

Lost “Village” Perceptual Or Real: Finding Answers In Environmental Ethics

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Abstract

Our perception and imagination of a Village is- rurality, a few houses with thatched roofs, lots of open space, cattle, simple living, a close-knit society, and a clean environment. This perception gradually faded away with the inclusion of industries and villages transforming into cities. The landscape changed with more congestion and traffic, multistory buildings, pollution, and degradation of the environment. The addition of more and more people further aggravated the degrading environment. Globally the statistics reveal that the majority of cities face environmental problems. The situation in cities is becoming more and more hostile to human survival.

In this background, this paper has tried to explore the perceptual or imaginary “village” embedded in our age-old culture and has related it to the principles of environmental ethics crucial for our existence and further survival of the planet Earth. It has theoretically analyzed the concept of village both perceptual and contextual, and tried to find explanations in the light of environmental ethics.

Keywords: Village, Perceptual, Contextual, Environmental Ethics, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

For economic development natural environment has always been exploited (Abedi-Saravestani and Shahvali, 2008). There was always an explanation in terms of economic rationality for controlling nature as is evident in the neo-classical economic world which poses a major challenge to the environment (Fergus and Rowney, 2005). Justification of human acts can be seen in the economy of scale and efficiency something as expected. Partridge (1980) in the introduction to Environmental Ethics course at the University of California cited several cases, like the clearing of forests, establishment of nuclear plants, construction of large dams, and oil spills with their commonly provided economic justifications and possible cost-benefit analysis and raised several questions that can not have quantifiable answers. Although a common acceptance is about the need for codes of conduct

based on the ethics of the environment for maintaining equilibrium between human nature relationships, a dilemma exists between overuse and depletion of natural resources when individuals and societies desire to maximize the gains (Abedi-Saravestani and Shahvali, 2008). A group of scholars argues in favour of the adoption of environmental ethics as a possible way to protect the environment from further deterioration and create an environment of sustainable development. Many factors support such arguments as ethical guidelines and worldviews can significantly influence individual and collective behaviours.

The Idea Of A Village

The term ‘village’ though has a lexical meaning that refers to a particular size of houses with a population in the countryside i.e., a small settlement in a country area, the contextual meaning of the term goes beyond the size of population and refers to multidimensional inter-relationship between human and nature. In general, a village is understood as a congregation of houses (usually at least 20) that is larger than a hamlet, yet smaller than a town, and which contains at least one community or public building like a temple, mosque, or church, with a varying size depending upon the total size of the population in the country. In this sense, the etymology of village has its origin in the Latin word “villaticus”, or “villa” and later the French word “village” which refers to a small assemblage of houses in the countryside. Village represents a period of time in this transition having *kuccha* houses with thatched roofs and mud walls and a large number of populations practicing agriculture and living close to the natural environment. But, the transition in the progression of human history ‘from hamlet to town’; ‘from hut to multi-storied complexes’; ‘from hunting and gathering to large industries’ gradually changed to ‘from open space to congestion’ in terms of spatial and ‘from bonding to un-bonding’ in terms of cultural contexts.

In the contextual sense, defining a village is not easy as it confronts the issue of not only space and its use but also the culture, nature, relationships, and its representation. Therefore, before trying to find an answer to the question relating villages to human existence, it is important to understand why in a country like India where more than sixty percent of people still live in villages and where still agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, we need to explore the village in question i.e., perceptual or imaginary village. In the current scenario when a number of environmental problems have grown and back-lashed on human survival the idea of exploring ‘village’ again gets more and more prominent. Certain questions need their explanations. Whether the imaginary or perceptual villages diminishing and transforming into new entities? Whether this process has affected the survival of planet Earth of which human is an integral part. Again, a related question also needs to be answered, were

the village economies used to be sustainable? Lastly, do we need to find our answers in environmental ethics? In the present scenario of Global warming, climate change, competitive, stressed, and more formal environment I have conceptualized village as a space, a mental state, an imaginary world at the same time transformation of man environment relationships. There are debates not only in literature or in society but we are living in a state of conflict between perception and reality and that is the reason for stress and exploring questions.

