

Student Bioethics Essay

Environmental Justice

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“From this earth, we were born.
 From this earth, we prospered,
 Unto this earth, we give ourselves.
 Into this earth, we will descend.”

In the barren deserts of Rajasthan, where wandering tribes roamed, where trees did not grow until rains were promised on our land, and where animals came out only at dusk, there lived a community, which flourished among nature – the Bishnois. The Bishnois were nature lovers. Their basic principle was protection of plants and animals that thrived on their land. Many lost their lives, in this valiant effort. But today their relevance has been lost. How? Under the pressure of technological advancement, it no longer became possible to continue in the old ways of their folk. Due to the population boom, along with advancement at the cost of tradition, even the environment started suffering, lush groves made way for small towns. And what happened to the Bishnois in return? Displaced from their land, they were also estranged from their identity. Thus, the loss of the environment, led to the loss of a community. Who truly suffered? Man or the wild? Or did both?

Another ethnic group, the aborigines of Australia have lost their individual identity, as their love for nature, lost out to the thirst for development. Tribal pockets even in our country staying in the fringes of sanctuaries, or trying to hide under thick foliage, are losing their homes. Where is the justice, really, in this? When did marginalization lead to ostracization? When did nurturing of nature become a means of losing out to the rest of the human race?

Welcome, to the whole wide world of “Environmental Justice”. In definition, it means the complete inclusion of all people, not differentiated by any race, colour, social class or any such divide, in the development, implementation and enforcement of the laws, regulations and policies pertaining to the environment. In principle it is the simple rule of equality for all, in their environment. Till a few days ago, even I was unaware about the correct usage of this term until I realized that it is simply one thing – Equality when it comes to the environment. If we are all born from the same earth, it is our duty equally to restore it to its previous glory.

Just as we see in the deep meaning resonating behind this term, we must also know the opposite of the above – Environmental Elitism. When the environmental movement starts excluding people, only to eventually become a club for the rich and the powerful – that is when elitism creeps in, and the “justice to all” who are part of this movement is lost. There are several examples of such elitism existing throughout history! For years, on an international level, India has been the world's dumping ground for harmful toxic waste. India receives annually, over a million tones of e-waste from western countries, in addition to the waste which is generated indigenously.

The Alang shipyard along the Gujarat coast is the world's largest graveyard for ships. For years, men and women have worked tirelessly, to breakdown metal and pull down masts, and to dispose off the world's ships. Much has always been said about the state of the coast, the health of the people and the long term hazards of dumping some of the most toxic metals and chemicals at Alang. Things reached a zenith, when the "Clemenceau" ship, which had been rejected by shipyards in the developed nations, was headed to its floating mortuary at Alang. Known for its toxicity, environmentalists rallied to stop the ship, and send it back to its parent nation – France. Eventually the protests payedoff, and the ship was not dismantled at Alang. But still the conditions of people haven't improved dramatically; skin lung and eye diseases still abound.

One of the most tragic environmental disasters to have happened in our country, the Bhopal gas tragedy, had only one face for years- the face of a lifeless child, half buried in the mud, after suffocation from inhaling methyl isocyanase leaked from the Union Carbide factory. Justice came, but after 27 years, and only in the form of an apology and a settlement. We were still unable to apprehend the murderer – the owner of the plant. Somehow, through the judgment, the words, "justice delayed is justice denied" rang true. Let's come down to our very own streets and alleys of our nation. Prevailing in every nook and corner is the attitude of NIMBY – Not in my backyard, which means that if the waste is not in my home, then it is not my responsibility anymore. But replacing this adage with a new colloquial term, PIMBY - Place in minorities backyard, because as the minorities cannot raise their voice and oppose, we will dump our waste in their backyard. It is interesting to know that Gandhiji, on whose birth anniversary, we began the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan movement, was strictly against any inequality, either by birth or merit, but believed in one nation, working to keep it clean and green.

Even after 70 years of independence, after 69 years of Gandhiji's death, we live in a nation where the deprecating act of manual scavenging still exists. The term itself means that a person goes into the sewer pits or septic tanks and cleans up faecal matter, toxic waste and other garbage which is dumped into it. Not only are these scavengers exposed to dangerous skin, lung and other infections, but also to death by inhalation of toxic gases. And most importantly stripping away their dignity, the ostracization and the inhumane way in which this section of the society is treated, is shameful, not for them, but for the rest of us- those of us who allow it, perpetrate it, and watch it like voyeuristic bystanders.

"If we were to hold the globe in our hands, and watch as it spins around an imaginary pole, day by day, we will see the green turning brown, the blue turning grey, and the earth dying a little by little." If we were to hold each other's hands instead, and take it upon ourselves, to work together, to keep the blue azure, and the green emerald, we might just be able to breathe life back into our little globe." The problems began with us, and the answers too lie with us.

In 2010, India launched The National Green Tribunal, A legislation of sorts, under the appellate court authority of India, looking to provide justice to those who wish for cleaner air, water and other needs for their living. Similarly, under the constitution of India, as well as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, it is our right to a clean environment, a safe workplace and access to clean air, water, sanitation etc. and this right is independent of race, colour, sex, region or any other difference.

But, legislation can provide only so much help. Change is to be found within us, within our community. It begins with small acts of environmental justice – if you keep the streets of your city clean – you are allowing every person who lives in your city, a right to a cleaner city. You are also reducing the burden on the rag-picker, and giving them a greater opportunity in life. Do you know the "butterfly effect"? A ripple of air because of the fluttering of the butterfly's wings, can lead to a storm elsewhere. Perhaps nature believes in this principle. Once it starts feeling the change in attitude of humans, it reciprocates too.

Some enthusiastic volunteers have taken up regular beach cleaning, especially after the Ganesh Visarjan, and help keep the marine ecosystem healthy. Similarly cleanliness drives, even within our KEM hospital, help all persons – from peons to Dean sir himself, be a part of the common goal – and hence lead to upliftment of all, and greater enthusiasm from people.

When large communities join in actively to fight for their right to a safe, clean and healthy environment, not only are they aggressive for changes in policy, but are also better aware of where the changes need to be allocated to. “From the community, by the community, for the community,” must be one’s ideal.

Many non-profit organizations are mobilizing communities in finding their voices and raising them. The Basel Action Network, acts to prevent dumping of toxic waste in under-developed countries. GreenPeace works for equality and the environment.

Local communities have fought, won and lost. Whereas radioactive plants have been shut down, or prevented from being built in some parts of India, a few hamlets of Jharkhand, suffer from congenital anomalies, large tumours and general ill-health due to the nearby nuclear power plant in the area.

This is a battle. A long drawn, tough and difficult battle, not against development, not against the forces of nature and not against the elitist people. At the end of the day, it is a battle against our own demons. It is easy to forget about climate change and environmental diseases on a daily basis. The true battle is, to remember them every day and to change; so that we keep our homes clean, we keep our streets, city, country clean, and eventually come to respect our environment. The true battle is to believe, that this battle is our own, not someone else’s, but our very own, and we are all warriors, with no difference of rank in this army, fighting for a common cause. The true battle, hence, is yet to come,

And we must be prepared for it.