consisting of uniform diffusion of reals. Mass offers resistance to energy to do work which leads to the arrest of the cosmic evolution. This is overcome by varying quantities of intelligence, energy and mass which are interdependent and act on one another. Their interaction leads to cosmic evolution which is defined as the differentiation in the integrated, the differentiated within the undifferentiated, the determinate with the indeterminate and the coherent within the incoherent. Here mass and energy remain constant in both their manifested and unmanifested, actual and potential forms : Earth, Water, Fire and Air freely combine in various proportions and groupings to produce variety of substances in the universe.

The Indians gave a clear picture of the Atomic Theory of matter. The five *pancabhutas* are considered as *anus* (atoms) which are made up of infra-atomic particles known as *tanmantras*.² Each of the *pancabhutas* vary with groupings of the *tanmantras* in their atoms. The sky behaves both as non-atomic and atomic and serves as a starting point for the building of other forms of atoms in nature.³ These atoms combine to form molecules and the combination takes place according to various geometrical arrangements in space. In a product, energy is due to the elements of *rajas*, resistance and stability due to *tamas* and the conscious manifestation due to *sattva*. The collocations of mass, energy and intelligence always break up and finally dissolve into Prakriti.

The Indian concept of atom antedates Dalton's Atomic Theory and the role of the atoms in the cosmic evolution is explained by modern science as: the tiny cell which is the primary building block of a living organism is made up of four elements, viz., Carbon (C), Hydrogen (H), Oxygen (O) and Nitrogen (N). These elements C,H,O,N are generated from nature (in conformity with Indian and Greek views of elements) and by some amazing arrangements generate life in an organism. Finally, when the organisms die these elements get dissolved into nature. Therefore the process of evolution and dissolution is a manifestation of nature. At the outset of the evolution, potential energy is converted into kinetic energy and again goes back to the state of potential energy at the time of dissolution

II. Man as an Aesthetic Animal

Atman (self) as envisaged by the Indian philosophers is immortal. Modern science says that life is created by an amazing arrangement of C,H,O,N. But *atom* conceived as the ultimate reality is beyond the operation of nature : it is not constituted by three *gunas* or basic elements of nature and is described as pure consciousness that both transcends nature

in its manifest and unmanifest forms as also emanates in them. According to the orthodox Vedic systems of Indian philosophy Nature consists of three levels (*Kosas*); inanimate matter, (*annam*), the vital force (*prana*) in living beings and the psychic force (*manah*) in some of the living beings (which is commonly called mind). But *atman* is all pervading, a pure consciousness that is immanent in all these three levels of existence while at the same time transcending them all. This means that *atman* remains unaffected at the time of dissolution-it is changeless and eternal and is not an arrangement of C,H,O,N. As an entity its stuff is none of the three constituents of nature which are impure since they are affected by pain, pleasure and indifference. But the stuff of *atman* is wholesome beauty (*anandam*) that cannot be experienced by any animal excepting a human being only when the intelligence (*sattva*) stuff predominates in him. It is in this state that a man is aware of the *sattva* constituent of nature, which delights him. Thus this *sattva* constituent might be called 'beauty'. A man in a *sattva* state perceives the whole nature as a primehouse of beauty. In this broader perspective, beauty is not a special quality of nature. Nature acquires it sometimes and does not do so at other. Nature as such is beautiful, but its beauty is to be experienced by a quantified state of man.

III. Nature as viewed Aesthetically

A Chemist views nature and its influence on the behaviour of man aesthetically as he is engaged in designing and synthesizing molecules of nature which are of great importance in this age of science and technology. Professor Ronald Hoffman writes :

What follows is an empirical enquiry into what one subculture of Scientists. Chemists call beauty. Without thinking about it, there are molecules that an individual Chemist, or the community as a whole, consider to be the objects of aesthetic admiration.⁴

The aesthetically evaluative properties of nature are grace, beauty and power, considering nature as an object with elements of intensity, unity and complexity. This generates an aesthetic response in the viewer.⁵ The familiar philosophical views of Kant on how to feel pleasure on an object of nature or art are :

He who feels pleasure in the mere reflection upon the form of an object..... justly claims the agreement of all men, because the ground of this pleasure is bound in the universal, although subjective, condition of reflective judgements, viz., the purposive harmony of an object (whether a product of nature or of art) with the mutual relations of the cognitive faculties (the imagination and the understanding).⁶

Thus what is admitted as beauty of nature is the sense of harmony, order and an object is beautiful well-proportioned with taste. The western thinkers have all along tried to study nature, know its secrets and finally to conquer it. But modern science says that one

can never conquer nature, one can only partially fulfil some of the human demands for sometime. Thus, while pursuing to conquer nature, man has grossly damaged the beauty of environment, endangering the very existence of our planet, the earth.

The natural cycle of a living organism is birth, growth, old-age and death- it is irreversible and it cannot be altered. But nature has an amazing system of checks and balances. It corrects the mistakes in the environment. It is dynamic. Therefore it is always beautiful to the human eye.

IV. Nature/Environment : Pollution

Environmental degradation has led to massive pollution which has become a global phenomenon and its magnitude is threatening and explosive. It is inevitable because of increase in population, increase in human needs, urbanization and rapid industrialization. In this alteration of the environment, man has forgotten the environmental ethics and, thus, has questioned the very existence of living organisms and our planet, the earth.

