

Understanding The Awareness And Concerns of Citizens Regarding Environment: A Sociological Study

Key words:- Environment Awareness, Consciousness about
Environment

The present paper tries to understand the basic awareness and concern of the people regarding environment. The paper takes into account two important variables, one, the awareness and concern regarding environment and second, the religion and its association with environment and environmental conservation.

Environmental concerns have emerged as one of the most popularly debated issues in public sphere and there has been a spectacular growth in public consciousness regarding environmental problems in India. It has slowly dawned on us that waste, pollution, congestion, land degradation, loss of biodiversity and the like are not isolated mishaps that time will cure but are, instead, by products of the way of living, population increase, and rise of consumerism in the modern era.

Environment, although a comprehensive term has more often than not, been treated in specific contexts. As stated earlier, the man equipped with tremendous sense of perception, seldom views environment as it is, he frames an opinion of his own depending on his capability to perceive, adapt to or transform it. In order to assess the understanding of environment after the Stockholm conference in 1972, almost all the developing countries including India have passed elaborate legislation against air water and soil pollution. Punishment for erring industrial concerns and units has also been provided. Pollution control departments have been set up in almost all the States of India. It is to be noted that more than two decades have passed since the government of India initiated a national programme for environmental protection with basic goals as protecting and conserving the environment; preventing the generation of pollutants that harm the health of people and damage the environment; protecting and conserving ecological and genetic diversity; identifying and protecting ecologically sensitive areas, and ensuring a better quality of life for its current and future generation by maintaining a healthy and safe environment. But these measures will not suffice until; the general body of the people believes that there is some inevitable danger to them as well as to future generation. Therefore the present study is an attempt to understand the concern and awareness of the individuals regarding environment protection and conservation.

II

The present study is a survey of two hundred Hindu households. The survey was administered in the rural and urban area of the

district Lucknow. An interview schedule was prepared for the study. One male and one female member of each household were taken into consideration. The sample was divided on the basis of sex, caste, education and habitation. On the basis of sex the sample is divided into male and female. The sample is divided into upper caste, backward caste and schedule caste on the variable of caste. The variable of education is divided into primary, secondary, higher and professional education. On the basis of habitation the sample is divided into urban and rural. Four hundred respondents were taken into consideration providing representation to each variable.

The field investigation was focused on two aspects. First, on the general awareness and concern of the respondents in terms of environmental protection and conservation and secondly, on the religious awareness and concern of the respondents in terms of environmental protection and conservation.

III

AWARENESS REGARDING ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION

The government of Indian has applied various measures and regulatory approaches to ensure the basic human health and safety. These include, the imposition of national standards for air, water and soil quality; the provision of institutional and infrastructural support for monitoring the compliance systems; the transfer of international technology; various research activities; the provision of grants and subsidies; the provision of grants and subsidies to industries so that they can clean up their production method and employ low-waste technology; the provision of public information and education; and encouragement of NGO activities. But environmental degradation continues to accelerate.

Through the interview schedule the first attempt was to discover the accessibility of the respondents to the word 'environment'. It was encouraging to see that 100% of the respondents, cutting all the boundaries viz. sex, caste, education and habitation gave a positive reply. It revealed that 'environment' is no more an alien word as it has entered the vocabulary of common man even in the third world including India. However, understanding for meaning of environment was found to be partial. Awareness regarding environmental pollution was very high among respondents of all the categories. The male respondents (94.0%) were more aware as compared to the female respondents (88.5%), no gross variation was observed among the respondents of different caste and educational categories. Since it is in urban areas that the greatest concentration of population, pollution, industrial and occupational hazards, traffic and hazardous wastes are found, it is hardly surprising that respondents with the urban background (98.31%) showed higher awareness regarding environmental pollution as compared to the respondents with the rural background (71.15%).

When it came to the question of individual sense of responsibility and the government's responsibility in checking environmental pollution it was found that responses for both were almost the same. In both the cases the male respondents showed higher positive response as compared to the female counterparts. However, caste showed no significant impact on the findings. The education here exhibited a

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moderate relationship which is in tune with the Western (Van Liere and Dunlop, 1982) as well as the Indian trend (Kumara, 1982).

It is generally believed that the urban residents are more environmentally aware than their rural counterparts. (Harry et al, 1969; Lowe et al., 1980). This relationship was substantiated in the present study as 70.90% of the respondents with urban background showed their individual sense of responsibility in checking the environmental pollution as compared to only 35.5% with rural background. Again 75.33% of respondents with the urban background as compared to 51.92% with the rural background wanted the government to play an important role in checking the environmental pollution. The reason may be assigned to the fact that in rural India there is less problem of environmental pollution as a result of which the awareness is less. Not only this literacy rate and the educational standard of the individuals is less in comparison to urban India.

Narayanan (1997) describes a dance performed by Usha Vananth Kumar and Sudha Vijayaraghavan titled Panacha Bootangal, the five Elements, that dramatically enacts humanity's greedy attack on the elements resulting in ecological havoc. According to him "With the growing awareness of our ecological plight, Hindu communities are pressing into us the many dharmic texts and injunctions, using epics and Puranas as inspiration in planting gardens, and reviving customary lore on the medical importance of trees and plants. Women, through song and dance, communicate the assaults on women and nature." The effectiveness of any religion in protecting the environment depends upon how much faith its followers have in its precepts and injunctions. Its values also depend upon how those precepts are transmitted and adapted in everyday social interactions. In the Hindu religion, growing plants and trees is considered a religious activity.

