

Construction of Indian Minds through Different Spheres towards Environmental Education

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Abstract

Awareness towards environmental protection and preservation has been a prominent part of the Indian lifestyle. Historically, the Indian tradition is embedded with the ethics of protecting our ecosystem. The interrelationship between humans and the environment is conceptualised and is deeply rooted within the Indian cultural tradition and ways of living. From time immemorial, aspects pertaining to environmental conservation has been engrained in the minds of children through direct and indirect indoctrination of ideas, which have eventually contributed to a better understanding of the issues concerning the environment. This paper intends to highlight the exposure created by various frameworks namely the cultural and social system, educational system and the field of entertainment in promoting sustainable development. These spheres are taken into consideration and are critically analysed in relation to their roles as tools to shape and expose young minds towards environmental education. The contemporary times have witnessed a rapid growth of industrialisation and urbanisation which have led to the deterioration of the environment, it also reflects a considerable loss of weightage being given to our ancient cultural beliefs which still remain unrecognised. Thus, the main aim of the study is to unravel the potential of the cultural, educational and entertainment spheres in enlightening the young minds in the notion of environmental education.

Keywords: Environmental education, Culture, Education and Entertainment.

INTRODUCTION

The past four decades have witnessed a dramatic surge in population and rapid modernization creating an imbalance in our ecosystem. Our environment is flagging in a much-increased pace mostly due to anthropogenic activities. To eschew irreparable damage, Environmental Education (EE) has become an important agenda in educating, creating awareness and instilling an attitude of concern among the people. A wide spread assumption concerning the sudden inclination or a relatively recent progression towards environmentalism

centred around the emerging eco-friendly practices and go-green trends, but it is evidenced that the roots of environmental education can be traced back to the early 18th century, which marked the concrete origin of the need for environmental education as put forth by the French philosopher and writer Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose philosophy of education popularised the notion of ‘study nature not books’ to direct the students’ attention towards preserving our ecosystem. But recently, the concept gained eminence after the Earth Summit and the Stockholm conference. Thus, the term Environmental Education can be defined as a methodology which instils an environmental consciousness and concern towards our surroundings by promoting sustainable living and also aids in forming a stable connection with nature.

Recognizing the role of children as the future stakeholders, EE is strategized accordingly to build environmentally conscious individuals. Due to technological advancements children spend most of their time indoors using electronic gadgets, surfing the internet and watching television, in this way they are well acquainted with the popular media. Integration of environmental issues into the academic curriculum is also mandatory to raise an environmentally educated generation who are conscious of the depleting natural resources and the steady deterioration of our environment. They must be equipped enough to handle the challenges posited to them in the near future. Quite commonly, the minds of children are mostly moulded by the existing cultural construct, the educational system as well the entertainment field. This paper thus explores the varied ways in which knowledge and awareness concerning our environment is imparted to children and how through these different spheres they get accustomed to it.

In India, from time immemorial, the ancient traditional beliefs and practices were deeply-rooted within the framework of harmonious co-existence between humans and the environment. There is no definite distinction between culture and nature as both are intertwined. The educational system, starting with nursery rhymes and moral stories are embedded with eco-friendly elements, which constitute to be one of the most common features of school books also seems to develop compassion for nature and sustainability. There is no definite distinction between culture and nature as both are intertwined. Educating students on the prevalent environmental issues at the primary level is mandatory as it contributes in shaping their thoughts and views. On the other hand, animated movies and fun books also have ecology and environment as one of their prominent features. Taking into consideration the existing cultural beliefs, selected stories which form a part of the curriculum and movies and cartoons

which have children as their target audience, the role of environment and sustainability is critically analysed.

CULTURAL IMPACT

India is known for its rich and diverse cultural heritage. The presence of innumerable communities and varied religions gives way to distinct as well as overlapping belief systems. Despite the existence of different communities and religions, environment has always been an integral and inseparable part of the Indian culture as a whole. With these cultural practices and beliefs being passed on over generations, the minds of children are engrained with these viewpoints. Their exposure to these cultural concepts bring them closer to the environment with a better understanding of it.

According to Hinduism and its scriptures, the right for existence is equal to every creation on this planet. The exploitation of nature is highly due to the preconceived notion that humans, being the most advanced of all creatures also hold the upper-hand. On the other hand, Hindu philosophy advocates a peaceful co-existence of the humankind and the wildlife. “Hinduism considers the Nature as “the body of God”. Birds and animals are exalted to the state of God to encourage a harmonious relationship and for their preservation. The doctrine of Ahimsa(non-violence) has its foundation from the Hindu philosophy and thereby ensuring non-violence against animals and human beings. The practice of revering cows on auspicious occasions and feeding crows in remembrance of the ancestors pertains to the ideologies of Hinduism.

