

Oliver Inchody
Saccidananda Ashram, M.P.

ECO-HARMONY : AN ANSWER TO ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Introduction

On the occasion of the World Day of Peace, January 1990, Pope John Paul II delivered a message on ecological ethics which may provide one of the first systematic treatments of the subject in pontifical teaching: "Peace with God and Creator, peace with all Creation"¹. Indeed the message starts by linking the issues of respect for nature and of harmony. "In our day, there is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life".

Yes, in olden days (pre-historic time), our ancestors witnessed a sort of perfect condiality of human beings with the natural world. The geographical configuration and its rich diversities were meticulously taken care of by man and "amity" would be the word with which we could term such a sense of togetherness. Nature provided all human needs readily and in sufficient quantity. There were no frequent cataclysm of nature as volcanic eruption and earthquakes. There was a certain regularity and rhythmic character in the occurrence of rainfall, of different seasons and of the beginning and end of the day. It was, perhaps, from this perfect harmony with nature the awe and respect originated which further culminated in worshipping the natural symbols.

Eco-harmony Vs Eco-crisis

According to this 'cosmotheandric vision'², the divine is not considered exterior to creation, but expresses itself through natural pheno-

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1. The message was actually presented to the press on 5 December and itself dated 8 December 1989.
 2. Cf. R. Panikkar, "Is History the measure of Man? Three kairological moments of Human Consciousness" in *The Teilhard Review*, 16 (1981), p. 40.

menon. The great forces of nature-the sky, the earth, the air, the water and the fire- as well as various orders of life including plants and trees, animals and forests, are all bound to each other within the great rhythms of nature. The chief characteristic of such a life style is "harmony"; harmony with nature, harmony with oneself and harmony with the divine. Since the cosmos is permeated with the divine, this mentality could not but perceive the nature as theocosm, the divinised universe. In a divinised cosmos, all expressions of nature were looked upon with awe; as a result co-existence was sought with all creatures including the vegetation.

But by the advent of reason and contemporary technologico-paneconomical ideology, man has torpedoed or rendered innocuous this old concept of 'harmony'. Thus the value based economy has overpowered the supreme ancient idea of co-existence. The man who lived in nature had been uprooted and was caged in history. It is this alienation from nature that has made him 'Man' and differentiated him from animals, for better or worse. As Edmund Tang opines:

There was a feeling that the universe vibrates with life. We, today, have become completely detached from this feeling. Rain puts us in a bad mood, we can no longer appreciate it. After our initial moment of admiration, snow becomes a nuisance. We are incapable of feeling or of listening to the wind.³

As a result the deep respect for all living things replaces the arrogant wish to eliminate and use other things for the purpose of security and the development of an artificial man-made world. The direct consequence of this 'man-centered' process is an 'eco-crisis', which is highly remarked by atomization and quantification.⁴

In such a mechanical world-view, the universe ceases to be a universe of the human community, or, as some call it a "humiverse".

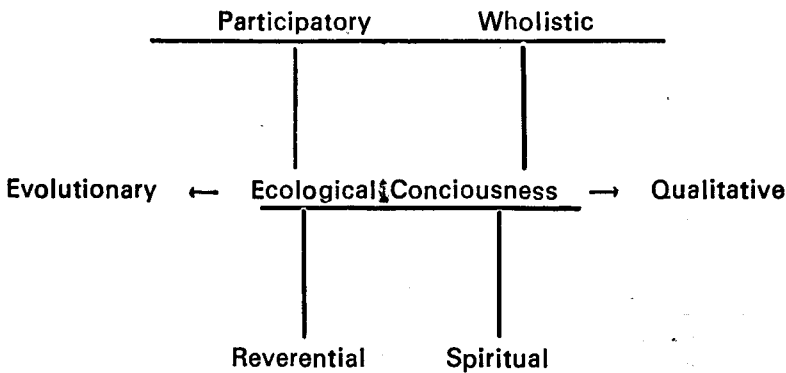
3. E. Tang, "What has religion to do with Ecology?" in *Pro Mundi Vita Studies*, No. 13 (February 1990), p. 17.

4. As we split everything into separate atoms, larger whole are disintegrated. Thus sense of wholeness is lost. But rather a sense of isolation, seperation, detachment, in brief, alienation, is emerged. Cf. H. Skolimowski, "Ecological Consciousness as the next stage of Evolution" in *The Teilhard Review*, 24 (Summer 1989), p. 40.

