

IN DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM: A STUDY OF HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT INTERACTION IN DELHI-NCR

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ABSTRACT

In June 2018, many concerned residents came together to resist felling of around 16500 trees in South Delhi to make way for housing projects and the redevelopment of area – which the media termed as a “mini-chipko” movement. This shows a paradox though: South Delhi residents, who belong to the upper middle-class strata, are usually not forthcoming for social issues, but showed remarkable effort to protest the felling of the trees in their area. Was the environmental issue a question of basic need for them? This paper examines this question, showing the shift in our approach to the environmental protection and preservation.

Keywords: *Environmentalism, Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, Preservation*

I INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Delhi witnessed something remarkable. Many concerned residents came together to resist felling of around 16500 trees in South Delhi to make way for housing projects and redevelopment of the area. In this “mini-chipko” movement, as the media termed it, the residents stood in Sarojini Nagar with posters saying “Mujhe Mat Maaro,” “Don’t cut down a life,” and “NBCC ke log aaye ped kaatne mere gaon mein, thak kar baith gaye ped ki chhhaon mein”. The purpose was to protect the greenery at the site. Many others joined the protest upon learning about it, creating hashtags like #Save Delhi # DelhiTreeSOS # Save Trees Save Delhi. Several WhatsApp groups, among others, like “Save 16500,” “Delhi Blue Skies” were formed to organize protests and discuss the felling of trees and the ways to stop it. On the ground, the protesters walked around and hugged the trees, hoping to build pressure on the authorities to drop the redevelopment plan. Efforts were also made to contact celebrities to join the movement.

It was no ordinary sight considering that most residents of South Delhi are perceived to belong to upper middle class, who usually have not been forthcoming for social issues. This area also has a distinction it may not like to be remembered for: in this area the sex-ratio is very skewed compared to rest of Delhi, but hardly would one notice people showing their concern for this issue. Why would people protest the felling of trees then? Since when has the environmental issue become a question of basic need?

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In this paper, my purpose is to examine how human beings have interacted with their environment in what is broadly characterized as the modern period. I show that there is a repositioning in the human-environment interaction, a shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism, and that this gets reflected in the way we have approached the question of protecting the environment since mid-twentieth century.

II HOW DO HUMANS INTERACT WITH ENVIRONMENT?

Philosophers have held diverse pictures of nature which shows how they also viewed human's relationship with environment. For Rousseau, nature was congruous with human flourishing, but Hobbes and J S Mill held the view that nature must be overcome for realizing human freedom (Jamieson 2008, 314). The view that man is sovereign of nature is also reiterated by Karl Marx, who commented, while analyzing the British India, that:

We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man to be the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of *Hanuman*, the monkey, and *Sabbala*, the cow (Marx 1978, 658).

Locke summed up the human approach to environment by arguing that land that is left unused, which has seen no "improvement" by way of pasturing, tilling, or planting is waste (Locke 1690). This view implied that man must work on or overcome his environment, and the value of nature arises when men mix their labour with nature.

The man as the sovereign view may be called anthropocentric view of human-environment interaction. On this understanding, we view environment as "common good", but as rational individuals, we seek to maximize our "interests", which means giving priority to "private good" over the common good. Garrett Hardin's influential article, "The tragedy of the commons" (1968) explains this succinctly. Hardin imagines a pasture shared by shepherds, each owning his own flock, yet their sheep grazing on common land. For a long time, this arrangement works, but as the flocks increase, the nature of the problem becomes clear. The common land can not support all the animals, whereas each shepherd, by adding sheep to his flock contributes to aggravate the problem. Eventually, the common land gets degraded, the sheep die, and the shepherds are ruined. Hardin argues that this structure is implicit in our society, which neglects the "common" good. Like the shepherds, whose efforts to maximize their individualistic profits destroys the common land which supports their sheep, we tend to degrade environment also, when we act in purportedly self-interest, by say, adding additional vehicles on the road.

The problem is that it may all seem rational, but the actions of the self-interested people may lead to an undesirable outcome. The costs of the common good are borne by everyone, but each is motivated to derive individualistic profit acting in one's self-interest because no one is sure that the other will also act in collective interest even if he did. In Hardin's scheme, each herder can rationally conclude that adding more animals will bring him more benefit, thus degrading the common land (pasture) which would harm all of them. In the same way, individuals may benefit individually from acts that pollute, change the climate, worsen air quality. The costs of such acts are spread over the entire population, and each acting in immediate self-interest, on aggregate produce outcomes that make everyone worse off.