The five elements of nature are responsible for supporting life on earth. Disturbance in any one of the five elements creates ecological imbalance which can destroy the global environmental system leading to crisis in Man-Nature- Symbiosis.⁷ The best and a simple example is the photosynthesis in plants (Fig.2). The photosynthesis in plants and

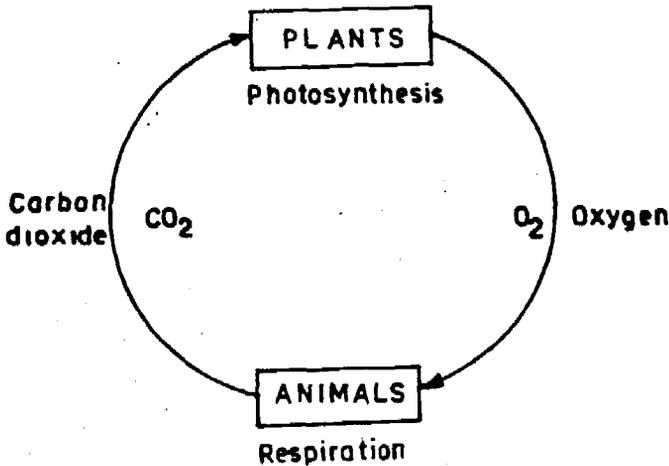


Fig.2 The Man-Nature- Symbiosis

respiration in animals are chemically opposite and complementary to each other and maintain the delicate balance of life-cycle in nature. In this cycle oxygen, a waste-product of plants is utilized by animals and carbon dioxide a waste product of animals is utilized by plants. The system is a delicate and complex one and is susceptible to disruptions. And if it gets disrupted, the entire mankind may be destroyed. Professor George Wald has summarized in the *Heritage*:

Three billion years of life, three million years of man-like creatures, ten thousand years of civilization and mere two hundred years of industrial revolution have brought us to the brink of disaster.⁸

During the two hundred years, sciences have led to deeper understanding of processes in physical and biological world from macro-universe to micro-universe as also the destruction of delicate ecological processes has led to numerous unnatural phenomena that have been experienced by man so far.

Air pollution has become a global problem. There is a general uproar for fresh air throughout the whole world. The amount of carbon dioxide is slowly increasing in the atmosphere leading to 'Green House Effect', which, in turn, disrupts the hydrologic cycle (Fig.3) which is responsible for our weather and running life processes in our planet. The water cycle is fueled by the sun, and this is nature's own purification process. Without it, life on earth would cease. Therefore, man holds his future in his hands.

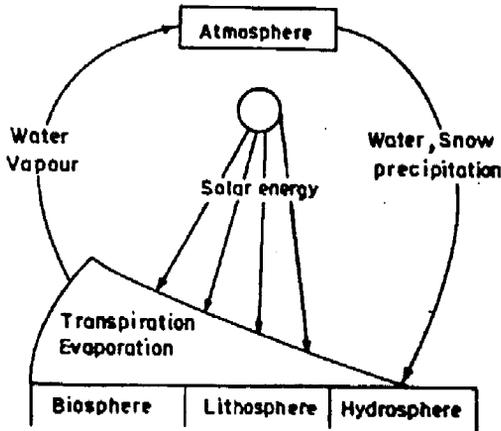


Fig.3 The Hydrologic Cycle.

Ozone in the stratosphere serves as a shield and saves human beings from the deadly effects of ultraviolet radiations from the sun, causing skin cancer and genetic mutations. Its depletion due to man-made chemicals will lead all living organisms and the plant kingdom towards total destruction.

The most striking feature of our planet is its extensive hydrosphere which interacts with the biosphere and the atmosphere through the actions of water. The hydrosphere has determined the course of human history. Horney is of the view :

The hydrosphere has also played more subtle roles in the human experiences; it has been theorized that the geographical regions of greatest intellectual stimulation and thus the most advanced culture move with the regions of cyclonic storms (i.e., atmospheric water exchange). As the press of uncontrolled human fertility makes water more precious, the role of water in determining the fate of man, nations and civilizations will inevitably become enlarged.⁷

The way man-made pollution and deforestation continue, one apprehends that it may endanger the lives of living species, oceans, oxygen and trees in our planet in near future, converting it into a desolate lunar-like surface without any form of life in it. The gradual destruction of nature by man has probably resulted in deterioration of human val-

ues. The highest perfection of life which is essential to human society has become a dream. Material pleasure has taken the reign. Man has lost faith in himself and at the community level. He feels insecure and tends to reject old traditional values. He seems at times, to behave like an escapist. Pollution of mind, character and moral values are in the ascending order. Loss of human values in each and every sphere of life is alarmingly increasing. A time may come when the society will be full of despondent ascetics, unscrupulous sensualists and cowardly criminals without convictions and conscience leading to total degeneration in human values. It will be too late to realize its consequences then.

Man must preserve the five basic elements of nature viz., earth, water, air, fire and the sky as these are his total environment. He has to create a golden age where man was in a state of absolute simplicity and nature in a state of pristine purity. Let the sky, space, earth, oceans and plants be in peaceful existence to help mankind to enjoy an everlasting peace with Man-Nature in total harmony.

Notes and References

1. B.N.Seal, *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Indians*. (Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, imprint, 1985) P.2.
2. The *tanmantras* according to science are the subatomic particles like electrons, protons, neutrons and so on.
3. Vijnanabhiksu, *yogavartika*, III. 40
4. R.Hoffman, 'Molecular Beauty', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol.48, No.3, 1990, P.1.
5. M.C. Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View*, Ed. M.J.Wreen and D.M.Callen, (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1982). p.385.
6. I.Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, (Translated by J.H.Bernard) New York, Hafner, 1951, p.28.
7. R.A.Horney, *The Chemistry of our Environment*, (Wiley-Interscience, John-Wiley and Sons, New York, 1978), p.1-3.
8. George Wald as quoted in 'The Culture of Ambivalence' by G.Naganathan in *The Heritage*, Vol.2. No.1. Feb.1986.

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