Thus any crisis in ecology affects nature: any manipulation to ecology will be a threat to the very biosphere itself; any insane movements against ecology will be also an attempt to desicrate the ecological consciousness. So situating the ecological crisis and articulating ecological concerns in such a world is of critical importance for the shaping up of ecological imperatives that are truly adequate, historically effective, wholesome, and credible. Thus the severity of the crisis people are faced with today invites the attention to undo an ecological imbalance. The sudden upsurge in ecological consciousness in some countries in the past and present decade, and the emergence of movements pledging to preserve and restore the wholeness of nature are the outcome of such an eco-sensitive mentality.

Ecological Consciousness and Eco-movements in India

Ecological consciousness, in its very radical way, is against the temper of the technological consciousness of today's age. It is a challenge thrown to the rationality of the mechanistic system. But at the same time, ecological consciousness emphasises economic equity and the irreducibility of large complex wholes to their underpinning components: ecological habits and human persons.⁵ Henryk Skolimowski enumerates six characteristics by which we can define the scope and nature of ecological consciousness. A diagrammatic presentation of those six would be through a mandala where all its characteristics are feeding into each other and feeding on each other; co-define each other.⁶



5. H. Skolimowski, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

As it is self-clear from the mandala, ecological consciousness reaffirms the wholeness and unity of it all, and reassures us that we are legitimate dwellers of the cosmos, not some kind of cosmic freaks. In this way, ecological consciousness is the synthesis as it marks a return to the spiritual without submitting to religious orthodoxies and the religious dogma; and as it seeks social amelioration and justice for all without worshipping physical power and without celebrating the aggressive nature of the human person.⁷

Coming to the ecological movements in Indian environments, significance have been launched by the non-elites: villagers, tribals, fisher people, etc., who became the victims of the utmost atrocities done to human habitat and as a result turned against such deharmonizing and inequitable tendencies. Thus they vowed to preserve and conserve the ecological consciousness in their life and the life outside. Their sensitivity to issues of economic equality and justice sets them to work as a committed group motivated by ecological consciousness. But their concern for human rights and freedom sets them apart from the mainstream of politics or other vested interested groups. They "seek to replace hierarchical domination of any kind with fully participative forms of a "humanity-in-nature," where freedom would no longer be placed in opposition to nature, individuality to social coherence"⁸.

We should single out in this context the 'Chipko' movement (chipko andolan). Chipko means hugging. Sunderlal Bahuguna organized this people's movement in 1973 to protest against the felling of trees at the Himalayan regions. Its philosophy is deeply rooted in the Indian culture and a practical programme to solve problems of pollution, population and poverty (3 Ps). Thus it is a movement which has its objective: the protection of trees from the rapacious economic interests by 'hugging' them.⁹

Similarly, 'appiko' movement also has been very effective against deforestation. Besides these, fishermen's struggle, movements against Teri dam, Narmada Valley project or the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP), silent valley project and organizations like 'Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad'

7. Ibid, p. 42.

8. Cf. Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, Cheshire Books (Palo Alto: 1982), p. 318.

9. S. Bahuguna, "What the trees mean to the Villagers" in *Yojana*, 29 (December 1982), pp. 7-8.

'Mitti Bachao Abhiyan' etc.,¹⁰ are some other examples of organizations that took up the issue of ecological consciousness. Waves of protest to vindicate the establishment of ecological balance and a 'whole' nature are observable in almost all these organizations. The main protagonists are the victims of exploitative ecological policies and practices. Visionaries like S. Bhahuguna, Medha Patkar and Baba Amte have emerged out of these.

The ecological movements, thus, try to resist 'raping' the earth. According to these activists, development of people is a comprehensive concept. It takes into account the whole person in relationship to his/her environment. Further it deals with the life in its fulness and not only in economic terms though important as it is. Thus the praxis of economical development demands the act of being in communion with nature. It changes ones attitudes from plundering, robbing, exploiting to a preserving, cherishing, protecting attitude for after all, one does not rob from his/her own home (OIKOS).

