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ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND GANDHIAN APPROACH

You have learnt about the basic concepts of environment and the environmental issues. You have also learnt about the need for conservation and management of natural resources. The earth is one, but the world is not. We all depend on one biosphere for sustaining our lives. Yet each community, each country, strives for survival and prosperity with little regard for its impact on others. It is our fundamental duty to make this planet earth a decent habitable place. The challenge of living in harmony with the earth is as old as human society itself. Environmental ethics relates to our obligations and responsibilities towards nature. For an equitable share we must have equal responsibilities. In this lesson you shall learn about environmental ethics, our responsibilities towards environment and the Gandhian approach to environmental protection.



OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- *define ethics and explain the importance of environmental ethics;*
- *list the approaches to environmental ethics;*
- *develop a sense of respect for all life on earth;*
- *focus on the need for creating awareness of the environment in children as through nature study;*
- *recall the traditions of harmonious living with nature and correlate religious beliefs and traditional practices of conservation of nature as a whole;*
- *highlight and create awareness about traditional festivals, arts, crafts and ecofriendly techniques, explain how social customs, traditions, beliefs and values influences environment and are in turn influenced by it;*

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- *describe various movements of conservation and public participation and emphasize the need for public participation in decision making and natural resource conservation;*
- *convince regarding the need for corporate environmental ethics;*
- *outline Gandhian thoughts and their relevance to the current concern for environment conservation.*

26.1 WHAT IS MEANT BY “ETHICS”

Ethics is a branch of philosophy. It deals with morals and values. An ethics is a principle that we use to decide whether an action is good or bad, right or wrong. Being ethical leads to right conduct and good life that is a life worth living.

But one must remember that each one owes some responsibility towards the environment which provides not only food and other materials but also satisfies aesthetic needs of humans comforts.

26.2 ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

Environmental ethics is that part of philosophy which considers the **ethical relationship between human beings and natural environment.**

As already pointed out that it is necessary that humans must learn to live in harmony with nature. You have learnt in earlier lessons that an equilibrium is maintained in natural ecosystems between different components through various processes including assimilation and recycling. But over exploitation of resources by growing human population has upset the natural balance. The use of technology and economic growth have led to ecological problems. The economic progress has been achieved at an enormous cost to the environment as manifested by growing pollution, loss of biodiversity and critical shortage of basic resources. The role of ethics becomes important, therefore, as it helps to assess strengths and weaknesses of a developmental activities such as deforestation, building a dam, mining, draining a wetland etc. There are many ethical decisions that humans need to make with respect to the environment. For example, should one continue to cut forests? How long increasing use of fossil fuel can continue? Do humans have the right to cause extinction of other species? What environmental obligations do we have for maintaining a healthy environment for future generations?

**Notes****Box -1**

In the present day context, there are many issues that need serious thinking:-

As urbanization is increasing, so also the need for water, this in turn leads to drawing of ground water. Over exploitation of sub-soil water has led to rapid decline in the level of water table, and if this continues for long, soon many areas would become a desert. The question is that are human needs more important or is it necessary to protect the environment. Recently the Supreme Court has banned construction and boring of new tubewells in the Aravalli region of Faridabad (Haryana) in adjoining Delhi. Hopefully, these measures may prevent rapidly depletion of vegetation and ground water in the area.

Box - 2

Industrial waste, both solid and liquid are usually dumped indiscriminately into the surrounding land and water bodies. Is it ethical to throw the waste outside ones' boundary? Can any industry afford not to be insensitive to the environment? Are the birds, animals, plants, soil and water quality not important to an entrepreneur or should he/she only be concerned about his/her profits?

Environmental ethics is the guiding force that should make every human care for their surroundings.

Environmental ethics exerts influence on a large range of disciplines including law, sociology, theology, economics, ecology and geography. It makes us think on several issues such as are humans more important than wildlife? Do animals have rights? What responsibility do we have towards non-human world? Such questions are the pressing issues of environmental ethics.

26.3 APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

All ethics so far evolved rest on a single premise, that the individual is a member of community of interdependent components. Human instincts prompt to compete for the place in that community but ethics prompt humans to also cooperate.

There are basically **three** approaches to environmental ethics. One view is that humans are the dominant and important species on the planet earth. That gives them the power to manipulate and use nature for their own benefit. This view is "human centred" and thus it is called **anthropocentric**.

