



## Nature and the lost human sensibility : Re-thinking on the form of Development in the Western Ghats .

\* Saji Varghese

### Abstract

The most basic question relating to nature in the contemporary situation is ‘since when has the concept nature given way to natural resources’?(Akheel Bilgrami, ‘Value Enchantment and the Mentality of Democracy: Some Distant Perspectives from Gandhi’ Democratic Culture, Routledge, New Delhi ,2011) . The metaphysical, cultural spiritual implication is that nature is a moral continuum which brings in the obligation of being and the interdependence among its components been maintained with ‘care’. handled with technology for commercial benefits .The paper attempts to redraw attention to the debates of development in Western Ghats (Coorg region) which is a site of lost inner connection of moral relationship among various components of nature . The site has often flaunted the recommendations of various Committees. The present pandemic situation has its causative role linked to the lost natural ties among the components of nature which in the cultural traditions of India, it is a breaking away from the moral ties of nature itself.

Key words : enchantment, continuum, sensibility ,Western Ghats

### Introduction

Development evokes cultural as well as economic, social and political fulfilment. It is ‘the great ascent’ towards new civilisation in which all human beings have enough goods to be fully human. (Robert Heilbroner) The ideal form of development is welfare of all as envisaged in the Gandhian principle of Sarvodaya. Gandhi formulated a vision and practice of development centred on non violent co-operation among social agents , responsible trusteeship in the ownership and administration of wealth, production by masses over mass production, village development and the provision of basic needs over the multiplication of wants. Gandhian vision of sustainable development emerged as a critique of the western – centric dominant model of development with its misplaced emphasis on the promotion of individual growth and self advancement ,the harnessing of nature ,the advancement of technological sophistication ,the spurring of urbanisation and the increased use of markets for the distribution of economic goods and services . Gandhism challenges the basic assumptions that the western model of development makes about the use of nature and natural resources, the meaning of progress ,the ways in which the society is governed and also about how public policy is made and implemented<sup>i</sup> .

The depredation of the earth caused by the contemporary human life style is described by some scientists in the ecological field as the 'sixth extinction'<sup>ii</sup>. The previous ones were the result of collision with asteroids, and other non human activity, but now deliberate and steady destruction by human of the earth's diversity. Humans cannot survive when huge biospheres are ravaged, for an untold number of creatures are performing services on which our life and health depend. What one gets to see all around is how our rivers, lakes and seas are being contaminated with toxic waste, how harmful chemical fumes are polluting the air we breathe and the water we drink. And how rapidly and starkly our thick velvety green forest cover is fast dwindling and literally being made to give way to a dry, bald terrain bereft of productivity. The silvery streams are drastically choked like clogged drains full of garbage and waste that is non-degradable. In the name of development one can only see a growth of unplanned structures of urban habitation. All these in a bid to satisfy a humankind who has this unique and uncanny ability of understanding and discerning what is most valuable on this planet.

### **Coorg as a moral site of lost sensibility:**

Coorg is a tiny district of Karnataka and is situated on the Western Ghats. Historically it has always been an independent principality until the British domination in 1834.

The Coorgs regard themselves as the original settlers of this beautiful mountainous region from time immemorial. As a dominant community of the region they have been warriors and cultivators of land throughout history [Baines, 1917]. However, today the tribals are becoming a 'displaced' category both from their land and from their culture. In addition they are now getting linked to western capitalism although their interaction with the larger market system is still minimal. They are not bound to anybody except in some farm estates where they still work as bonded labourers. However, their struggle and the position is distinctively different from other exploited categories like dalits. The latter are the victims of caste oppression, mainly in the context of post-colonial present they have become the primary contradictions of the dominant caste.

The region is a site of tourism, huge revenue is accumulated from the region by the state.