Over a period of time, human has advanced towards an unsustainable way of life disconnecting from villages. Large-scale industrialization and urbanization have posed a threat to the environment and biodiversity which is observed in global warming and climate change. Race for more and more amenities made humans subservient and the fact was ignored that this has caused an unrepairable loss to the environment. The idea of the cultural construction of a city emanates from the time of Emile Durkheim who associated rural and urban life with mechanical and organic solidarity respectively and German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies who argued that urbanisation promotes *Gesellschaft* (association) instead of *Gemeinschaft* (community). In the *Gemeinschaft* community individuals are bonded by common norms, shared physical space, shared beliefs, resources, community, family, friendship, and tradition is more valued. Whereas *Gesellschaft* society deals with a much more complex world. Social relations are based on impersonal ties or self-interest, less interaction, more formal, more rationality, a professional way of dealing with efficiency, more business, and rapid change. In the 1930s, Louis Wirth gave the idea of 'Urbanism as a Way of Life' in the *Journal of American Sociology*. According to Wirth (1938: 4), "A sociologically significant definition of the city seeks to select those elements of urbanism which mark it as a distinctive mode of human group life". One should not expect drastic variation between the urban and rural types of personalities as the city bears the imprints of previously dominant modes of life since it is a product of growth. The urban way of living is expanding with the development of technology and transportation. He further described the city as the controlling center attracting people from remote areas and connecting them into an entity as he writes:

"For the city is not only increasingly the dwelling place and the workshop of modern man, but it is the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote communities of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos" (*ibid.*: 2).

Several studies mention that city life leads to more psychological seclusion, social and economic stratification, congestion and health hazards, mental stress, and a more competitive environment.

The questions are interconnected and can be answered by adopting a diagnostic approach rather than a prescriptive one. The question does not try to investigate an answer in the demographic or morphological village, or else any walk out of the city will provide the number of villages in India. Then what we are looking for? Let us try to find answers by taking Indian village and its characteristics as an example. Sociologists (Dumont, 1970; Guha, 1994; Lynch, 1974; Pocock, 1974; Sirinivas, 2002, 2003) and Geographers (Pacione, 1984; Singh, 1972; Singh and Singh, 1975) are two dominant groups of academicians other than economist who have worked on villages with a passion to understand the rural settlement and its relationships with nature. Economists (Berberoglu, 1992; Francks, 2006; Sinha, 1990) have tried to work to improve the condition of rurality and to make them urban in terms of infrastructure and attitudes, so are taken separately. The two important aspects of rurality that have been commonly stated across studies are 'caste' and 'deity'. This is not to suggest that there is no other common aspect of village life in India. Caste has been common in social relations, resource access, deciding housing patterns (morphology), movement to other forms of settlement, rituals, and if one can say in each aspect of life. If we take caste as a symbol of rural life, as urban life is supposed to be modern based on economic rationality rather than caste and kinship, then even in metro cities of India, we can see the village characteristics without fail each time we do a social analysis of urban morphology. However, caste-based rural social relation in the form of '*jajmani system*' is slowly coming to cease to exist (Srinivas, 2003). The question remains if we observe village characteristics even in cities. The one aspect of rural life that has been normally downplayed is the relationship between nature and man, and it is this relationship on the basis of which Gandhi said that 'India lives in its villages'. Here the idea was to focus on the development of villages which will boost the overall development of the country. The Gandhian concept of development was based on indigenous technology and the self-sufficiency of villages. The fact remains that the people are close to nature in general in India, they are nature worshipers (since the Vedic era) whether it is the sun, moon, earth, stars, planets, rivers, plants, etc., or other forms since they were connected with their livelihood. India is a country of monsoon agriculture and uncertain and unpredictable rainfall conditions, and hence people are more dependent on rainfall as only about 30 percent of arable land in India has assured means of irrigation. Their

dependence created a rain God. Similarly, Gods and goddesses are associated with air, water, fire, soil etc. However, this intricate relationship changed with changing technology. Agriculture is still the main occupation of more than sixty percent of the population and hence the primary livelihood depends on it. If the majority of India is rural then where does the imaginary or perceptual village exist? The problem lies in self-contradictions and a state of dilemma. Our expectation is different from what we observe in reality or the village in context. Although, India is a country where villages are not only found but only villages are there, even the Indian towns present glimpses of village life. There has been a number of works that emphasize that Indian towns or for that matter towns and cities of the Third World are rural in nature. Hence, to answer the question of where is the perceptual village, we need to build up a consensus on what we expect from a village than probably we can answer this question.

The Need For Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics as a branch of knowledge has come into existence to protect the degrading environment in the 1970s at the request of environmentalists. This request has come in the background of two-three noted works by Leopold (1949) 'Sand County Almanac'; White (1967) 'The Historical Root of Our Ecological Crisis' and Hardin's (1968) 'The Tragedy of Commons'. The foundation of several journals (Inquiry 1973; Environmental Ethics 1979; Earth Ethics Quarterly 1989; Environmental Value 1992; and Ethics and the Environment 1996) and institution of various societies (International Society for Environmental Ethics and Environmental Association for Environmental Philosophy) in the late seventies, eighties, and nineties contributed to shaping the form of the discipline and provided a platform for a different kind of debate within the realm of environmental ethics.

