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Ethical Environmental Governance In Sikkim

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Abstract

Environmental governance has been at the heart of socio-economic and political development strategies, whether due to benevolence for nature or to ensure human survival. Green policies legislated and green governance manifested as a management strategy and ethics as a foundation for analysis should aid in addressing the anthropogenic connection and issues of the environment and help pursue sustainable development in the context of Sikkim. Instilling ethical standards to mitigate environmental issues, various government-led initiatives and community-led practices have emerged to aid environmental governance.

Keywords: Environmental ethics, governance, local initiatives, Sikkim

1. INTRODUCTION:

The changing nature of human-environment interaction has called for a need to make environmental studies concerned with more than just the impact of environmental degradation on humans and their survival. New perspectives to give a deeper essence to the paradigm have arisen with ideas of Ecocriticism through Romanticism which was termed 'Romantic Ecology'; hence focusing on the ethical rationale behind the protection of the environment.

Ramachandra Guha has also acknowledged the influence of Romanticism on environmentalism and has studied the emergence of environmentalism in different regions of the world (Guha 2000,2014). Various literature on environmentalism explains the exploitation of nature by humans and its impact on human security, and some call for looking into the values concerning the exploitation and the mitigation of environmental issues. Environmental ethics or philosophy is one such approach that proposes to understand activities concerning the environment by emphasizing values and norms.

2. WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS?

Environmental ethics is concerned with the philosophy of the environment and like many other branches of environmental studies; it dwells on asserting the idea that environmental issues go beyond affecting humans only. It concerns values and norms relating to a 'good life' that protecting the environment would give, rather than emphasizing environmental issues through the lenses of politics and economics. Environmental ethics seeks to study the environment through values or virtues; so, is the environment instrumental, intrinsic, or extrinsic? Where instrumental values refer to the environment being a means to an end; intrinsic value refers to the environment having value beyond being a human resource and extrinsic value refers to the

environment having both intrinsic and instrumental values. Environmental ethics believes the environment to have value in its own right and is non-instrumental (Palmer, McShane and Sandler 2014).

An environment-development debate has been at the heart of environmentalism, especially in developing countries. This has been so because, on the path of development, the values of the flora and fauna inhabiting it have been said to be compromised. The emphasis on 'economic development' has challenged and negated the values of the society. Environmental ethics is founded on the idea of social justice issues emerging out of environmental issues. Is considering ethics detrimental to economic development? The proposition of virtues by Mahatma Gandhi, who considered "dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good" is countered by Lord Keynes's idea of economic possibilities; Keynesian philosophy tends to ignore the ethical aspect of the road to development; which considers ethical considerations to be hindrances and follows 'for foul is useful and fair is not'. Despite this being mentioned, Keynes still acknowledges that there are repercussions of economic activities that go beyond economic benefits, 'avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still', admonished us not to 'overestimate the importance of the economic problem or sacrifice to its supposed necessities other matter matters of greater and more permanent significance' (Schumacher 2011).

Ethics refers to doing what is right, but it generally depends on the rules of the organization, and may not be morally correct. So, does it incorporate principles like fairness, equality, equity, justice? What is 'fair'? Does economic development include welfare, fairness, and justice? The economy is linked to the market, which is linked to price, and as a result, the purity of the activity is compromised. In characterizing the modern world, Schumacher argues that in markets, all things are treated equally, that it is an institution that incorporates boundless bargain hunting, and that it lacks any qualitative feature such as ethics. Schumacher quotes Professor E.H. Phelps Brown, and his Presidential Address to the Royal Economic Society on 'The Underdevelopment of Economics' (1973) "the smallness of the contribution that the most conspicuous developments of economics in the last quarter of a century have made to the solution of the most pressing problems of the times"- one of the problems he recognized was 'checking the adverse effects on the environment and the quality of life of industrialism, population growth, and urbanism' (2011, 32).