Abundant tourism activities in highly sensitive and ecologically pompous regions do cause considerable impacts on environment and causes rigorous environmental risks. The impact magnitudes of tourism, mainly depend on the intensity of tourist activities. Some studies show that 80-95% of major water resources are polluted by tourism activity and also same opinions have expressed by other research studies on water pollution in the district (Krishna et al. 2012; Divya et al. 2013; Venkatesha et al. 2013; Vishwanatha et al. 2014; Bhatnagar et al. 2009).

The Western Ghats is an extensive region spanning over six States, 44 districts and 142 taluks. It is the home of many endangered plants and animals. Western Ghats host India's richest wilderness in 13 national parks and several sanctuaries. Recognised by UNESCO as one of the world's eight most important biodiversity hotspots, these forested hills are also sourcing to numerous rivers, including the Godavari, Krishna and Cauvery. The Western Ghats acts as a huge water tank supplying water to six states. The

unusual kind of flooding of rivers and several cases of landslide around the Coorg region of Karnataka in the western Ghats has raised several pertinent questions on the desirability of the development happening in the name of tourism .

### **Policies and Neglect:**

The Western Ghats needs high attention in the sustainability aspect of whole India and especially South India. The Ministry of Environment and Forests of India set up in March 2010 an expert panel (Gadgil commission) to find a strategy for conserving these Ghats.

Madhav Gadgil Committee Report on the Western Ghats Gadgil Commission, an environmental research commission is named after its chairman Madhav Gadgil. The commission is formally known as **Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP)**. The commission submitted the report to the Government of India on 31 August 2011.

Gadgil committee had eminent ecologists and their report too reflected that. The report was labelled favourable to environment and environmentalists and not development (or illegal mining ). There is a never-ending debate between environment and development; it's tough to balance both without compromising the other.

Some of the recommendations of the Gargil Committee are :

1. The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) designated the entire hill range as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA).
2. The panel, in its report, has classified the 142 taluks in the Western Ghats boundary into Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ) 1, 2 and 3.
3. ESZ-1 being of high priority, almost all developmental activities (mining, thermal power plants etc) were restricted in it.
4. “no new dams based on large-scale storage be permitted in Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1. Since both the Athirappilly of Kerala and Gundia of Karnataka hydel project sites fall in Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1, these projects should not be accorded environmental clearance,” it said.
5. specifies that the present system of governance of the environment should be changed. It asked for a bottom to top approach (right from Gram sabhas) rather than a top to bottom approach. It also asked for decentralization and more powers to local authorities.
6. The commission recommended constitution of a Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA), as a statutory authority under the Ministry of Environment and Forests, with the powers under Section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.

However, the above report was given a deaf ear by the authority and the following points were highlighted to catch the attention of the so called voters of the development.

- The major criticism faced by Gadgil Committee report was that it was more environment-friendly and not in tune with the ground realities.
- Recommendations were cited as impractical to implement.

- Gadgil report has asked for a complete eco-sensitive cover for the Western Ghats which hamper different states on energy and development fronts.
- There was a criticism against the constitution of a new body called WGEA. States insist that protection can be given under existing laws.
- Gadgil report doesn't give a solution for revenue losses due to the implementation of its recommendations.
- Gadgil report is against dams in the Western Ghats, which is a crucial blow on the ailing power sector. Considering the growing energy needs of India, critics argue that this recommendation cannot be taken.

Karnataka has been strongly resistant to the idea of regulating the Western Ghats. Both Gadgil and the compromised version in the form of the Kasturirangan Committee's report were also refused to be implemented. The notification designated 20,668 sq km of the Western Ghats in Karnataka as ecologically sensitive, including Kodagu.