Environmental ethics makes the goal of sustainable development comparatively easy, as ethics is 'a theory of or the standards of right and wrong, good and bad, in respect of character and conduct which ought to be accepted by a class of individuals' (Mautner, 2000). Ethics is guided by the understanding of distinguishing between good and bad or right and wrong conduct. It deals with issues of good versus evil behaviour and hence defines acts that are morally permissible and obliged (Abedi-Saravestani and Shahvali, 2008). Ethics is normally defined broadly as thinking about the organization of life in accordance with our deepest moral norms (Wogaman, 2004). The aspect of 'value' that makes any action right or wrong is associated with environmental ethics. Value theory of ethics is also known as moral philosophy that deals with morally responsible behaviour and duty-bound persons (Partridge, 1980). Human has been the centre of initial ethical discourse and the same has been with the

case of environmental ethics which in Western tradition was split into two namely ‘anthropocentrism’ and ‘non-anthropocentrism’ (Abedi-Saravestani and Shahvali, 2008; Cochrane, 2007). An anthropocentric perspective seeks things such as a sustainable society, sustainable food production, and sustainable economic development, all in relation to human welfare. Whereas, non-anthropocentrism shifts the emphasis from strict consideration of human interests to the recognition of the importance of nonhuman interests using a system approach (Payne and Raiborn, 2001). The centrality of humans in ethics has been the main reason for the centrality of humans in environmental ethics. Further, initially, human response to the environment was considered morally neutral since nature was assumed as impersonal and too vast to be damaged by human interventions, and that has been the reason that the analysis of ‘moral responsibility’ and ‘environmental ethics’ has only recently attracted to the attention and concern of moral philosophers (Partridge, 1980).

The debate within environmental ethics remained centralized around different conceptions of the environment and various aspects of ethics. Environmental ethics is concerned with the issue of responsible personal conduct, and with respect to natural landscapes, resources, species, and non-human organisms. Environmental ethics can be described as having a conscience or moral that reflects a commitment and responsibility towards the environment as well as present and future generations. The current focus on counteracting the adverse effects of deforestation, pollution, and climate change suggests that society has recognized both the importance of its role in and the need for, sustainable environmental management for the benefit and use of current and future generations. Environmental ethics considers not only the natural but also the human environment. It aims to analyze how human beings are affected physically, mentally, and spiritually by various developments in the environment in which they live and work, for example, the layout of cities, the provision of public services, and so on (Benson, 2000). One way of viewing this relationship has been highlighted by Stone (1987) in his book ‘Earth and Other Ethics’ suggesting that technology provides a framework of possibility, what society is able to do; ethics provides a framework of morality, what societies collectively decide they ought to do; while law provides a tool enabling societies to implement their ethical decision making in practice. Moreover, it has often been argued that if humans have ecological morality, the need for stringent legal provisions would be less felt.

Environmental ethics in brief concerns the formulation of our moral obligations regarding the environment and the concept of ethics in this has much to contribute to environmental

sustainability and is considered indispensable (Wogaman, 2004). Humans under any circumstances can not remove themselves from the environment and once it is recognized that humans have environmental obligations all areas of ethics are effective including ‘war theory’, global distributive justice’, domestic distributive justice’, ‘human rights theory’ and many others (Cochrane, 2007). Environmental ethics as a branch of knowledge needs to be wider incorporating the conception of the person, moral philosophy, and various aspects of environmental ethics like descriptive, normative, and critical, the theory of value, and theological and religious philosophy of environment of east and west and many more. Emphasis/ignorance of either one will not solve the purpose that environmental ethics aspires for. Only religious or theological explanations for environmental ethics may be disputed by the ethicists; similarly, normative /prescriptive justification for contained use of resources might be refuted unless there is an explanation for ‘justice’ and ‘norm’. The question of justice, justification of normative arguments, and structure of metaethics, i.e., asking the meaning of justice before providing justification for the normative level of environmental ethics all need to be part of this new branch of knowledge (Partridge, 1980). There is therefore ardent need to evolve an integrated approach in the development of the discipline of environmental ethics.

In this background, it seems that if humans aspire for a better living environment, the new branch of knowledge ‘environmental ethics’ will stay and grow much wider and also will incorporate the issue of environmental education within its fold. The village is a concept that envisages sustainability, self-sufficiency, respect for all life forms, protection and conservation of the environment, and saving the earth and humanity from all adversities. It is our perception of a simple and healthy life. If the norms and principles of environmental ethics are followed humanity can live in villages free from global warming and climate change circumstances.

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