

Lecture 39: Environmental Beliefs

Slide 1

BELIEFS

Beliefs are by definition the assumptions regarding relationships between two things. Thus the term environmental beliefs refers to people's assumptions regarding causes and consequences of environmental problems and what strategies are going to succeed in short term and long term. It has been found that in polluted/contaminated environments people suffer not only from the physical effect of pollutants/contaminants but they also suffer from various misconceptions and stigma (Swarnakar and Sharma, 2009).

Study of beliefs is important for two reasons:

1. People may hold ecological (pro-environmental) beliefs and undertake action to prevent destruction of natural environment or they may hold an anthropocentric/instrumental belief that nature can be incessantly exploited for human ends. Some may hold a belief in between the two. The beliefs affect their action and, therefore, in the study of environmental action it is important to study belief systems.

BOX 11.1: CONSEQUENCES OF ARSENIC CONTAMINATION

Thus, people with arsenic suffer from stigma. Sometimes arsenic patients are identified as leprosy patients and are ostracized unkindly by society. The victims are abandoned not only by larger society but also by their relatives and family members. Children of arsenic patients are not allowed to attend social and religious functions as they are believed to have inherited a serious problem (something like leprosy) which might manifest anytime and may be transferred to others. This phenomenon is similar to that observed in cases of HIV positive people in various parts of the country.

(Quoted from Swarnakar and Sharma, 2009)

Slide 2

2. In the risk areas where people suffer from the physical effects of environmental hazards the effects are socio-culturally interpreted. It is found that social stigmatization among the victims and discrimination against them can lead to extreme instability in the social life and social harmony and social capital are eroded (Box 11.1). People tend to neglect the health problem until and unless it manifests visibly or becomes unbearable.

SOURCES OF BELIEFS

Thus to protect the environment and also to save people from suffering the physical and cultural results of hazards it is important to change their belief systems which is not an easy job. There are many sources of beliefs in general and environmental beliefs in particular. They include:

- Folk wisdom, religious texts and religious organizations
- Education
- Media (newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, etc.)
- International and internal migration, increasing mobility of population and pilgrimage
- Market through advertisement, etc.
- Political parties and leaders who set political agendas
- Non-government organizations, community based organizations and other civil society actors

All of them will have to be used to reverse the process, i.e., to change the anthropocentric beliefs to pro-environmental beliefs.

Slide 3

Today in developing countries there is a great hunger for development and very little environmental consciousness. Folk wisdom and traditions are reinterpreted to serve the goals of capitalism. During the independence struggle and in the post-independence period in India philosophers, leaders and intellectuals favoured synthesizing western materialism and eastern philosophy. It is difficult to convince the people of India that in the interest of survival of earth they must volunteer for the present low levels of consumption or surrender inessential needs when the developed countries (and also the elites in their own countries) have so much of wasteful consumption. Religion, the modern media, and political leaders are only promoting consumerism and commodification; with little interest in sustainability of ecological process. The result is an anti-ecological belief system, maintained by social structure, capitalism, political leaders, and even religious leaders.

In the above context a cynic may ask: what is the role of environmental consciousness or beliefs when all major decisions are taken by the economic elite (in connivance with political elite) and the ordinary citizens have virtually little role in saving environment. Change of beliefs and behaviours among the common people will be of little consequence unless it leads to mobilization of people to change the social structure of capitalism. Some people however think that the environment can be protected only when people at large develop strong pro-ecological worldview leading to philosophy of spiritualism, equality and simplicity.

Slide 4

ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS

Environmental movements are mobilizations of people with the goal of protecting the environment or of fighting against the practices which are leading to any type of environmental degradation. In India they also refer to people's struggle to hold their traditional right to protect their natural habitats and resources. In economic terms, they involve a new political struggle for safeguarding the interests and survival of the poor, and the marginalized including women, tribals and poor peasants whose economic and political interests are closely associated with nature. In the past these movements have often resulted from a deep agrarian unrest but their nature has changed considerably. There has been a rapid growth of forest-based industries in the post-independence period such as paper, plywood, rubber, soap, etc.

This resulted in giving preference to large scale plantation of fast growing commercially viable species... Thus the organic and composite nature of forests with varied flora and fauna had been destroyed and thereby the people and the communities who were dependent on these forests were marginalized causing disenchantment among them. In this milieu the agrarian unrest continued after independence. (Augustine, 1995).

Ecological degradation and economic deprivation generated by the resource insensitivity and intensity of the classical model of development have resulted in environmental conflicts... (Shiva, 1991).

Chipko movement of Tehri Garhwal, Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad's resistance to Silent Valley river project, people's protest against Narmada Sagar project and Appiko movement of Uttarkannada district of Karnataka are some of the most visible environment movements in India.

Slide 5

CONCLUSION

Environmental issues are some of the most important issues of our times. Everybody talks about the end of earth caused by industrialization and insatiable human desire to attain higher and higher levels of material development. Climate change is a high probability risk. Though this is true that the developed countries are more responsible for environmental degradation and climate change, the developing countries too have to accept their part in protecting environment. They also see a link between rapid population growth and climate change.

To quote from UNFPA's State of World Population 2009:

Thirty-seven of the 41 National Adaptation Programmes of Action, or NAPAs, that developing-country Governments had submitted to the UNFCCC by May 2009 explicitly link climate change and population and identify rapid population growth as a problem that either exacerbates the effects of climate change or hinders the ability of countries to adapt to it. Through the preparation of NAPAs, the least developed countries state their priorities and needs for adapting to climate change. The growth of population can contribute to freshwater scarcity or degradation of cropland, which may in turn exacerbate the impacts of climate change. So too can population growth make it more difficult for Governments to alleviate poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

Thus there is a need to link population to various facets of environmental issues. The major ones are: resource depletion, perception of risk, environmental beliefs, environmental action, and social organizations and institutions responsible for environmental management.

Questions and Exercises

Slide 1

1. What is the role of population in environmental impact and climatic change?
What other factors affect environment?
1. What are various views on population-environment links?
2. How can one assess the environmental impact of a proposed industrial project?
What are major indicators?
3. Visit a tribal area where a big industry has come up during the last fifteen years.
Talk to people and try to learn what has been the impact of industry on social and economic life of the people? What do they say about changes in agriculture and forest produce?
4. Define the following:
 - a. sustainable development
 - b. environmental conflicts between developed and developing countries
 - c. sociology of environment
- i. Why do the developed and developing countries have divergent views on sustainable development?
- ii. What is required to general pro-environmental beliefs in India? Who has to play a leading role in this?
- iii. Examine the various definitions of sustainable development and develop your own definition for the use of policy makers in India.
- iv. Identify an environmental movement in India and write an essay on its history, successes and failures.
- v. What are all the complexities involved in linking population with sustainable development?
- vi. Using internet resources collect data on carbon emissions for ten countries. Examine whether the carbon emission is in proportion to their population.

References

Slide 1

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Slide 2

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