

SEASON OF CREATION-1ST SEPTEMBER TO 4TH OCTOBER 2020

Fact Sheet 1-Saving the Environment

Introduction: There is a global environmental crisis. The Gulf Stream is threatened, the Greenland Icecap is melting faster than predicted, the last decade was the warmest for the last millennium and the world's oceans are warming at a dangerous rate. The Tsunami of 2004 was a grim reminder. The good news is that 150 nations signed an Agreement at the **Montreal Conference on Climate Change** to cut down emissions of poisonous gases which have been making the world unlivable.

I. What is Environment/Ecology? *Panch Mahabhuta* or the five elements of nature-land, water, fire, air and sky, provide the world of human beings, the flora and fauna, living in and around; with the daily needs of life. Nature has enough for our needs but not enough for our insatiable greed. Most economic development is fossil-based; which is the major source of pollution of water and air, whose benefits are reaped by the rich and the industrially developed countries, while the consequences of pollution are borne by the poor and the developing countries leading to ecological degradation. From the academic year **2004-05 Environmental Studies was made compulsory at all levels of education** (School, University and Professional). Thanks to the grass-roots level movements like *Chipko*, *Narmada Bachao Andolan* and the like.

Human beings and the environment are inseparable. **Rachel Carson** in her famous book, *Silent Spring* told us this in 1962. *The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings.* The environment is made up of biotic (living) and abiotic (non living) things. The study of interactions between these two is the Science of Environment /Ecology.

II. The Significance and Importance of Environment/Ecology: The futurologist **Sir Aldoux Huxley** rightly said that quality of life can be radically changed only by means of the sciences of life; and ecology is a branch of the sciences of life. Environment or Ecology is a complex and an interrelated subject. It is not just about tree-plantation, waste management, water pollution, conservation of flora and fauna but also inter-related challenges like demographic changes, availability of food, fodder, energy, raw material, costs and consequences of economic development, utilization of new technologies etc. which affect the livelihood systems of people. To understand the environment one needs to be an activist who learns by doing. One needs to change one's mind-set e.g. the success story of the *Plachimada Panchayat* functionaries in Palakkad district of Kerala who dared a multinational corporation (the **Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages Pvt. Limited**) and stopped the latter from pumping water for commercial use. Since 2005, the company has stopped its operations at Plachimada. **Natural resources like air, sea, waters and forests cannot be privatized. It is the duty of the Central government to protect and improve the environment which is a fundamental duty under the Constitution.**

III. What Environmental Reform Initiatives has the Government of India taken? The life style of Indians is environment-friendly e.g. non-killing of animals among the *Bishnois* or worshipping the *Peepal* tree or the cow as *gomata* etc. **The United Nations Conference on Human Environment was convened at Stockholm in 1972**, which laid down the basics of environmental reform to be followed in signatory countries including India.

- a) Human beings have the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life in an environment of quality that permits a life of dignity and well being.
- b) Human beings bear a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations.

The Stockholm Declaration (15 Dec, 1972) designated, June 5 as **World Environment Day**, when they would reaffirm their pledge to conserve and improve the environment. Mrs. Indira Gandhi participated in this Conference, and incorporated it into the 42nd Constitution Amendment Act, passed in 1976 (Article 48-A) the Directive Principles of State Policy. The Wildlife Protection Act was followed by the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1974, Forest (Conservation) Act 1980 and the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1981.

Sadly, the implementation of legislation provisions, are often slow; and sometimes not implemented at all e.g. **The Bhopal Gas Tragedy** on the night of 2-3 Dec. 1984 which killed 3,500 people and injured 2 lakh victims who have to date, received very little or no health care facilities, nor adequate compensation. This and earlier tragedies precipitated the **Environment (Protection) Act in 1986**. This Act too found it difficult to provide relief to victims. However, the Indian Judiciary managed to order the closure of dangerous lime-stone quarries, tanneries, shifted hazardous industries etc. operating in residential areas of Delhi.

IV. An Appraisal of the Rio/Earth Summit in 1992: The Stockholm Resolutions were confirmed by the Rio de Janeiro /Earth Summit which adopted the famous Rio Declaration and its plan of Action popularly known as Agenda 21; and the Declaration on Principles of Forests. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held at Johannesburg in 2002 reviewed the Post Rio Program. The **Rio/Earth Summit was a failure** due to the conflict of interests between the rich industrial countries of the North and natural resources rich countries of the South. The best intentions as outlined, in these treaties and conventions were defeated by a defiant USA and other rich countries taking shelter behind it, in order to safeguard their industrial elites.

Global warming is a dangerously increasing phenomenon. Burning of fossil fuels like coal is the major source of emissions. This has resulted in severe incidents of drought and flood, rise in the sea level submerging a good part of low-lying countries. To avert this, the famous **Kyoto Protocol** was **signed by 154 countries but NOT by USA and Australia**. Similarly the

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was not signed by President (senior) George Bush at the Rio Summit.

80 percent of the world's biological resources exist in the forests of the South (i.e. the developing countries) and the North (industrially rich countries) want unrestricted access to these forests for raw materials for their drug production leading to tropical deforestation.

The UN Convention to combat **Desertification** was adopted by the Rio Summit in 1992 but the Northern countries were unwilling to accept desertification and falsely put the blame on population pressures. **However, the hole in the ozone layer causing cancer particularly to the white skin and persistent organic pollutants (POPs) travelling to the Arctic was dealt with full force by the Montreal Protocol and stopped.**

V. Why is India in an Ecological Crisis today? What are the Challenges ahead? The inaction of the governments has led to *Governmentalism* of the Environmental Agenda, as it has become a cause without a concern. Agenda 21-Rio's Plan of Action has almost become a dead document. Governments need to be kept accountable and responsive. **The Brundtland Commission Report** can become workable only when *Development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*. Active and conscious citizens of the world need to ask for an equal share in the per capita entitlements of the global commons (like the resources of atmosphere and ocean). **The next war will be a war for water that is becoming scarce. Any Answers????**

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS/ACTIONS

Read *Saving the Environment* slowly and prayerfully. Meditate, pray and reflect on the same. Then answer the following questions:

1. We are all aware of the environmental crisis at the global level and particularly in India. What concrete baby steps can you take as an individual/ as community to better the situation or at least to stop further damage?
2. You read briefly about the success story of how the Hindustan Coca Cola Beverages Pvt. Ltd. in Kerala was stopped. What are the successes or other stories you have heard or read about, with regard to the environment?
3. The Bhopal Gas Tragedy took place on 3rd Dec. 1984. Thirty-six years later today in 2020, are we still experiencing the consequences of the gas leak? How? Does any good come out of such terrible tragedies as the saying goes; *every dark cloud has a silver lining*.

4. **India's resource extraction i.e. withdrawing materials from the natural environment is reported to be more than three times the world average. Is there a North/South hemisphere divide today? If so, what are the reasons for the same and its effects on India, on you as an individual and as a community?**
5. **Do you think COVID-19 and the pandemic are connected to Environmental degradation? If so, how and why? During the lockdown, air pollution over most cities came down drastically e.g. the Air Quality Index in Delhi was between 30 to 40 in late March and early April this year, as compared to around 180 to 200 at this time last year.**
6. **A simple habit of putting off lights and fans when not needed is a *green good deed*. Make a list of simple doable *green good deeds* or *small positive actions* that could perhaps change your mind-set, your life-style and your spirituality.**

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