



Preservation of Green North East India: A Levinasian Response as a Continuation of Indigenous Living

Rajeesh Devasia¹ and

Dr. Imkumnaro²

St. Joseph University, Dimapur

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Introduction

Environment is the sum total of conditions which surround the human being. It is synonymous with nature where the physical components of the earth such as land, air, water, etc., support and affect life in the biosphere. In the words of Wood-worth, "Environment is everything that affects the individual except his genes. Environment stands for all those circumstances which are asserting their influences on the individual since birth to death".

There are a number of environmental problems which are akin to all. They include pollution, food shortage, power shortage, water crisis, violence, poverty, global warming, and so on. North East India is a home of environmental hub. However, in the recent past the violation towards the nature in the area has increased. It is the offshoot of the developmental greed of human beings.

The treatment of the environment in the indigenous people has been laudable in the past. The environment is part of the daily living of the people in North East India. The people lived within the system of environment with true spirit of comradeship. Emmanuel Levinas speaks about envisaging the nature as the "Other". Consideration of environment within the perspective of the continental philosopher, the author tries to draw the possible preservation of the environment in North East India.

¹ Rajeesh Devasia is a Research Scholar, in the Department of Philosophy, St. Joseph University, Dimapur, Nagaland.

² Dr Imkumnaro is HoD of Philosophy Department and Asst. Prof. in Philosophy in St. Joseph University, Dimapur, Nagaland.

Common Environmental Problems

From the earliest times of thought, nature is considered as the theater of the gods.¹ The Greeks conceived a world in good order which not only human beings but also gods must obey. Transgressing the nature invited punitive results. They believed that the better treatment of the earth in turn gave them blessings. Those that ill-treated the earth suffered famine, disease and death.² The preservation of the environment has become a topic that emulates attention from very early on. It has however, become very pertinent in our world.

There are various environmental hurdles in today's world. To mention a few will just rub us shoulder with those that we live part of them. Pollution includes, air pollution, water pollution, noise pollution, soil and land pollution, radioactive pollution.³ Deforestation is the result of numerous developmental activities carried out by the human race. Settlements of villages and pastures, forest clearings were done. Increase in population has led to occupation of forest land for human habitation. From 70 per cent forest land, it has become 16 per cent in our day.⁴ Another area everyone is concerned is the climate change that is rapidly increasing in a horrid pace. The climatic change has resulted in the extinction of several species and it is causing callous threat to many more. There are many more environmental problems that we can name, for instance over-population, waste disposal, urban sprawl, over-fishing, acid rain, ozone layer depletion, natural resource use, and so on.

Environmental Degradation in North East India

'Environment is a complex of many variables which surround man as well as all living organisms.'⁵ A conducive environment is indispensable for a healthy living of all organisms. North East India has been a conducive environment for long for all organisms. It could be rightly said that early human being was a very successful practicing ecologist.⁶ The relationship with biotic community was very intimate for every person in the North East. The knowledge about the environment and its effective use was his/her potential strength. However, onslaught of civilization has drastically led to the destruction of environmental equilibrium. There are many pertinent environmental problems akin to North East India.

There is acute deforestation, water crises, food shortage, poverty, illness, violence and mounting pollution in North East India. North East India is largely agricultural. Agriculture has been the major occupation for many villages. The modern day practice of chemical fertilizer, irrigation, pesticides have resulted in high presence of toxic materials. This in turn has caused diseases and deaths.⁷ It has also resulted in contaminating the water, the land and the air.

The progress in science and technology buoyed the industrialized society. This has numerously increased the amount of pollution and human waste⁸, which in turn has degraded the Northeastern environment. The pollution of water and air not only two environmental concerns that requires much attention but also the entire ecological system is in the danger of equilibrium. The exploitation of natural resources has increased ecological imbalance.

There is acute soil erosion in North East India. Over the years the use of chemicals used on the land has led to the process of hydration, hydrolysis, oxidation-reduction, carbonation, etc. These in turn disintegrate the soil.⁹ Soil erosion in North East India is very rampant. It has adverse effect on the environment.

Earthquakes are common in North East India. They are tremors which are produced by the passage of vibratory waves through the rocks of the earth.¹⁰ Earth-quakes causes several damages in the loss of life and property, landslides, change in the course of rivers, loss of vegetation and animal life, destruction of dams, etc. This brings about ecological imbalance in the region. Other environmental problems include floods, forest fires, jhuming, etc. There is an emerging need to curb these issues to sustain the environment.

Some Indigenous Living as the Preservation of Environment

There are numerous natural resources such as soil, water, forest, wildlife, minerals, etc in the North East India. They have been used with minimum ecological imbalance in the past. Though people did not consciously make efforts to preserve the natural resources, but they did not exploit them to the extent of their own peril. Nature was not only used for their survival but it was part and parcel of their daily community living. Hence, we do not find over use of the natural products. The conservation of the natural resources with the rational use of resources was a normal process. The harmony existed between the human being and the nature is unmatched.