Vedic literature venerates the natural elements as expressions of God. Earth, sky, fire, water and air, the basic elements of life to sustain, must be respected and conserved by mankind according to Rig Veda. Puranas hold a strong belief that each tree is an individual deity and thus must not be felled. Therefore, people watered them and tied sacred threads in order to worship them. Scriptures like Vishnu Samhita in Sanskrit provides information pertaining to biodiversity conservation. Bhagavad Gita regards human culture without nature as an entity without soul.

Certain beliefs are quite overshadowed with the passage of time and are reduced to the level of superstitions and are disregarded without a proper understanding of its environmental values and health related aspects. On the contrary, many illogical superstitious beliefs are still followed and practised. For instance, people tie a lemon along with chillies in a thread at the doorstep of their buildings to cast away the evil eye of the Goddess of misfortune, Alakshmi.

However, there is a scientific reason behind this superstition that the thread absorbs the citric acid and emits an odour which acts as a natural pesticide to thwart disease-causing pests and insects. Another such belief which is disregarded as a superstition is the act of throwing coins in holy rivers. During the ancient times, copper coins were widely used and depositing them in the waterbodies was considered to bring good luck. The science behind this belief is that the copper sediments in these water bodies helped to destroy bacteria. Also, these rivers were the major source of drinking water for many people and thus the copper element present in them was beneficial for health.

In contrast to Hinduism, Islam and Christianity consider nature as subservient to humankind. Nevertheless, both the belief systems advocate rigid rules regarding man's handling of nature.

“He has raised the heaven and set up the balance, / [declaring] that you should not contravene with regard to the balance. / And observe the measure with justice and do not skimp the balance. / And the earth, He placed it for [all] creatures” (Al-Rahman 55: 7-11)

Similarly, in the Genesis 1: 26-28, God directs the specific ways in which man ought to protect his creation. The Quarnic word “Khalifa”, viceroy or steward, sums up man's position as a responsible caretaker of nature. Major Christian views on environmentalism also held a brief for the notion of man's stewardship of God's creation emphasizing on man's role to environmental preservation. The relatively recent strand, Green Christianity, forms a bridge between theological belief of Christianity and the environmental issues promoting all- inclusive Christian based activism.

Buddhism also preaches reverential attitude towards the environment. For instance, in *Sutta Nipata*, Buddha lays down the principles for ecological conversation. Dalai Lama, one of the foremost disciples of Buddha emphasized on the “interdependence” of all creations. Jainism promotes environmental harmony through spirituality. The concept of Ahimsa sums up the Jain way of life. Sikhism endorses a balance within God's creations. This balance, when distorted, results in calamities. Many stories of the gurus highlight their relationship and reverence for nature.

Thus, as evidenced in the scriptures and cultural practices, nature and environmental concern are the underlying core elements that bind all the religions and cultures. Children fed with these thoughts and raised in such a cultural atmosphere are inclined towards environmental protection.

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

India is one among the countries that have aggrandized the concept of Environmental education in the academic curriculum. The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) and Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) focus on formal and non-formal inclusion of strategies relating to environmental education. Though there is a paramount need for EE among all age groups and sections, children are generally regarded to be the target audience. The National Policy of Education advocates an academic framework which is grounded within three levels. It is an amalgamated subject called 'Environmental science' at the primary and secondary school levels and is a distinct subject at the college level.

Thirukkural is one of the earliest works in Tamil literature. Though being an ancient text, its ethics and morals are universal and have been appraised over centuries. Its relevance to our lives has resulted in its inclusion even in the academic framework. Thirukkural, in educational institutions is not taught merely as a literary piece of work but children are made to understand the ethics and moral values behind them. Valluvar has used nature as an element to advocate morality. He stresses on the interdependence of all living creatures. In Kural 11, water is compared to ambrosia.

VaaninRulagamVazhangiVarudhalaal
ThaanamizhdhamaendruNaraRPaatru

Stories like Magic Garden focus exclusively on the environment and children's relationship with it. By attributing human qualities to nature, such tales bring children closer to the environment and provide them with a better and deeper understanding of their surroundings. The inclusion of such stories in textbooks make them an inevitable topic and has a wider reach. Prominent areas of the environmental concern like Rainwater Harvesting, climate change, global warming etc are also a part of the academic curriculum, thereby enhancing children's knowledge of the needs of the environment.

Non-academic fictions such as *The Cycle's Dream* by Prabhat, recounts a story of a little cycle who dreams of becoming a motorcycle one day, but later realises that there would come a time where all the oil in the world would be exhausted. This story has been engineered in a simpler way to attract children and also to make them understand about the need for proper usage of natural resources and to keep in mind the future generations. Stories like *Six Spell-makers of Dorabji Street* by Shabnam Minwalla and Nirmala's "Neem Tree" by Rita Nath

Keshari also depicts the need for nature preservation.

Apart from the inclusion of Environmental Science as an academic subject, Schools today focus on a pragmatic change by introducing clubs, NGC's and projects that actively involve children to contribute to environmental preservation. Some schools instruct their pupils about the harmful effects of plastic and the strict prohibition of it from the campus. Students are also asked to plant trees in place of punishments. Such practices extend beyond the institutions.