Thus, environment is a common good, which does not receive as much attention from rational, self-interested individuals as the private good would receive. The problem is that often the private good would mean neglecting the common good, yet it is the common good which would impact whether the individuals can survive as beings.

III APPROACHES TO HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT INTERACTION

The major approaches to environmental protection lie between anthropocentrism (the belief that humans alone have intrinsic value) and ecocentrism (which rejects anthropocentrism). Four major approaches may be identified, as discussed below.

Conservation of Resources

This approach has also been called "prudent husbanding" of nature's resources (by Plato and Mencius, for example) and means elimination of waste (according to Pinchot) and promoting efficiency in use of resources (as Samuel P Hays puts it).

This approach may also be understood as "developing" the resource for its conservation. In *The Fight for Conservation*, Pinchot identifies "development" as an important conservation principle, along with "the prevention of waste" and development "for the benefit of the many, and not merely the profit of the few" (Pinchot, cited in Eckersley 1992, 35). McConnell argues that preventing waste means "maximizing output of economic goods per unit of human labor" (cited in Eckersley 1992, 35).

The problem is that this approach is overtly utilitarian, and if applied to land management, as advocated by the resource conservation movement, it would lead to unconstrained "total use" of the resource. It would suggest not to leave anything in its natural condition, as doing so would mean waste and waste should be avoided (Rodman 1983). The meaning of waste includes using resources inefficiently, or not using them at all.

The ecology of human welfare

The concerns of this approach are like conservationism, which is to achieve a

more clean and pleasant environment, but it follows the principles of “prudence” and “enlightened self-interest”. Thus, it challenges the economistic approach of the conservationists, who prioritize productivity by using natural resources efficiently. But the human welfare movement is primarily concerned with improving the “quality” of environment, which means making efforts for health and safety in the residential, urban and agricultural environments. Thus, the resource conservation approach is preoccupied with waste and depletion of resources (that is, concerned with factors of production), and the human welfare approach with general degradation, and the condition of environment (that is, with the quality of environment, social and physical both). From the perspective of resource conservation, sustainable development would mean sustaining natural resource for production, but from a human welfare ecology perspective, it would mean sustaining the support systems for human reproduction (Eckersley 1992, 37). By focusing on health, amenity, recreational and psychological need of human community, human welfare approach registers an improvement over conservationism, and by challenging the latter’s endorsement of science, technology and utility in protecting environment, it gives a new dimension to environmentalism by stewarding a search for ecologically acceptable ways of living.

The human welfare ecology movement is largely concentrated in urban concentrations where population concentration is dense and environmental pollution a big concern. The activists appeal is based on the interest of the human civilization, that is, we must interact with environment in ecologically benign ways – for our survival, for the future generations as well. The claim is that we must look after environment because it looks after us.

Preservationism

As we have discussed, conservationism recommends using resources efficiently and human welfarism seeks a quality environment. Preservationism suggests reverence to nature, and appreciation of its aesthetic and spiritual appeal (that is, nature, undomesticated by humans). If the resource conservationist (like Pinchot) is concerned to “conserve nature for development”, the concern of the preservationist is to “preserve nature from development”. Designating large wilderness tracts as national parks is an example of preservationism. This approach may include preserving nature for scenery and recreation, for enlightenment and for a site of threatened values.

Preservationism differs from earlier approaches in the way it reclaims the moral standing of the nonhuman nature, by challenging anthropocentrism and questioning why humans, one of many beings created by nature, ought to value himself more than the rest. Yet it also converges with conservationism and human welfarism since it proposes human-centered justification for restraining development. Another problem with this approach is that it could selectively deal with saving those places that have more aesthetic appeal for our senses or hold religious or sentimental values, for example mountains or rivers, than say

places like wetlands. Some scholars have questioned the approach for its presumed divide between human and nature, and for its ethnocentric character in dismissing the practices of the native inhabitants of a region (Callicott cited in Eckersley 1992, 40-1). Setting aside tracts of wilderness may not be helpful either, given growing population and pollution, since the former would get affected anyhow by the latter (Rodman 1977).