A second human centred view is that humans have the ethical responsibility towards future generations of human beings so humans are the 'stewards or caring managers' who must leave earth in a good condition for future generations. The critics of anthropocentric view point talk of human ignorance. They feel, humans yet do not know how many species live

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on the earth, how they interact with the environment and with each other. Environmental wisdom talks of total dependence of humans on nature and the nature is for all species. This is **life centric** or **biocentric** approach.

An extension of the above view seeks respect for all life and demands reverence towards the entire environment. Such a non-anthropocentric approach that talks of ethical responsibility towards other species and even ecosystems is also called **ecocentric**. According to this view point, it becomes compulsory to save the planet. The basic fact is that humans cannot erode the planet completely, but it can destroy us entirely. It is our basic necessity to protect the environment so that we can ensure our survival, and prevent ourselves from perishing.

Therefore it can be said that everything in nature and all natural systems have intrinsic value. If mankind has to survive, the environment needs to be protected.

26.4 RESPECT FOR ALL LIFE ON EARTH

In order to survive on this planet in a sustainable manner, one must remember the following:

- All we need for our survival and consume comes from nature.
- We know very little about planet earth.
- Humans are dependent on other organisms for survival, hence they have a responsibility towards them.

The earth is our home and home for all other living beings too. We need to remember the age old adage “live and let live”. We are duty bound to defend our planet from any harm and if it is wounded we have to assist in its recovery.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 26.1

1. Define (i) ethics (ii) environmental ethics

2. Name the approaches to environmental ethics.

3. State one justification for environmental ethics.

26.5 TRADITIONS OF HARMONIOUS LIVING WITH NATURE

Indian philosophy aims not only at the well being of all humans but also of all beings. The Sanskrit verse: “**Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah Sarve Santu Nirmayah**”

**Notes**

Refers to “**May all be sinless and may all experience happiness.**”

The Vedas, Mahabharata and Ramayana all chant praises about cosmic harmony and environmental protection. These Indian systems respect not only humans but also care about welfare of other beings.

Nature and environment were given importance from Rigvedic period onwards. Verse states- “the sky is like a father, the earth like a mother and space like their son”. The universe is a family of three if any damage occurs to one-the universe goes off balance.

In many of our states, new year begins and is celebrated with the harvesting of the rabi crops in the month of April. Baisakhi in Punjab, Nabo Barsho in Bengal, Tamil and Telugu new year of Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh are few examples. In Kerala Vishu Kini is celebrated at this time when folks arrange and decorate small mounds of grains, vegetables and fruits and consider it auspicious to see them on the morning of first day of the festival.

Indian festivals, traditional art and crafts also can be looked into from the viewpoint of environmental ethics. Worship of plants and animals has long been known in India.

Box - 1

Colours from tesu (flame of the forest) flowers, pomegranate peel, turmeric are used as sources of different colours, earthen lamps, vegetable oil and cotton wicks are used for decorating homes during special occasions. Special food items are prepared at some festivities to highlight the importance of different plants and plant products that laddoo made from Amaranthus (ramdana or chaulai) are eaten .

Box -2

In various parts of the country, people worship various animals and plants. A large number of Hindu Gods have a “Vahana” i.e. vehicle that they ride. The goddess of wealth Lakshi rides an owl, Durga is astride a tiger and Saraswati sits on a swan expresses collaboration between human and gods. Plants like tulsi, banyan and banana, coconut fruit are worshipped; turmeric is used in rituals considered auspicious associated with Hindu, Islamic and Buddhist cultures. Clumps of trees (ranging from bamboo in eastern Himalayas to forest in Himachal Pradesh) or a portion of the forest is considered as the place where gods or spirits of ancestors reside. Thus they are left undisturbed and the area is considered ‘sacred grove’. The sanctity of the area ensures that the flora and fauna flourish and biodiversity is maintained. In India, the Bishnois of Rajasthan have sacrificed their lives to protect sacred ‘khejdi’ trees.

It is recorded that some sacred groves have water bodies within their boundaries. Hunting, logging etc. is prohibited and these areas are preserved for generations. They represent native vegetation in natural or near natural state. In the Himalayas Sherpas considered certain mountains as sacred and do not climb into them (for conquering peaks during expeditions)

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Box – 3

Approximately 13,720 sacred groves are known to exist in India. Cutting of plants and killing of animals is prohibited through social traditions and taboos. Dead wood collection, honey gathering is allowed. Many such groves are found around shrines, monasteries and burial grounds in the various parts of the country.