Though the history of the exploitation of forests is as old as human being, but their use was balanced through a natural growth process. Forest cutting was for personal or community use only.¹¹ The traditional Jhuming was done periodically clearing certain defined areas. They took turns to jhum a field after a considerable break for land. There were however, plenty of forest lands untouched by all for the preservation of wild animals, minerals, etc.

The land use was done with simple natural techniques. There was no chemicals or pesticides used on the land. As a result the land had no contains of the toxic elements. Food products were much more healthy and nourishing. The existence of more than 8000 herbarium specimens in North Eastern forests has been identified by the Botanical Survey of India (BSI)¹² is the result the respect the people had towards the nature.

Wildlife conservation helps in maintaining the ecological balance. Besides, it adds to the economic, recreational and aesthetical points of view. In the past the human interloping in the forests were barely minimal (if it happened, mostly for food), the number of wild animals were high, and sufficient space for their increase.¹³ Hence, the maintenance of human-animal distance helped in the conservation of forest lives.

As a result we find the human health nurtured in the past. Human health tends to follow both social systems and the natural environment.¹⁴ As contrast to today's increasingly unstable climate, the accelerating loss of species, and growing economic inequalities, there was a time when the human life with nature flourished. There was ecological appreciation.

North Eastern story has changed drastically in the recent past. The exploitation of nature is rampant. It has resulted in crude ecological issues which even question human life itself. To arrive at amicable solutions to the nature's cry for relief, the exploitations must halt. Nowadays, there are number of means proposed to achieve this. Emmanuel Levinas'¹⁵ approach to nature (environment) could be one such proposal.

A Levinasian Proposal for the Preservation of Environment

Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) is a continental philosopher of the twentieth century. His concern was the primacy of the ethical relation to the other person which includes all beings. Levinas greatness lies in his original thinking, which is dominated by one thought. This we find expressed in his thesis that ethics is first philosophy, where ethics is understood as a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person.¹⁶

We can understand Levinas' explanation of the ethical relation to the other person as that of Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative, namely respect for persons. He envisaged that I should act in such a way as never to treat the other person as a means to an end, but rather as an end in him or herself.¹⁷ Levinas argues that this relation takes place in the concrete situation of speech. He speaks of the 'face-to-face' relation with the other which should be understood as not something that I see/perceive, but something I speak to. In speaking or calling or listening to the other, I am actively and existentially engaged in close relation. The focus is the particular individual who is in front of me.¹⁸ Thus Levinas gives great importance to the other person that he is confronting at every point in time.

Emmanuel Levinas' exploration on the environmental thinking is studied in the collection of essays *Facing Nature*¹⁹. Here the editors enumerate Levinas' perspective on the moral standing of nonhuman nature, the relevance of his account of responsibility for environmental ethics, etc. Levinas is responsible for inspiring the 'ethical turn' in continental philosophy²⁰. He brings about the moral standing of animals and on nature in his interviews with graduate students from the University of Warwick, which is published as "The Paradox of Morality" and "The Name of Dog, or Natural Rights".

Levinas' ethics is first and foremost 'anthropocentric'²¹ where the central place is given to human person. Besides that there is immanent possibility of ethical standing of animals and the environment due to the human responsibility that is accorded to human beings. Levinas' in his famous work *Totality and Infinity* remarks on how human beings experience their lived environment as a source of enjoyment and their account of dwelling.²² He also commends here on 'animal freedom' which he described as 'wild, faceless'. In his elaboration of the topic, he vouches for specific types of environmental ethics and specific environmental policies. A great deal of Levinas' scholarship on nature can be brought under the inquisitive question: *Do animals and the environment have moral standing?* Thus, the understanding of human beings towards nature should be enhanced by the application of environmental studies and animal rights.

Another area that we find Levinas undertakes is the area of climate change. His account of responsibility that is accorded to human beings as individuals towards the nature, also calls for greater restraint. If the climate variation is a regular phenomenon these days, then each human individual should own up their responsibility.

We do find in Levinas the following remarkable scholarship on environmental ethics. First, he emphasizes that the human beings are the centre of this environment. Secondly, human beings enjoy a greater freedom which in turn calls for responsibility for their actions. Thirdly, there is an inevitable need for responsible behaviour towards the environment. Fourthly, human beings do find in the nature a place for their enjoyment. And lastly, the changes such as climate change should be open the eyes of the human person and own up responsibility for the adverse changes in the environment.

Findings of the Paper

There is a close semblance between the North eastern indigenous living to the one that is proposed by Levinas. **The human person is the centre of every tribe.** All activities surrounded his/her living. **Levinas proposed that the human person is the centre of this environment.** The nature is the cradle for human survival. This approach of human centrality gives added value to human being in his relationship with nature and environment.