Schumacher emphasizes the Buddhist ideology of nonviolence, acting on need rather than greed, and resource utilization; various aspects of modern economics are emphasized, and against it is placed the concept of Buddhist economics, which would at the very least help analyze the impact of modern economics on the environment, if not bring about a total resolution of environmental degradation due to economic activities. One difference between Buddhist economics and Modern economics as asserted is regarding consumption; where Buddhist economics would consider consumption a mere means to human well-being, and it would aim to obtain maximum well-being with the minimum of consumption; modern economics would consider consumption as the ultimate end and purpose of all economic activity. Buddhist economics tends to look at the larger picture of the interaction of man with the environment and not just man utilizing the resources of the environment for selfish needs.

Eco-Buddhism also termed as Green Buddhism is said to have been influenced by transcendentalism and romanticism. The concept of Eco-Buddhism has two points of view; one which does not consider nature as having intrinsic value and that it exists for human well-being; and second the ethical and the romantic view, which does in ways consider the environment to have an 'intrinsic value'. The first thought advocated that early Buddhism was not concerned about the preservation of the environment/nature because 'nature' or the natural world was a place of 'suffer, decay, death, and impermanence' (Holder 2007). Though, early Buddhist texts have not emphasized the intrinsic value of nature, nor have there been any mention of the human and nature relationship; what has however been emphasized is that human beings are inseparable from nature, and the latter forms a means by which human beings live. Yet, the values and teachings of Buddhism have been imbibed in environmental activism for the messages of nonviolence, love, and respect for animals and nature, and no harm to be instilled in life which is manifested through nature, especially in developing countries where nature is interconnected to culture, religion, economics, politics, etc (Yangtso 2019).

Eco-Buddhism is also at times seen to exhibit ideas of 'deep ecology', an environmental activity that calls for a 'total revolution in [human] consciousness' in such a way '... that understanding of our integration into the natural world, respect for the right of all beings to life, and profound awareness of interdependence' are encouraged to manifest (Harris 1995).

The term 'deep ecology' was originally coined by Arne Naess, a Norwegian Philosophy Professor. This concept has also been emphasized as one element of ecologism by Andrew Heywood. It was introduced in the 1970s. Naess believed that every strand of environmentalism or environmental study would have to involve deep ecology. Deep ecology is a concept that tends to look at nature and its conservation beyond that of its usefulness to humans and their well-being; it looks at the intrinsic value of the environment (2014) and Naess also mentions that any conservation strategy of the environment ought to look at its validity rather than just its instrumental value; that is conservation of nature should come out of love and concern for nature and not just as an important resource for human benefit or usefulness. Explaining the same, Naess provides eight (8) principles of deep ecology; these are:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves- intrinsic value, and this has no connection to its usefulness to human purpose.
2. Richness and diversity of life-forms contribute to the relation of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Human beings have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
5. Current human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect the basic economic, technological and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present state of affairs.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly high standard of living.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes. It is this principle that highlights the importance of deep questioning as the process by which to follow/develop/enact the other principles (Naess n.d).

Though deep ecology is a non-anthropocentric approach, Naess believed that inculcating its principles during policy-making would benefit since any policy on the environment would impact humans in the long run.

One element of environmental ethics is social justice; environmentalists in different parts of the world have come to question justice of some form or the other. Where social justice in developed and developing countries may differ; in the end, they all seek to address the problems of sharing benefits and burdens in the society. Environmental Ethics as such is the ethical reflection of the relationship of humans with the nonhuman world. Environmental Ethics connects the philosophy of the environment to the 'intrinsic value' of the environment which is connected to environmental justice and sustainability; and the human and nonhuman values, which relate to 'holistic values' connecting it to other species of animals. As Environmental Ethics arose in the 1970s, two contrasting traditions have been identified with the ethical questions which are; ecofeminism and eco-pragmatism (2014, 433,434).