26.6 INCULCATING ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

It is common knowledge that we acquire habits and attitudes in our childhood. The values inculcated during childhood stay life long. Therefore, it is extremely important to inculcate respect for the environment in every child. If children are exposed to live issues, they understand and try to resolve them when they grow up to be administrators, policy makers, teachers, home-makers or politicians.

In the school curriculum activities such as (i) growing plants and taking care of them (ii) visits to national parks and sanctuaries (iii) creating stories/ poems/ plays on nature conservation, should be included. Tree plantations for ‘greening schools’ and its neighbourhood, weeding lawns, making attractive posters and messages related to environment should become competitive events every year for various classes.

Nature study should inculcate in the children love for living beings and urge for maintaining the surroundings.

The ‘land ethic’ is an idea that should be created in every citizen’s mind. According to this, each person is a citizen of the land and thus responsible for its “health”. Health is the capacity of land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 26.2

1. Why must children be made aware of environmental ethics?

2. State two traditions which express life in harmony with environment.

3. What is a ‘sacred grove’?



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26.7 CONSERVATION MOVEMENT AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

- Government alone cannot take up the burden of creating awareness and ensuring a clean environment. There is a need for public participation at every step. If the common man is aware of what is going on at the local and national level, thus surely decision-making by the authorities can be influenced.
- The Silent Valley project in the Western Ghats was abandoned due to protests environmental activists and by public representation. It helped to save the rain forests of that area which is one of the hot spot of biodiversity in the world.
- You have already learnt that the Bishnois of Rajasthan had once upon a time laid down their lives to protect the local Khejdi trees (*Prosopis spicigera*)
- A noted environmental activist and lawyer M.C. Mehta filed a public interest litigation (PIL) against the Union, Government of India. His interest was to protect India's Taj Mahal from the effluents of the Mathura refinery. This landmark case created awareness about the right of every citizen to clear air, water and land. It also opened the doors for many other PILs and the judgement given by the court.
- Some such cases are those that caused the shifting of polluting industries from Delhi and NCR (National Capital Region); the compulsory use of CNG (Compressed Natural Gas) for buses in Delhi and NCR the use of the campaign, 'Green Fuel Clean Fuel' led to the use of unleaded petrol for cars in Delhi (first time in India). Also these show that awareness or activism by individuals public organizations, NGOs etc. can definitely lead to a cleaner environment.
- The agitation against dams is a controversial issue, and the Narmada Bachao Andolan has been very actively pursuing the case of the Narmada Dam oustees (people displaced due to construction of the dam). Similar instance have arisen over the Tehri Dam.

Awareness in public domain also leads to positive and fruitful cooperation between the government and people of the area. Joint forest management practices have participation of the official machinery and local inhabitants in forest conservation, afforestation, wild life management and also other natural resources.

26.8 CORPORATE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Ethics is also necessary in business management. One of the important lesson learnt during the past century is that the economy and environment are dependent on each other. A clean environment is now taken as one of the basic social responsibilities of the corporate world. The industry produces a large amount of waste products and disposal of waste or lowering of pollution levels has a cost. The cost of controlling waste determines a company's profit margins. This is why it is cheaper to dump wastes into river than to install a waste water treatment facility; it is cheaper to release waste in the air than to trap them in filters. Such pollution is unethical and immoral, but the corporate world may adopt such practices

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to cut costs and make profits. However such decisions are based on short term profitability rather than long term benefit to society.

Recent environmental movements have moved the business community towards environmental ethics. Industrial houses have now become interested in efficient, green and clean technology. The use of solar cars and technology with low carbon foot prints.

In some of the metropolitan cities, corporate houses have taken charge of developing and maintaining green patches and “gardens” to act as the “lungs” of the city. Corporate houses also sponsor prizes for competitions of school going children and college going youth on themes and topics of the environment.

Above all EIA (Environment Impact Assessment) has enforced the environmentally ethical operations of all new business projects.

Many public participation functions or movements now follow and endorse eco-friendly practices e.g. an NGO in Pune (Nirmalaya) makes compost out of flowers offered at Ganesh Chaturthi and offers it to the earth.

Many Durga Puja committees have re-discovered traditional organic paints and other techniques to avoid using toxic plastic paints and non-biodegradable material for making idols and for decorations at the puja venue

(Also read box 19.1 of lesson 19 on Concept of Sustainable Development.)