### **Environmental Concerns**

The one time cordial man-nature relationship has been marred due to increased human greed, prominence of materialism, individualism and egoism, ruthless misuse of nature etc. The defilement of friendly man-environment relationship commenced with the era of enlightenment of the renaissance in Europe. The environmental degradation has reached its peak, as we cannot afford to let it continue, thus, there is a need to readopt a philosophy of life of symbiosis i.e. cordiality between man and nature. The ultimate solution of all environmental problems is embedded in the conversion of materialistic human society into a humanistic one. In my opinion, neither economic stability (after successful measures of meeting the recession) nor the political will, or judicial enactments can deal with the present crisis, the only answer to this global catastrophe lies in man's ethical response towards environmental degradation in terms of values. Aldo Leopold, who was not a philosopher but a professor of forestry and land management in his famous essay 'The Land Ethic', found in his 1949 book *The Sand County Almanac*, has stimulated a great deal of discussion about the kind of principles we need to guide us on environmental issues. Leopold argued for the extension of what we see as worthy of our respect from the human community to include animals and the natural world, or what he referred to as 'the biotic community'. His famous principle, briefly expressed, was, 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise'. Though it is late, however, as the saying goes better late than never, to raise the fundamental question how we ought to develop or live not endangering lives and existence of the vital elements of nature. Perhaps one of the most suitable, practical, philosophical answers to this question today lies in adopting an attitude of treating the non human content of nature as not the 'other' but as a part of a composite whole.

**Interdependence : Coexistence Man –Animal –Plant**

Man has to love and care for animals and plants for reciprocal benefits from them. Since ancient period Indians who are largely divided into different Tribes, showed tolerance to other animals, nature and prayed to plants as deities and preserved natural resources without disturbing them. Because of this all living and non-living elements of nature were praised, defied by ancient Indians. Any kind of action that destroys the harmony of nature is considered as sin. Man's primary obligation to five physical elements such as earth, water, fire, air, and ether is known as *bhuta-jajna* in A.V [SatapathaBrahmana ] Indian textual philosophical tradition placed man as equal to every other element of our environment and emphasis had been given upon cordial relationship among all elements of our world. India has a tradition of anthropomorphism, where different types of plant and animal life have been ascribed special position.

Interestingly Buddhism also propagates 'MOTHER-CHILD-RELATION' as a model of ideal relation between man and Nature. We are entitled to satisfy our needs and not greed. The mother out of affection feeds her child as per the requirement. But an adult self-supported child does not require mothers' support any more. If now he demands still from the mother this is out of greed. If without adjusting with the harmonious course of nature we exploit nature, it takes revenge.

There is a unique model of interdependence and harmony advocated in Mahabharata when Krsna told in Uddyogparva that lions are the protectors of forest and forest is the protector of lions. Deforestation cannot take place by human action out of fear of the lion and lion also is being protected by the reserved protected forest. (*tasmatsinhahvanamraksetvanamsinhasyapalayet*)

It is interesting to see that the same is being taught in Vyaghrājataka of Buddhism. The reality of human beings is to be realized as an integral part of his environment and in learning how to 'live-together' in this world of interdependence of humanity and nature in a harmonious balance. The story of *vyāghrajātaka* (no. 272) goes like this: *Bodhisattva*, one tree goddess, a tiger, and a lion were living in the same forest. Once without listening to the warning by *Bodhisattva*, the tree goddess drove the tiger and the lion away from that forest. Afterwards the greedy woodcutters came and destroyed the abode of the goddess. This story may be used in an extended sense to signify the model of protecting woodlands and forests with the help of wild animals. We know that the deforestation along with loss of forest products cause many kind of natural disaster like soil erosion, flood, draught etc.

In the Mahabharata Vidura is seen to tell Dṛtarāstra that the most wonderful thing in this world is the fact of co-existence. Human, animal and plant --- all exist inter-dependently. [ *— sarvesamevabhutanamanyonyenyopajivanam.* ] We are born in this earth, we die in this earth and so earth is the abode of all of us. – [*Bhumihpratisthabhutanambhumirevasanatanam*]. Pauranikas told us that trees give men their 'abode', food-garments --- all kinds of living center around trees and creepers in Satyayoga [*sarvapatyupabhogastutasamtebhyaḥprajayate*].

And gradually men became greedy and they destroy forest indiscriminately. Again, when men restrained their greed, they again were getting their needs fulfilled from Nature --- honey in all leaves and branches [*bastrani ca prasuyantefalanyabhavarani ca – amaksikammahaviryamputakeputakemadhu*].