Environmental ethics concerns itself with the right and wrong treatment of the environment which goes beyond the impact on human lives and interests. It seeks to add philosophy to studying the environment and is considered to be applied ethics or applying philosophy to environmental problems. To change the outlook on the environment, Richard Routley in 1973 at the World Congress of Philosophy in Bulgaria gave affirmation to the need for a new approach to the study of the environment. The paper was titled "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" He stressed moving away from the traditional notion that human interest is at the center of all activities; he did not justify the exploitation of nature for human interests (Attfield 2018).

It is imperative to emphasize the intrinsic value of the environment from the point of view of the ecological crisis in cognizance today. This crisis has translated into various conflicts one of which is social conflict. As mentioned earlier, environmentalism addresses issues of socio-economic justice, there is also a recognition that a serious ecological crisis has culminated in increasing social conflict. In India, such social conflicts which are localized within villages or in particular regions have contributed to environmental movements; and the impetus given to such movements has been credited to the voice of the environmentalists for creating and spreading awareness about the deteriorating condition of the environment in India (Gadgil and Guha 2005).

2.1 Environmental Ethics in India:

For the West, environmentalism was about enhancing and maintaining the quality of life; for the Third World and developing countries, it was for survival. The latter is known as the Southern viewpoint. Environmentalism for the sake of sustainability or natural resource protection has been deemed anthropocentric, that is, it is centered on humans. Environmentalism in India, or the third-world countries has been tagged as Environmentalism of the Poor (2000,2014). In these regions environmentalism is connected to different forms of social justice, here environment has affinities to tradition, culture, and livelihood and considers values and norms as an intrinsic part of politics and governance.

The environmentalism of the poor relies on traditional networks and protests that are non-violent, for instance, Gandhian Satyagraha. Gandhian methods of protest during the freedom struggle have been applied to environmental movements in different parts of the country and also in Sikkim. Gandhian philosophy was directed to search for a framework of concepts and values that would establish systems for mitigating global environmental crises. Different values advocated by Gandhian Philosophy of environmentalism have different influencers, for instance, the concept of love and peace for solving different problems of the world is said to be taken from Leo Tolstoy; Henry Thoreau's ideas of civil disobedience are seen to be the factor behind Gandhi's nonviolent protests; Gandhi's criticism of industrialization is seen to have been influenced by Ruskin who believed that industrialization has destroyed the harmonious man-nature relationship (Nepal 2011).

Environmental activism has witnessed the adoption of Gandhian principles to highlight the socio-economic impact of development projects in India. Mulshi Satyagraha was initiated against dams being constructed on the Western Ghats, the Hirakud dam of 1946 in Orissa, and Tehri dam which saw the likes of Sunderlal Bahuguna of the Chipko movement; also, anti-dam protests of Narmada Bachao Andolan, a protest against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam which went on to influence the protest against the construction of dams in the state of Sikkim have to a great extent applied the Gandhian method of protests. In the book Hind Swaraj published in 1909, Mahatma Gandhi mentioned that 'the current mode of development is exploitative of man by man and of Nature by man'. Though he did not outrightly reject the industrialization of India by providing an alternative model of development, Gandhi denied it on moral grounds- namely the selfishness and competitiveness of modern society which was detrimental to the environment. Gandhian philosophy has been considered to be based on morality and ethics, whether he was a true environmentalist cannot be confirmed but one environmental ethic he did follow was 'the world has enough for everybody's need, but not enough for everybody's greed' (114,117) .

Arne Naess, has also accepted the influence Gandhian environmentalism has had on his concept of deep ecology. Padam Nepal in his article on "Ecological Crises and Gandhian Solution: (Re) Locating Gandhi in the Contemporary Environmental Discourses", has quoted Naess (1987), "As a student and admirer since 1930 of Gandhi's non-violent direct actions in bloody conflicts, I am inevitably influenced by his metaphysics which to him personally furnished tremendously powerful motivation and which contributed to keeping him going until his death. His supreme aim was not India's political liberation. He led a crusade against extreme poverty, caste suppression, and against terror in the name of religion. The crusade was necessary, but the liberation of the individual human being was his supreme aim" (2011, 183).