In the present study religion was considered as a valid reason behind tree plantation. Though, other motives were also given importance but to lesser extent. However, when it came to actual practice of growing plants and trees the results were not very encouraging. Thus, only 31.0% and 43.0% of the male and the female respondents respectively showed inclination towards tree plantation. In terms of caste maximum inclination was observed among the scheduled caste respondents. In terms of education maximum inclination was observed in medium educational group (41.98%). In reference to habitation respondents with rural background (56.73%) were more inclined towards tree plantation as compared to respondents with urban background. The respondents were found to be aware of the affects of cutting green trees and also showed high concern against felling green trees.

As far as participation in environmental awareness programmes and rallies was concerned it was found low in respondents of all the categories viz. sex, caste, education and habitation. Awareness regarding concepts like sustainable development, ozone layer depletion, green house effect, recycling of waste products was found to be low in the respondents. In the male respondents awareness was higher as compared to the female respondents. The variable of caste and habitation expressed no consonance in this regard. However, education did play a major role in the awareness regarding these issues; it was observed that environmental awareness was more at the higher levels of education.

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This is supported by the studies of Hendee et al., 1968; Harry, 1971; Van Liere and Dunlop, 1980; Lowe et al., 1980.

The overall assessment in terms of general awareness and concern in terms of environmental protection and conservation suggests that the male respondents had higher level of awareness as compared to the female respondents. No study in terms of sex based analysis of environmental awareness and concern could be available to the researcher to support or negate this result.

Studies in terms of relationship between caste and environmental awareness and concern are nearly absent in India. Though the Western studies emphasize the racial differences in environmental awareness and concern (Higgins, 1994). In the present study caste as such showed no significant relationship with environmental awareness and concern. This could be explained in the light of the traditional principle of 'purity and pollution' (pollution in religious as well as in the hygienic sense) associated with the Indian caste system (Dube, 1970). However, due to the process of secularization, westernization and sanskritization (Srinivas, 1962) the ideas regarding purity-pollution has highly weakened over time.

IV

RELIGIOUS VALUE AND THE AWARENESS REGARDING ENVIRONMENT

Religion provides certain fundamental guidelines to help human beings cope in a technological society. First, it defends the individuals' existence against the depersonalizing effects of industrialization process. Second, it forces the individual to recognize human fallibility and to combine realism with idealism. Third, while technology gives the individual the physical power to create or to destroy the nature, religion gives the moral strength to grow in virtue by nurturing restraint and liberation from self-centeredness. Religion directly and indirectly, can be a powerful source for environmental conservation and protection.

India has the tradition of worshipping planets, trees, birds, animals, rivers, mountains and planets. According to Tagore, the distinctiveness of Indian culture consists of its having defined life in the forest as the highest form of cultural evolution. In the shift from traditional society to modern orientation, developmental processes in India have neglected traditional reverence for almost every aspect of nature. Such respect and acceptance of the presence of God in nature is required of Hindus in order to protect and maintain the natural harmonious relationship between human beings and nature.

Recent surveys indicate that the vast majority of Indians believe in God and themselves to be religious (Madhu Jain, 1998). This feeling of religiosity on the part of Indians can be helpful in inculcating a feeling of love and care for the natural environment. When the respondents were questioned regarding the role of religion (fasts, festivals, havan, worship of nature in term of plants, animals birds etc.) environmental protection and conservation, the results were mostly positive.

A majority of the respondents particularly female were more aware of the religious importance of plants, animals, birds, rivers and planets. Further the respondents also gave a list of trees, birds, animals, rivers and planets of religious importance. The respondents also provided a list of fasts and festivals related to trees, birds, animals, rivers

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and planets. This suggests that the conservation of nature in terms of Merton's (1968) functional theory is 'latent function' of the religion. The different aspects nature like trees, animals, birds, rivers, mountains and planets in the socio-cultural life of the Indians have been provided a sacred status. Not only this, anyone violating the order of nature or the sacredness of the environment is liable to be punished in present life or in the future life as Indians believe in the theory of karma and rebirth. This sanction imposed in order to maintain the sacredness which particularly aims at protecting the nature for future generation is in harmony with the concept of 'sustainable development', which emphasizes on development that meets the needs of present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

In terms of the motive behind the observance of fast and festivals, the respondents were motivated by different reasons. A substantial percentage of female (60%) in comparison to male (21%) preferred the religious and cultural factors. Sixty six percent (66%) of the male in comparison to female (25.5%) preferred social obligation and pressure as a factor which motivated them for the observance of fast and festivals. This clearly suggests that female were more religious and carry the tradition of society. The distinction in motive was seen in the actual practice also. As 85% of the female in comparison to 52.5% of the male observed these fasts and festivals. In terms of the aims of havan and the observance of havan, the female respondents were more motivated by the fact that religious obligations are fulfilled in comparison to male. The respondents overwhelmingly accepted the fact that the Indian epics and traditional ecological knowledge convey message regarding environmental protection and conservation.

V

The overall assessment of the religious awareness and concern of respondents revealed that the female respondents were more aware as compared to the male respondents. Across the different category of castes and education the awareness and observance did not show any linear effect. The respondents with rural exposure had higher awareness regarding association between religion and nature and its role in environmental protection and conservation. The environmental problems require a holistic approach. One thing must also be realized that environmental problems affect everyone in one way or another; hence all people have a responsibility to protect the environment. The right to a healthy environment is an obligation as well as a responsibility of every individual.

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