Indian context for the Notion of Eco-harmony

In the context of India, it is evident that this holistic approach to nature was tolerated and encouraged with full support. Man's attitude to nature is neither one of subjugation, nor one of dominion and exploitation, but one of 'harmony'. Every attitude and activity is governed by the universal law of 'dharma' which assigns to each one and to each reality its proper place and role in the totality. 'Lokasamgraha' or the maintenance of the world is a basic aim of life. Based on this line of thought, the Indian and Oriental traditions have developed a sense of harmony, i.e., a fellowship feeling which is to manifest itself in terms of 'karuna' (charity), 'maitri' (active good-doing) and 'daya' (compassion) towards all beings.¹¹

10. A detailed discussion on the various people's organizations and movements against environmental destruction is given by Anil Agarwal and Gabriele Dietrich.

Cf. A. Agarwal, "Ecological destruction and the Emerging pattern of poverty and people's protests in rural India" in *Social Action*, 35 (January-March 1985), pp. 54-80. Also see G. Dietrich, "Development, Ecology and Women's struggles" in *Social Action*, 35 (January-March 1985), pp. 1-4.

11. These principles are very much projected in many of the Indian and Oriental traditions, e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. Cf. Yvon Ambroise, "The Ecological Problem in India" in *Jeevadhara*, 18 (January 1988), p. 8.

The underlying principle behind this code of conduct is 'jīva,' the life element in the world. This 'jīva' is shared by humans, animals and plants and by higher orders of being. All life tends towards unity, thereby, creating a fellowship of all living beings. To separate or to objectify these elements is to demean the world, camouflaging its true nature.

The schemes of four 'purushārtās' or 'ends' of life, namely, 'dharma' (righteousness), 'artha' (wealth), 'kama' (pleasure), and 'moksha' (Liberation) and of the four 'ashrams' or stages of a "twice-born"-namely 'brahmachārin' (student), 'gṛahastha' (householder), 'vanaprastha' (forest dweller), and 'sannyāsin' (wandering ascetic), indicate an awareness that does not cut life off from the world and community. Similarly, the practice of 'panchayagna' or five sacrifices in which the householder is expected to make daily food-offerings to the gods, to the ancestors, to guests, to the animal world and to the self, manifests a universal concern.¹²

The Gīta develops this further with the idea of 'svadharma', one's own duty, specific to one's own context. 'Dharma' is expressed in ritual 'ṛta', in sacrifice ('yagna') and in righteous behaviour ('nīti'), which together keep the world in right order and harmony.

'Ahimsa' (non-violence) is yet another paradigm to preserve the wholeness of nature. Gandhiji who advocated 'ahimsa' also propagated a humanism that made Man, not the machine, the measure of life in the world. Thus together with 'ahimsa', he emphasized such principles as 'sarvodaya', trusteeship of all earthly goods in favour of the human community as a whole. Thus these Indian models propose a belief based on the partnership-cum-stewardship ethic which stands for holding of the land (including of its trees, rivers, mountains and minerals) and other species in trust for God and for the general benefit of mankind.

Conclusion

From the above exposition, it is enumerated that nature is a 'relational whole' with human persons, the natural environment and the 'divine'

12. M. Amaladoss, "Ecology and Culture: Some Indian Perspectives" in *Jeevadhara* 18 (January 1988), p. 52.

as its constituents. To preserve the wholeness of nature or to be at peace with the creation is a task. But quite often today's society passively and actively passes a silent 'yes' to the economic mentality. Anthony Gittens is also of this opinion. He Points:

... though we would not want to kill a bird or cut down a tree, we passively assist each day at mass executions of organisms and stand mute while mayhem is committed on the atmosphere. Modern technocracies feed on progress and are gluttons for energy; their ethics reflect this voraciousness and they rationalize or justify increasing entropy.¹³

In all these analysis, people see an anxiety of the ecoharmony being lost: an anxiety of the integrity of nature-man-spirit being washed out. In an emphatic cosmocentric understanding all the parts of God's body (nature-man-spirit) have rights, or rather claims of their own. What is distinctive of human beings is their duty, their 'dharma'. Thus the rights of the human and the 'dharma' of the cosmos intrinsically and inseparably bound together in the divine cosmic person of 'purusha'. Whenever the components of nature are dismantled, disintegrated and disregarded there comes out a silent cry from the nature, a plea to preserve its ecological consciousness. It is to this plea one has to be sensitive.

13. Cf. A.J. Gittens, "Ecology and World Poverty: A Christian Response" in *Spirituality Today*, 38 (Spring 1986), p. 22.

Here the author uses the word, 'entropy', which is used in thermodynamics and statistical mechanics, and communication theory to refer to the wastage of the matter and the energy of the universe; the general trend of the material universe towards disorder and death.