An ethical view of the environment and its governance is an inclusive approach; hence, it would not be complete as many have argued if it does not acknowledge the gendered nature of the society. This approach seeks to question environmental issues on the premise of social relations that exist in a society; this refers to a three-fold relationship: between human and human and nature and a double dialectic, between human and human (patriarchy, capitalism, racism), and between humanity and nature (Mellor 2000).

Mellor mentions that the argument for this would be based on the ecofeminist assertion that there is a connection between the subordination of women and the exploitation of nature, deep ecologists' argument for a non-anthropocentric ontology and cosmology and the dialectical relations of human material life advocated by the Marxists. For this, a concept has been generated called deep materialism, the former word taken from deep ecology and the latter from Marxism. In the analysis, a particular branch of ecofeminism is introduced called affinity eco feminism; it views the masculine-feminine dichotomy to not be antagonistic but complementary to each other; and that they are part of the same hu(man)ity. They believe that the subordination of women and subordination and destruction of nature comes about when there is a domination of masculine values, and the solution for this is to assert significant importance on feminine principles.

Ecofeminists have accused modern science of having assumed a form of patriarchy that has led to the degrading of the lives of the people and threatened environmental sustainability. Some have come to stress a gender-specific perspective on the environment and its governance; Bina Agarwal has called for a transformational rather than welfarist approach where development, redistribution, and ecology are linked in a regenerative way (Agarwal 2010).

Hence, what would be ethical is to establish a balance between the three dynamics as mentioned by Mallor. Vandana Shiva emphasizes the feminine principle; which implies Shakti (dynamic energy). It is generated from the belief that all existence arises from a primordial energy which is the substance of everything, pervading everything. The manifestation of this power, this energy, is called nature (Prakriti) (Shiva 2016). The feminine principle as manifested in Prakriti/Nature is characterized by: firstly, creativity, activity, and productivity; secondly, diversity in form and aspect; thirdly, connectedness and inter-relationship of all beings, including man; fourthly, continuity between the human and natural; lastly, the sanctity of life in nature. As Shiva mentions, under-development and also maldevelopment have come about not due to insufficient or inadequate participation in the development process; but due to asymmetric participation in which women have borne the cost but are excluded from the benefits.

2.2 Environmental Ethics in Sikkim:

Environmental ethics as an inclusive approach seems to bring under its fold the philosophy of environment, doing what is morally right, values; Eco-Buddhism, the dichotomy between man-nature; speciesism, feminism and finally Nature having an intrinsic value. All the aspects have been discussed in the preceding section of the paper. This final section would be providing principles and practices concerning environment in the state of Sikkim in India which could be. The state has seen a fair share of environment-development debate, environmental activism; and the application of Gandhian Philosophy in environmental governance.

Organisations have emerged and continue to exist representing people from different backgrounds religion, communities, gender, etc. Their method of protest has generally been non-violent; following the Gandhian method of Satyagraha, protestors went on hunger strikes. Using slogans such as “Meaningful development not destructive development”, and “In the name of development don’t make us refugee in our own homeland”. Anti-dam concept led to the eco-philosophy movement which saw the dangers that building dams could impose not only on the physical environment but also the cultural environment (Little 2009). As stated in (2014) environmental justice gets violated when encroachment upon reserved lands is made and indigenous community rights to it are taken away and also when local knowledge is not taken into consideration (2014).

What is ethical in environmental governance is the entire process of governance being made inclusive of local communities, policies to be reflective of the sentiments of the community, and also indigenous rights; governance should be transparent and inclusive of different sections of society like women. Catering to these very aspects, the state government of Sikkim has worked towards the goal of sustainable development by formulating green policies since the early 1990s. The authorities carefully devised several plans for compensating any damage that may be incurred on the natural environment by development projects; the latter of which was seen to be important for the overall development of the state.