According to Pauranikas, who admit tradition and possibility as pramana, the climatic change occurs when balance is lost -- cold and heat -- anything becomes extreme[ – *sitabatatapaistivraistastataduhkhitabhrsam*]. Praising the forestation in purana it is said ‘one tree is one life’ – one who plants one tree, he lives in heaven for many years as Indra lives – [*yascaikamapirajendravrksamsamsthapanarah. So'pisvargevasedrajanyavadindrayutatrayam*].

An ideal relation between our way of living and nature may be traced in *The Dighanikaya's* (II, 31; 26) *Simgalavadasutta* where the Buddha narrates it to *gchapatiputtasimgalaka*. Silva explains it in the following words:

“A house holder should accumulate wealth as a bee collects nectar from a flower. The bee harms neither the fragrance nor the beauty of the flower, but gathers nectar to turn it into sweet honey. Similarly a human being is expected to make legitimate use of Nature so that s/he can rise above nature and realize her/his innate spiritual potential.” (see: Batchelor & Brown, ed., 1994; 22). The *Dhammapada* iv.49 also says – “Even as a bee gathers honey from a flower and departs without injuring the flower or its colour or scent, so let a sage dwell in his village”. (Eng.tr. Radhakrishnan, 1950: 75). Following ‘honey–bee–model’ our right thinking and right doing should go hand in hand. Eco–catastrophe would be viewed by the Buddhist as a consequence of unrestricted exploitation of nature by human beings. External pollution originates from our attitude level corruptions. The key to happy living lies in maintaining a balanced way of life among plants animals and human and in sincere wishing for happiness for all creatures — “big or small, moving or immobile, visible or invisible, far and near.” (*Suttanipāta*, 1977; 36)

The contemporary ecological crisis can be seen as such a phenomenon as man made . Any forms of moral life has to refer to a set of possible moral forms in response to the historical fact of the ecological crisis. The tribal sense of interconnectedness as in Coorg is such a moral form. Their form of life is sustainable, ecofriendly and satisfying to them. They have not met with the modern problems of alienation, loneliness, family disintegration, ecological devastation and spiritual famishment. Maybury - Lewis writes: “It is critical that we examine the roads they took that we did not; only then can we get a clear insight into the choices we ourselves make and the price we pay for them... Only then can we consider the possibility of modifying some of those choices to enrich our lives.”<sup>iii</sup> Every authentic historical cultural form, in Heidegger’s terms, is a possibility that we choose and yet inherit from our own cultural horizon.<sup>iv</sup> Every such form is historically rooted and yet new in terms of what it asks its adherents to see and do. There is continuity rather than an abrupt rupture with the current cultural vision. This is the only way of escaping the cultural trauma of engaging with alien phenomena. Here the alien phenomena refer to engaging in a development scheme which is foreign and far away from the cultural ambit of the said ‘tribal community’ or region. The expressive traditions of modern cultures will have to powerfully recreate the tribal sense of interconnectedness if there is any hope of its revival. The contemporary ecological crisis is such a limit situation and calls for a moral, cultural transition to a vision of ourselves as beings connected to the earth and all other creatures, modeled on the tribal vision. This attempt, therefore, is not a going back; the attempt is not to recapture pre-modernity. The attempt, if at all, is post-tribal, postmodern or alternatively

modern. The experience of the tribal people all over the world can, in some form, become different experiential vantage points for the moderns.

**Endnotes:**

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<sup>i</sup> 'Religion,culture and the Ecological Crisis' ed. Siddhartha, Fireflies Ashram,Bangalore,2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Selections from Radha Burniers Writings ,Wake up India,Vol.XXXIV .No.4,March 2015.p.2.

<sup>iii</sup> David Maybury Lewis, On the importance of being Tribal: Tribal wisdom' 395,.390.

<sup>iv</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, 435.

\*Dr. Saji Varghese

Associate Professor

Lady Keane College

Shillong.

9436334729 (Mobile)