Human responsibility towards the environment is inescapable. The need of nature for human subsistence also makes it the important area of safeguarding it against all adversities. In the past, the use of nature was with restraint. There was no exploitation of nature. Because nature was part and parcel of human habitat and it enhanced social bonding among the members. Therefore, responsible use of the environment was imminent criteria for the early human beings. Due to the onslaught of technology and advancement the dependency on nature has diminished greatly. Levinas also speaks of the importance of human responsibility towards the environment. This aspect of human responsibility is much more of an ethical obligation that the human beings bear upon themselves. Conversely, human being on account of responsibility to nature should care for the 'face of the other'.

Human activities are in resonance with human need. There is a common bond with the environment. It is this oneness that motivated for responsible behavior with respect to things that are in the nature. The unique acceptance of human beings as part of the nature committed to the use of nature for the enhancement of human life but never exploitation to the nature. There always remained a deep modesty in the use of the things of environment.

Nature was seen as the place for human satisfaction and more fervently human enjoyment. Human celebrations found place in the heart of nature. There was always intermingling of the nature with the any type of human celebrations in the past for the indigenous people. The similar vein of thought we find in Levinas as

well. The nature is the place of human enjoyment which he terms it was '*jouissance*'²³. **In Levinas it is not just enjoyment of nature, but it includes the joy of living as part of nature.**

Conclusion

We have tried to show in *Preservation of Green North East India: A Levinasian Response as a Continuation of Indigenous Living* the possible similarity that coincides with the lived out experience of the indigenous people of the North East India and in the original thinking of Levinas. There is a clarion call to go to the past as it reminds about the environmental sanity that the elders have shown in the use and living of/in nature. Human beings are the centre of the environmental arena where they need to play a significant role of a referee. Human beings are the watch-guard of the nature. Hence, their behaviour should emanate a sense of deep responsibility for the well-fare of the nature. Levinas in his original thinking brought about the need to address the '*face of the other*' both in *human other* and *non-human other*. A sense of responsibility safeguards the interest of human beings as well as the good of other created things (animals, etc). The environment needs the human responsible action for its preservation. Thus there is an inevitable relationship between human beings and the nature.

¹ J. Donald Hughes, "Environmental Philosophy" in *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy* Vol 1, Detroit: Gale Cengage Learning, 2009. 354-359.

² J. Donald Hughes "Environmental Philosophy", 355.

³ H M Saxena, *Environmental Studies*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2006, 94

⁴ H M Saxena, *Environmental Studies*, 20.

⁵ H M Saxena, *Environmental Studies*, 2.

⁶ Nara Narayan Mahanta and Hridaya Nanda Borah, *Environmental Education*, Guwahati: Mani Manik Prakash, 2018. 40.

⁷ Nara Narayan Mahanta, *Environmental Education*, 41.

⁸ Gautam Sharma, ed., *Environment, Man and Nature*, New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1989, 89.

⁹ Nara Narayan Mahanta, *Environmental Education*, 48.

¹⁰ Nara Narayan Mahanta, *Environmental Education*, 49.

¹¹ Nara Narayan Mahanta, *Environmental Education*, 145.

¹² Gautam Sharma, ed., *Environment, Man and Nature*, 72.

¹³ Nara Narayan Mahanta, *Environmental Education*, 152.

¹⁴ K. Swarnim, *Ecology, Environment and Biodiversity*, New Delhi: Surendra Publications, 2011, 259.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas is now widely recognized alongside Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre as one of the most important Continental philosophers of the twentieth century. His concern was the primacy of the ethical relation to the other person and his central thesis was that ethics is first philosophy. His work has also had a profound impact on a number of fields outside philosophy such as theology, Jewish studies, literature and cultural theory, psychotherapy, sociology, political theory, international relations theory and critical legal theory.

¹⁶ Simon Critchley and Rober Bernasconi, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004., 6.

¹⁷ Simon Critchely, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 12.

¹⁸ Simon Critchely, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 12.

¹⁹ William Edelglass, James Hatley and Christian Diehm, eds., *Facing Nature - Levinas and Environmental Thought*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012.

²⁰ Continental philosophy is a set of 19th and 20th century philosophical traditions from mainland Europe and America. Continental philosophy includes the following movements: German idealism, phenomenology, existentialism (and its antecedents, such as the thoughts of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche), hermeneutics, structuralism, post-structuralism, French feminism, and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and some other branches of western Marxism. This sense of the term originated among English-speaking philosophers in the second half of the 20th century, who used it to refer to a range of thinkers and traditions outside the analytic movement.

²¹ Anthropocentric is regarding humankind as the central or most important element of existence, especially as opposed to God or animals.

²² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity, an Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979, 127.

²³ The term refers simply enjoyment. In *jouissance*, Levinas speaks of the relationship of the human being with the world. Nourishments are good for us; it is when we feel really alive. Because we are separated beings, we are happy to be dependent on nature. But there are needs which are not reflexively thought about, and that is our experience of *jouissance*.