ENTERTAINMENT AND MEDIA

Educating people has become an easier and a far-flung process through the field of media especially. Media has also found its way into schools where digital technologies have replaced blackboards enabling students to visualize objects and concepts for a better understanding. Entertainment media has been providing a very strong stage to educate children about environmental protection over years. Many tele programmes, cartoons and even animated films have been made to focus on the issues of today and also, they emphasize on a very particular fact that nature provides us and nurtures us while we tend to exploit it. Even characters in these films and cartoons are either children or adults who teach children how to respect nature and to behave as a part of it. Most of these cartoons and animated movies are very familiar among the Indian audience even if they are a production of many other countries.

Personification of animals and plants or trees as characters of films or cartoons have been a very successful way to attract children. Through this type of characterisation, animals and trees are given a chance to speak their issues and also how humans are meant to protect them. Films like 101 Dalmatians have played their part to encourage children to have pets and also considering them as a part of their family. Social media is no exception when having an impact on today's children. Many random videos, memes and information on environmental protection and environmental issues have a quicker reach to children through social media.

Many tele shows for children teach about biodiversity and how to protect our planet. "Captain Planet and the Planeteers" is one such show where the eco villain Hoggish Greedly awakens Gaia- the spirit of the earth. She finds that the planet is entirely damaged and sends five magic rings across the world of which four controls the elements of nature and one controls the heart. Captain Planet along with the power of the elements fight against the villain to save our planet. "Sesame" is another intriguing puppet show where characters like Bert, Ernie, Elmo, Cookie Monster and Big Bird teach children to save the planet usually along with a celebrity. They talk

about concepts like saving water, pets, recycling etc. “Magic Bus” is a show adapted from a book series where Ms. Fizzle, the science teacher takes her pupils to field trips where she teaches them about new creatures, climate changes and water recycling. “Bill Nye the Science Guy” was another popular show of the 90’s where he teaches many subjects to children including ecology and environmental science using different experiments.

Animated films like “Frozen”, “Moana” and “Ferdinand” focus on nature and humankind misusing it rather than protecting. The second part of “Frozen” displays a binary between the human world and the wildlife. The movie focuses on the need for a balance between both these worlds for life to sustain peacefully. The elements of nature are shown as rebelling against the injustices done by humans. At the same time, they are revered as the providers and guardians of Northuldra tribe. The movie also gives a comparison between human lives and water’s ability to hold past which is in connection with the controversial hypothesis put forward by Jacques Benveniste. It also depicts a notion that like ice and water humans are can also change the mistakes of the past to prevent future disasters. Moana is another film that is widely appreciated and connects with children. In the very beginning of the movie we are shown with a child playing with water and the sea also plays with it. The whole village had their own way of living with nature. Nature provides them everything they need and the people there believed that Mother Nature or “TeFiti” as they called her was the power of creation. Moana, being the chosen one to take back the heart of TeFiti represented the attempt of mankind trying to fix the balance between nature and themselves. Throughout her journey, water helps her and other elements like wind and fire are also depicted in the movie as the forces of nature. Nature is personified in the film in a very elegant manner where Mother Nature is not represented by anything in a human form but nature itself in a shape of woman. The movie re-emphasizes the fact that the power of creation belongs to nature and it provides us with all we need. Any disruption in this balance between nature and humankind would cause issues. The tradition of the village of Motunui is represented by the character of Moana’s grandmother who believes the heart can be taken back to TeFiti and that nature is always ready to help us fix it.

In the movie of “Ferdinand” we see how animals are used for sports and also those bulls considered as unfit were sent to the slaughterhouse. The movie shows two different extremes where in the beginning we are shown with a family where they consider Ferdinand as a part of their family rather than seeing it just as a beast of burden. The other side of the movie gives a vivid picture of how the bulls are trained for sports and are not even considered as a creation of nature as humans are. “Ferdinand” is humorous and also throws spotlight on violence against

animals in a way that would appeal to children. The bulls are made to voice out for themselves which would attract children more towards their issues.

These movies and many such animated movies focus on drawing in the attention of children while also feeding them with how they are to reciprocate their gratitude towards nature by protecting it.

CONCLUSION

So, with these factors enhancing the environmental message to reach faster and wider, children are implanted with the thoughts of saving our planet for the betterment of future generations. The culture they are brought up with, the educational system and other educating activities in institutions and also the field of entertainment, constantly reminds of the fact that the balance between mankind and nature is of the utmost importance for life to sustain. Children these days are also aware of the schemes and plans of government to setup a cleaner environment. As said before, many of the movies or stories and even cultural beliefs which have environmental purposes directly or indirectly have been discarded due to mere ignorance and not trying to analyse behind the surface. Environmental education is now the most important subject area that has to be consciously focused upon, since the shortcomings of global change needs generations of people who are fully aware of tackling and fixing the issues.

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