Various policies under sustainable development goals under UNDP have been adopted; state-level green initiatives have also been formulated. Since the early 1990s, several efforts have been initiated in protecting the sanctity of the environment of Sikkim like a tree plantation drive termed Smritivan which was an initial step towards the goal of green Sikkim; ‘State Green Mission’ (2006), and ‘Ten Minutes to Earth’; Sikkim adopted the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, Sikkim Forests, Water Courses and Road Reserves (Preservation and Protection) Act of 1988; Joint Forest Management Programmes involving the tribal/local people. The State Department of Environment and Wildlife encourages research work; it is assisted by other institutions like the Botanical Survey of India, GB Pant Institute for Himalayan Environment and Development; the involvement of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have also been welcomed; State Forest Development Agency (SFDA) has also been formed which acts as a third tier with Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India at the apex, followed by the State Government of Sikkim (Forest and Environment Department, www.sikkim.gov.in n.d.).

To maintain the sanctity of the environment, the state government made it compulsory for any developmental activity to be followed by Compensatory Afforestation; single-use plastic has also been banned. The State of Sikkim also has its own Sikkim Human Development Report which gives details of

every aspect of the state. Being a part of the Himalayan region, Sikkim is not devoid of the impact of ongoing global climate change; to understand and mitigate the same Sikkim State Action Plan on Climate Change (SAPCC) has been devised which undertakes research and participation from esteemed professionals, researchers, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the field but also considers the contribution of local knowledge in mitigating the same (Department of Science and Technology 2014).

The state also has initiated the publication of the State of Environment Report through the Forests, Environment, and Wildlife Management Department under the Government of Sikkim which provides a comprehensive account of the status of the environment of Sikkim covering all aspects of the environment like forest and biodiversity, water, land, air and any negative and positive developments which have taken place.

Sikkim has seen a fair share of environment and development conflict; dissent has come from several sources and mostly it has emerged based on the sentiments of different communities being damaged along with the damage induced upon the environment. Taking into consideration the sentiments of the Lamas or Monks based in West Sikkim who had protested against the Rathongchu hydroelectric project accusing the project of having hindered the sacred status of the land and leading to the destruction of several holy sites, the project was closed by the state government (Arora 2006).

Today, with concerns arising around the rebuilding of the Teesta III dam which was destroyed during the Glacial Lake outburst flood (GLOF) in October of 2023, causing grave loss of lives and livelihood of the people residing in the region; rebuilding it would lead to public safety being compromised (Das 2025). People from different walks of life still advocate for the participation of the people in maintaining the sanctity of nature and working towards sustainable development, by their membership of community-based organizations. Sikkim has always been and is still vulnerable to natural calamities like earthquakes, floods, landslides, cloudbursts, and climate change and the involvement of different actors besides the conventional institutions in decision-making is imperative. So, the presence of such organisations is significantly important to effectively address and mitigate the impact of manmade or natural calamities on nature and the lives of the people who together make up the ecology.

3. **Ethical practices in environmental governance in Sikkim**

Some ethical practices in environmental conservation in the state are:

3.1 Sacred Groves:

In many developing countries including India, certain natural unexploited areas have been identified as 'sacred groves'; these are patches of virgin forests uninhabited, unexploited but rich in biodiversity. They remain as 'protected areas' by the local communities and the encroachment of which is considered to violate cultural and religious rights of the communities and violating the sanctity of the forest as well. The premise for protection is that it is associated with deities, rituals and taboos (Khan, Khumbongmayum and Tripathi 2008).

Sacred groves fall under the category of folk-conservationist strategies, and are taken to be the antithesis of government-led initiatives in reserved forests. This strategy is adopted in North Sikkim, and it entails the collaboration of the community, the forest, and the state to preserve the sanctity of nature as well as the Lepcha community. Sacred groves are areas identified, allocated, and protected by local communities based on customary sanctions that correspond to cultural and ecological values (Arora 2006).