But anthropocentric arguments have also been advanced in support of preserving nature because of its instrumental value to humans. These arguments use labels such as “life-support”, “laboratory”, “art gallery” and “psychogenetic”, emphasizing nature’s nourishment value, informational value and experiential value to name a few (Eckersley 1992, 41). Preservation of wild nature may also have political potency in that it could be a symbolic resistance against urban culture and materialism of consumerist society, and a call for respecting another set of values which wilderness represents, such as freedom, spontaneity, diversity and communal ownership of resources. However, the preservationist approach also seeks to radically balance the scale of anthropocentric arguments: it calls for preserving nature in its own interest.

Animal rights and liberation

This approach focuses on prevention of cruelty to animals, arguing that animals have moral worth, like humans. Utilitarian arguments for protecting the rights of animals draw on Bentham’s philosophy, which argued for extending human moral obligation to all who can experience pleasure and pain. Following this, Peter Singer has argued that all sentient beings should be given moral consideration, not only of the members of human race, since both show the capacity to suffer.

Singer evaluates that there is ample evidence that animals feel pain like humans. If the being is otherwise sentient (that is, it has the capacity to feel), it is sufficient to consider it a right-holder. If we value the capacities to communicate in a shared language, possess self-consciousness and enter into reciprocal agreements for someone to be a bearer of rights, we would likely have problems in justifying human rights for immature humans, brain damaged people, infants and senile. Singer emphasizes the logical inconsistency in extending rights to such people while ignoring the suffering of the nonhumans in practices such as factory farming and vivisection. This inconsistency is an example of “speciesism”, Singer says, following Richard Ryder.

Singer suggests that wherever possible, we should avoid causing animals to suffer. By implication, it means prohibiting hunting and slaughtering of animals, and promoting vegetarianism. By extension, Singer would recommend that we should protect not only domestic animals but rather also wild animals, and forests and wetlands ought to be protected for their wellbeing.

Singer’s argument is appealing because his justifications rest on the principle that pleasure should be maximized and pain avoided, a view made famous by Bentham. By including nonhuman sentient beings in the category of rights-

bearer, he also makes a case for moving toward universal justice. But Singer's regarding the nonsentient beings as morally inconsequential has invited criticisms, as has his treating sentient nonhuman beings analogously with "defective" human beings. Critics also point out that Singer's philosophy is not suitable for environmental problems, since it is atomistic. Some have noted that Singer's model may be coercive also, because if pressed to its logical conclusion nonhuman beings may require to become vegetarians.

Despite its problems, the main contribution of animal liberation movement has been to defy anthropocentrism by exposing its unevenness, making a strong case for econcentrism.

IV ECOCENTRISM

This approach takes the spirit of preservationism forward, ecologically. Like the preservationist concern for sublime scenery and nature's aesthetics, ecocentrism seeks to protect species and ecosystems under threat, even if they have no use for humans. Ecocentrist environmentalists would like to preserve wilderness so that nonhuman world flourishes. Broadly, ecocentrism recognizes human and non-human interests in nature, but in a wider sense than conservationism, human welfarism, and preservationism, and not only for the present population, but rather also for the future generations. Also, the eccentric approach is holistic, not atomistic.

The importance of ecocentrism is that it does not only advocate to preserve environment for its instrumental value, but rather in recognizing that such an approach would make the nature a thing, the purpose of which is to serve the interests of sentient beings. Ecocentrism attributes intrinsic value to species as such, whether native or endangered.

But ecocentrism may still remain atomistic because it extends equal moral worth to individual living organisms, not to populations, species and ecosystems taken as entities in their own right. The concern is to develop an approach which is ecologically sensitive, one which values not only living sentient beings but the ecology in its entirety.

V CONCLUSION

Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism are two ideals along the spectrum of human-environment interaction, which give relative importance to humans and environment respectively. Most movements, including the movement to save trees in South Delhi, are located in between these two ideals, yet one may notice a shift in favour of ecocentrism. The challenge, however, is to figure out whether the principle of prudential self-interest guides our approach to environment protection today. If this assumption is true, ecocentrism would remain a moral homily, a fashionable political stance rather than a phase marking transformation in our approach to understanding human-environment interaction.

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