

Preservation of India's culture and environment

B. P. Radhakrishna

Environment science is the fashion of the day. Erstwhile geological departments in universities are getting converted overnight into schools of environmental studies and scholars are busy selecting research problems, imitating what is going on in western laboratories, forgetting that concern for the environment was the foundation on which Indian culture was fashioned.

Every devout Indian starts his daily routine with a prayer to mother Earth:

*Samudra vasané devi parvata stana
mandalé*

*Vishnu patni namastubhyam pāda-
sparsam kṣamasva mé*

(Ocean as your garment, mountains as
your breasts, O'consort of Vishnu,
forgive me for treading on you)

Our cultural heritage

How can such a reverent attitude be reconciled with our present indifference to the preservation of environment? Our Aryan ancestors living amidst sylvan surroundings and concerned about the preservation of the pristine purity of the environment prayed:

Madhu vātā rīyate

(let the wind waft pure air)

Madhu kṣaranti sindhavaḥ

(let rivers pour sweets to us)

Mādhwēernaḥ santvoṣadheeh

(let plants be nectar to us)

Madhu naktamutoṣasi

(sweet be the night and day)

Madhumat pāṛthivam rajah

(let the dust of the earth be sweet to us)

Madhu dyaurastu nah pitā

(sweet be our father in heaven)

Madhu mānno vanaspatiḥ

(may the trees be full of sweets)

Madhu mānastu Suryah

(let the Sun be gracious to us)

Madhvee gāvō bhavantu nah

(let our cattle provide sweets to us)

Rigveda 1-90

How noble are these thoughts and how much concerned about the preservation

of the environment our ancestors were! Gandhiji said:

'India is to me the dearest country in the world, not because it is my country but because, I have discovered the goodness in it... Everything in India attracts me. It has everything that a human being with the highest possible aspirations wants... Our civilization, our culture, our swaraj depend not upon our wants and indulgence, but upon restricting the wants, self-denial.'

We seem to have ignored this aspect of our cultural heritage and blindly adopted western ways of life based on consumerism, multiplicity of wants and self-indulgence in pursuit of pleasure. If such a life style is to be adopted by our country as a whole, our natural resources will be consumed in no time, generating in the process an incredible quantity of rubbish, which will defile our land, pollute our water and foul the air we breathe.

Wrong policies of Government

Knowing full well that an unchecked growth of vehicles on roads is the root cause of air and noise pollution, it is surprising that governments, instead of curbing the manufacture of vehicles, have gone out of the way to license more manufacturing units to produce even greater number of cars, trucks and scooters. Not satisfied with having done this they have also allowed liberal import of cars. No thought is bestowed upon improving the public transport system and reducing the number of vehicles on the road. Take another instance: sugar factories are the worst pollutants of surface water. Yet, more and more licenses are granted for new sugar factories. Rich agricultural land well suited for growing food grains is diverted to sugarcane cultivation, a crop which consumes vast quantities of water. In order to provide uninterrupted supply of water to sugar barons, major dams are constructed at enormous expense, uprooting many poor families in the process. There is no end to the evils that are perpetrated in the guise of ushering in economic prosperity.

India is a poor country most of whose people can ill afford to spend the little amount they have saved for buying gold. Yet, Government policies have allowed liberal imports of gold, tempting people to buy the glamorous yellow metal. No less than 25,000 crores of rupees which could otherwise have become available for investment is locked up every year.

India indeed was once a land of plenty with its mountains covered with luxuriant forests, and fertile land yielded the basic needs of its people. It received plenty of rainfall and was inhabited by hardy and industrious people. It was, to use the words of the poet: *sujalām, suphalām, malayaja śeetalām sasya syāmalām mātaram*. If such a land is today in shambles, its mountain slopes devastated, forest cover removed, its pure waters, not excluding even the sacred Ganga, converted into glorified sewers and the free air surrounding us poisoned with noxious gases, we only have ourselves and the modern ways we have adopted to blame ignoring the wisdom and teachings of our forefathers. Open spaces, land for a home, clean air to breathe and clean water to drink which are to be considered as our birthright have disappeared.

Need-based economy has been substituted by greed-based economy which has made the rich richer and the poor poorer. The country has not the means for cleaning the filth it has generated, mounds of which arrest the eye everywhere.

Adoption of conservation ethics

India had all along adopted a conservation ethic. It is only in recent years it has adopted a wasteful life style, consuming resources and raw materials in a reckless manner. Liberalization of consumer markets and introduction of buying through credit cards have led to an alarming growth in consumption of articles which we can easily forego. Swami Vivekananda said, not a long time ago:

'So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold educated man a

*Reproduced with permission from *J. Geol. Soc. India*, 1998, 52, 253-256.

traitor who, having been educated at their expense pays not the least heed to them'.

