

Conservation and Change of Attitude

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What is around us is known as environment. Basically it has two components. One is a creation of nature. It comprises the earth, soil, water, air, oceans, seas, rivers, trees, plants, forests, wild animals, grasslands etc. The other is man's creations. It comprises the cities, villages, roads, buildings, houses, etc. The man made environment was created by gradually changing the natural environment. Man has brought about a tremendous change over the natural environment in recent times by rapid development.

Man's modern rapid development activities which altered the environment constantly, have led to the gradual breakdown of the basic environmental concord. The physical balance on which the entire earth surface rests has been disturbed. As a result atmospheric heating, rise of the oceanic water level, depletion of the ozone layer are threats the entire globe is facing.

The environment problem today is of common interest whether it is a zone or a separate country. Man has destroyed natural resources on a large scale. It has caused environmental pollution — streams, rivers and the land have been polluted. Therefore the environment problem affects everybody and every country and a special interest is shown.

Sri Lanka has a long history. In its traditional culture there was harmony between man and environment. The cultivation methods, customs, manners and the administrative system were designed to meet the basic requirements of the people, like food, clothing and shelter. At the same time due consideration was paid to environment.

However, it has been observed for sometime that this environmental relationship has been in the process of snapping. Subjection to imperialists, spread of commercial crop systems, capitalist economic systems, the success of the commercial economic theories to influence the people's lifestyle, have completely revolutionised their cultural and moral foundation. Rapid increase of population led to the introduction of accelerated development projects to meet the people's requirements. Forests were cleared on a large scale and settlements established, and large stretches of land were prepared for agriculture. Without considering the suitability of location factories were constructed which effused effluence capable of polluting the environment. All these posed a threat to Sri Lanka's resources and environment.

One of the main environment problems Sri Lanka is faced with today is the destruction to its forests. Its forest cover in 1963 was 44%. Today it has been reduced to 21%. In the preceding three decades about 1 million hectares of natural forest have been destroyed. This has caused erosion, earth slips, floods, drought, destruction of wildlife, and drying up of water sources. Inappropriate agricultural and other human activities harmful to the environment have caused serious erosion problems. Statistics reveal that 60% of Sri Lanka's high lands are faced with the erosion threat. This has led to the filling up of river beds, silting of reservoirs, and soil infertility. Although Sri Lanka is considered a country rich in water sources, now there are signs of destruction of these sources. In most areas the water level has dropped. The quality of the water also had declined. Industrial waste, chemical fertilizer and garbage are the chief agents of water pollution.

Because of large scale clearing of jungle the natural habitats of wild animals are being destroyed. The disappearance of the island's plant and animal varieties caused in the name of development in the period which elapsed was very great. Thus the variety in animal species is facing a threat.

Not only the water but even the air is being polluted gradually. Air pollution in cities is now becoming a serious problem. Exploitation of coastal resources without a proper plan has upset the environmental balance of the Sri Lankan coast. Sri Lankans have destroyed some of the most valuable coastal resources. Over exploitation of coral has brought about a near extinction. The coast is constantly polluted by tourism, coastal settlements, poverty and industrial waste released to the coast.

Due to unplanned development, shanty and slum zones have come up in cities. There are numerous environmental problems connected with them. Garbage stagnation is a very serious environmental problem of cities. The pollution caused to the urban and rural sector by industries inaugurated without any consideration for environment conservation is a problem of serious magnitude. Gem and graphite mining industries have created problems for people living in certain areas and the resource foundation too has been affected.

The government's attention was directed towards the environment problem only recently. The most significant event in this regard was the attention drawn to environment protection in 1980 by the present President, when he was Minister of Local Government, Housing and Construction. The environment which was completely neglected until then received special concern when this National Environmental Act was passed in Parliament in 1980. Subsequently the Central Environment Authority was set up under his Ministry in 1981. Formulation of environmental policy, education, advising and instructing were entrusted to the Authority. In 1988 the National Environmental Act was amended. All relevant regulations have been formulated, and steps are now being taken to prevent environmental pollution. In addition an Environment Ministry was instituted recently. This is a clear indication of the government's interest in environment.

Now wide ranging programmes are implemented at national level to protect environment. To control industrial pollution the Central Environment Authority has begun issuing permits. Assessment of effects on environment are made before new projects are undertaken.

Wide ranging programmes are being implemented to educate the people with the intention of involving them in environment protection. Several environment protection projects are implemented with foreign aid. With all these precautionary measures it is doubtful whether the country's environment would be protected completely. The reason is that each one of us in some way is contributing to the environment problem. A man's activity from birth to death, is always involved in clashes with the environment. These clashes result in environmental changes. Those changes sometimes upset the environmental balance. Here everybody's duty should be to act in a way that would cause no harm to environment or least harm. If even in a small measure one would co-operate to protect environment, its impact would be limitless. Without the co-operation of the community no course of action could succeed.

Whatever the rules and regulations imposed for the protection of environment, however numerous the programmes introduced for the purpose, only limited results could be derived. The successful operation of any law will depend on its acceptance by society and the encouragement it provides. Projects can be operated successfully depending on the active co-operation of the community. Otherwise the most excellently formulated laws or projects similarly planned will not produce the desired results.

For this to happen what is necessary is a change of attitude and thinking of the whole population, the entirety of society. We have to accept the position that the colonialist commercial economic theories, the value system based on private profit, have not produced principles conducive to environmental protection.

Therefore this is the most suitable circumstance to develop an ethical system favourable to environment. For this it is essential that the clergy, the non-governmental organizations, and the political and social leadership occupy the forefront. It is through the maximum commitment and co-operation of all that a healthy co-existence between man and environment can be established.

Only by such a concerted effort could a development foundation be laid protecting the natural resources for the use of future generations.