For biodiversity conservation sacred groves are taken as ideal centres, wherein lies endangered species of flora and fauna which are not present in reserve forests (2008, 282). Here, it is to be pointed out that sacred groves and protected areas are not synonymous; the former as described previously relates to a certain section of the environment as having a cultural and religious significance to local communities, while the latter refers to areas identified for its distinct location and its characteristics under the aegis of the state government. About 30.77% of the state's geographical area are Protected Areas (PA) with seven Wildlife Sanctuaries, one National Park and one Conservation Reserve (Forest, Environment & Wildlife Management Department 2016).

In Sikkim about 56 sacred groves have been identified, out of which 19 are listed as important by state Forest Department, 15 of which are Buddhist sacred groves 'gompa' forests and 04 Nepali Devithans (Acharya and Ormsby 2017). The environment and development discourse in Sikkim reflected through the anti-dam movements in Sikkim especially in Dzongu in North Sikkim, have deeper premise than mere

protests against environmental degradation. Other reasons for the protests have been marginalization of cultures, vanishing tribes, and encroachment upon sacred landscapes (2017, 239) including sacred groves.

3.2 Local Traditional Knowledge in Climate Change:

Climate change has been identified as one of the current environmental problems faced by Sikkim. Local communities have adopted adaptive environmental governance when it comes to climate change; utilizing their local knowledge and experiences to adapt to climatic changes and also mitigate the issues caused by it; considering traditional knowledge in governance procedures could provide for an effective strategy of adaptation (Ingty 2017).

Community participation through the involvement of NGOs and community organizations as members of the Working Group (WG) of Sikkim State Action Plan on Climate Change (SAPCC) is also sought. The working group also comprises members from Government Departments, educational institutions and private sectors as well (Department of Science and Technology 2014).

3.3 Participation of Local People:

The state authorities have given importance to local/traditional knowledge; with the involvement of local people, 53 trees have been identified and declared as Heritage Trees of the state under the Sikkim Forest (Preservation, Protection and Declaration) of Heritage Tree Rules, 2016 (2016, 18,19).

Initiatives like Joint Forest Management Committees or Eco-Development Committees have been established at the village level. These committees' welcome participation of anyone interested in activities like forest afforestation and the protection of natural resources. 155 such Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMC) have been identified in the state (2014, 91,92). The state also has made it possible for the involvement of NGOs in different areas of conservation. Himal Rakshaks translating to guardian of the mountains is a committee comprising members from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), ex-herders and local activists who wish to implement their knowledge and experience for protecting the resources of the mountains. They are involved to avoid the overuse and misuse of resources by trekkers, tourists, and adventurers. They are employed to maintain the sanctity of the forests (Forest, Environment & Wildlife Management Department n.d)

3.4 Mero Rukh Mero Santati:

Prioritizing the important connection between nature and the people of Sikkim, Mero Rukh Mero Santati (My Tree My Legacy) highlights the green initiative of the State Government of Sikkim. It fosters the idea of a sustainable environmental initiative connecting tree plantation and childbirth. The policy aims to plant 108 trees for every new child born in the state. The state government has opened delivery of services to new parents through the involvement of agencies like ASHA, forest staff, and local governance bodies (Forest and Environment Department 2023).

Conclusion:

Sikkim a small Himalayan state has set an example of being an 'organic state', a hotspot for diversity, for the tourism industry, and a great potential for development through utilization of natural resources. The accusation that the sanctity of the place has been interfered with by policies of development has generated concerns among local communities, yet it has also played an important role in generating awareness among the people regarding the environment and the values it entails for human and non-human species in the ecology. With such challenges, green policies have been pursued to make sustainable development without compromising the intrinsic value of the environment. Provision of a democratic platform has been laid within the governance mechanism, for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Community Organizations, and Civil Society Organizations to represent their concerns. Policies on the environment cannot be devoid of the values it holds for the people in terms of their culture and identity; as such processes for development have adopted strategies for inclusion of local people and their local expertise in dealing with changes in nature. Despite the environment-development interaction; Sikkim continues to imbibe on a journey that considers the environment to be an intricate part of human life.

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