How many of our schools and colleges impart education aimed at emphasizing moral values and building up of character. There are any number of Institutes of Technology in the country but these have become our 'most generous gifts to the United States!' Every student after qualifying rushes to the gates of the American Embassy and stands there in queue from the early hours of the morning, facing many indignities, with the sole object of obtaining a visa. The land of opportunity and wealth attracts him like a magnet. His education has been such that he has developed no pride in his own country. A country which produced the sages of Rigveda, Vyasa and Valmiki, Buddha and Asoka and poets like Kalidasa and Bhartruhari does not inspire him. It is very likely, the modern products of the university system have not even heard of these names, let alone developed a sense of pride in their achievements. Universities of India's past at Taxila and Nalanda once attracted seekers of knowledge from all parts of the world and had developed the capability of imparting higher knowledge in arts and even sciences. Where has all that ability gone? Why this lethargy, lack of initiative and blind imitation of what others are doing propelling us in a wrong direction?

Deteriorating environment

What is the status of our country today. Most annoying power cuts, scarcity of even drinking water affecting large parts of the country, pollution of land, water and air, generation of tremendous din and dust, veritable chaos in traffic causing innumerable avoidable accidents, senseless devastation of forests, floods year after year affecting the same places and causing immense havoc, exploitation of minerals for the purpose of export and not for indigenous utilization, criminal wastage of water for irrigation, chaotic law and order situation where might is right, money and muscle power score

over justice and equity, delayed justice itself making a mockery of law and order – none of these evils appear to be matters of concern. The surprising part is that our scientific community too has turned a blind eye and has showed not the least concern, nor engaged itself in research activity aimed at finding remedies for the ills affecting the people. They are mostly concerned with producing papers and getting them published in international journals and seeking international recognition for themselves. Is it not time to give up this attitude, reactivate the thinking process and focus attention on finding solutions to the manifold problems affecting the country?

Scientists are remaining mute spectators watching helplessly the deterioration that has set in without questioning the wrong policies of Government. Is this because that a majority of them are servants of Government and dare not question lest their livelihood is seriously affected? The time has come for introspection and a reorientation in their outlook.

Develop pride in Indian culture

As Indians we have to develop pride in our own culture which has survived over thousands of years. Instead, lured by wealth of western nations and luxurious styles of living we have discarded our dress, manners, life styles and attitude to life. Families are broken. Elderly people are neglected and condemned to spend their life in solitude and misery. Science cannot remain divorced from ethics and moral values. The steep fall in our standards is because we have neglected cultivation of moral values. Unless we give attention to building up of character, no significant progress is possible.

Indian culture has given prominence to an ethical outlook on life. It has upheld *ahimsa* (non-injury), *satya* (truth), *akrodha* (freedom from anger), *tyāga* (renunciation), *śanti* (tranquility), *daya* (compassion), *aloluptvam* (freedom from covetousness), *mārdavam* (gentleness), *hrīh* (modesty), *tejah* (vigour), *kṣamā* (forgiveness), *śauca* (purity), *adroha*, *na atimāniā* (freedom from malice and excessive pride). While hunger, sleep, fear and sex are common

to men and animals it is the sense of right and wrong that distinguishes man from the rest of the animals. Indian culture, throughout the centuries had emphasized and upheld these virtues. It holds good all the time and for all people. It is this *Sanātana Dharma*, the moral law, which needs to be emphasized. It may be difficult to practise but should always be before us as ideals – as essential ingredients of human happiness.

National Science Summit

It is good to hear that the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan has decided to convene a National Science Summit to discuss how best our human and material resources should be exploited to achieve all round development. Green revolution and self-sufficiency in food became possible because scientists set a clear goal to achieve, and descended from their ivory towers and mingled with the farmers. If clear goals are set and adequate support provided by the State and the public, our scientists can be expected to find solutions provided they give up their imitative research and address themselves to finding solutions to the problems affecting the country. Technology developed should be truly indigenous. Anything borrowed and imposed from above is not likely to provide the desired result.

'The world today faces many technological, educational and social challenges, yet its fundamental problem is that of morality – personal morality, political morality, international morality. And at the heart of every moral problem is the question of intellectual honesty'.

–Cyril Bilby

If this basic fact is recognized, our educational and scientific programmes reoriented, progress is yet possible. Will the scientists of the country stem the rot and lead the way?

B. P. Radhakrishna is in Geological Society of India, Gavipuram, Bangalore 560 019, India.