INTEXT QUESTIONS 26.3

1. Give an example of PIL which led to taking steps against environmental pollution.

2. What is meant by corporate environmental ethics?

3. State one ethical step taken by business houses in honour of the environment.

26.9 GANDHIAN THOUGHT AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO CURRENT CONCERNS FOR ENVIRONMENT CONSERVATION OR GANDHIAN LEGACY

The life and work of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) have had a considerable influence on the environmental movement in India. Mahatma Gandhi has been acknowledged as the ‘patron saint’ of the Indian environmental movement. Environmental activists have



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relied heavily on Gandhian thought of non-violent protest or satyagrah and have drawn heavily on Gandhian philosophy against heavy industry which may displace or crush the poor and downtrodden.

The chipko movement (Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunder Lal Bahuguna), Baba Amte and Medha Patkar (Narmada Bachao Andolan) all derived inspiration from Gandhi. Other groups like Sulabh International that work for uplifting of Harijans and sweepers, who once lifted night soil were also inspired by Gandhian thought. Gandhi was indeed an “early environmentalist” who anticipated the environmental crisis of the modern industrial society. His writings in ‘Hind Swaraj’ published in 1909 explained how the current mode of development is “exploitative of man by man and of nature by man”.

The Gandhian emphasis on frugality and simple life does not mean that environmental ethics is contradictory to pleasure. However, it is to be understood that there is no pleasure in wasteful consumption. Pleasures come from living in harmony with each other and with nature. Pleasures should not be based on exploitation of creatures. It should not harm the earth, but it should come from creative work and activity and cooperation. Environmental ethics also teaches us to appreciate the harmony in nature and its bounties.

Environmental considerations must form an integral part of all planning for India’s growth and development, last but not the least, let us not forget what Gandhiji said:

“Mother Nature has enough for our needs but not enough for our greed.”



INTEXT QUESTIONS 26.4

1. Who are the founder of Chipko movement?

2. What type of work does Shulubh International?

3. Why Gandhiji was known as early environmentalist?

4. What was the main slogan of Gandhiji?



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- The planet earth is the only habitable space for humans.

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- An ethics is a principle that we use to decide whether an action is good or bad, right or wrong. It is branch of philosophy which deals with morals and values.
- Environmental ethics is the part of philosophy which considers the ethical relationship between human beings and natural environment.
- We must learn to respect nature, all living creatures and remember that our resources are finite.
- Nature and environment were given importance from Rigvedic period onwards.
- Traditional practices have been environment friendly.
- Activities such as growing plants, visits of national parks and sanctuaries, creating stories or poems or plays on nature should be included in school curriculum.
- Modern day indiscriminate use of resources and increasing pollution loads have led to dangerous results thus the need to inculcate environmental ethics.
- Gandhian philosophy promotes the concept to co-existence with nature.



TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. What is meant by environmental ethics?
2. What are the approaches to environmental ethics?
3. Why is it necessary to have environmental ethics?
4. With the help of a suitable example, explain how the concept of environmental ethics as promoted in Indian Scriptures.
5. What is meant by “sacred groves”?
6. It is necessary to make children aware of environmental issues. Why?
7. In what ways can business houses practice environmental ethics.
8. What is meant by Gandhiji's statement, “Mother nature has enough for our needs but not enough for our greed”.
9. Relate three traditional practices as examples of environmental ethics.
10. Collect material to write notes on -
 - (i) Chipko movement.
 - (ii) Narmada Bachao andolan highlighting the environmentally unethical moves and the protests against them.



ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS



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26.1

1. (i) It is a branch of philosophy. It deals with morals and values.
(ii) Environmental ethics is at the part of philosophy which considers the ethical relationship between human beings and natural environment.
2. Anthropocentric, eccentric, biocentric or life centric.
3. If mankind has to survive, the environment needs to be protected.

26.2

1. Because they should acquire habits and attitudes in their childhood. It is necessary to inculcate the respect for the environment in the beginning.
2. Respects to nature; respect to plants and animals.
3. An area ensures that the flora and fauna flourish and biodiversity is maintained. These areas are preserved for generations.

26.3

1. M.C. Mehta file a PIL for protection of Taj Mahal from the effluents of the Mathura refinery.
2. To provide a clean environment to the nation is the basic responsibility of corporate world.
3. Use of green and clean technology, development of green patches and gardens (any one)

26.4

1. Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunder Lal Bahauguna
2. For uplifting of Harijins and sweepers who once lifted night soil where also inspired by Gandhian thought.
3. He anticipated the environmental crisis of the modern industrial society.
4. Mother Nature has enough for our needs but not enough for our greeds.