

Conserving Environment by Integrating Religious Practices in School Curriculum

Sourovi Thakur¹, Usashi Kundu (De)²

¹Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Education, Diamond Harbour Women's University, Sarisha, W.B., India
sourovimitra[at]gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Diamond Harbour Women's University, Sarisha, W.B., India
usashik[at]gmail.com

Abstract: *Today, three of the majorly discussed topics around the globe are Environmental Conservation, Religion and Constructivism. Most developing cities are suffering from poor air quality, scarcity of water, non-replenishable effect of plastics, untimely extinction of species and many other deadly effects of environmental hazards. Religious faiths have proven itself as one of the most powerful and enduring force of human history which acts as an agent of social control and socialization. Among learning theories, Constructivism is the latest approach that says, learners learn and construct their knowledge from their own experiences. So the main focus of the paper is to explore the scope of incorporating the major religious practices in the Science curriculum of secondary school level that directly or indirectly help in environmental conservation, from a constructivist perspective. Descriptive analytical method is used in this present study. Every religion worships some Gods and/or Goddesses and they are mostly represented by different elements of nature. Again, every religion performs certain practices and follows certain rules. Some of those practices and rules are found to be environment friendly. So if the students get to know how these religious practices could help in conserving the environment through the school curriculum, it will be easier to develop pro-environmental behavior among them from a very young age.*

Keywords: Religious practices, Environmental conservation, Constructivism, Secondary School curriculum

1. Introduction

Today, three of the majorly discussed topics around the globe are environmental conservation, religion and constructivism. Let us have a look, what is happening around us. According to Central Water Commission data [13], Indian rivers crossed highest flood level twenty five times of the previous year. The cyclone Bulbul destroyed so many lives and said to be more powerful than Aila. Delhi has become one of the most polluted cities in the world where about 50% children are suffering from lung diseases. According to satellite data from NASA, 6 Asian countries including India are at risk due to coastal flooding by 2050 [21]. These are just a few instances of what is happening around the world. The solution is environmental conservation. The question is 'How'? Among various strategies to solve this issue, one of the least applied fields is religious practices. Whenever one thinks of religious activities in respect to environment, the images that flash on the mind are immersing ashes of dead bodies in Ganga, deadly-suffocating smokes generating from fire crackers during Diwali or sacrificing animals in various rituals of different religions. But this is just a small part of a huge story. In reality, all the religions ask for conserving the nature. These provide a major scope for using religious practices and philosophies to conserve the environment. In recent secondary school curriculum Environmental Science/Studies is integrated with different other subjects. The subject teaches the students how to preserve the environment and how to live sustainably. The motto is to develop a pro-environmental behavior among them. Now when we talk about teaching, we look for the best approach for effective teaching and learning. Constructive approach is gaining much importance among the educationists these days. Therefore, this paper aims to include various eco-friendly religious practices in secondary school curriculum

to conserve the environment from a constructivist perspective.

The paper will try to justify the inclusion of eco-friendly religious activities in school curriculum by exploring various eco-friendly religious activities of different religions and by exploring their various religious philosophies leading to environmental conservation. It is also important to choose the appropriate level of school curriculum for this inclusion so that students get maximum benefit. The complete study has been conducted from a constructive perspective. The researchers seek to find out the scope in secondary school curriculum for incorporating eco-friendly religious activities most appropriately. This study has employed a descriptive analytical research method based on critical review of relevant literature.

2. Environment Conservation

Environment includes almost everything around us and in this respect section 2(a) of the Environment (Protection) Act 1986 defines environment as: 'Environment includes water, air and land and the inter-relationship which exists among and between water, air and land and human beings, other living creatures, plants, micro-organism and property' [1]. Environment conservation thus means protecting what around us as National Geographic stated:

'Earth's natural resources include air, minerals, plants, soil, water, and wildlife. Conservation is the care and protection of these resources so that they can persist for future generations. It includes maintaining diversity of species, genes, and ecosystems, as well as functions of the environment, such as nutrient cycling. Conservation is similar to preservation, but while both relate to the protection of nature, they strive to accomplish this task in

different ways. Conservation seeks the sustainable use of nature by humans, for activities such as hunting, logging, or mining, while preservation means protecting nature from human use.' [7]

Environmental conservation is an umbrella term that includes anything and everything that help in achieving the goal of making life more sustainable for the planet. It includes preservation of bio-diversity, checking pollution, preserving natural resources and improving quality of life without harming the environment and maintaining the balance of each component of environment.

Religious practices

According to J. Milton Yinger, 'Religion is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problem of human life' [12]. Emile Durkheim (1976) mentioned, 'Religion is only the sentiment inspired by the group in its members, but projected outside of the consciousness that experiences them, and objectified' [9]. Religious practices include various kinds of rituals, sermons, different prayers, sacrificing of living and non-living things, commemoration (of deities), festivals dedicated to specific deity, initiations, funerary services, meditational sessions, conducting traditional marriages, music, art, dance, and many other aspects of human culture.

Secondary School Curriculum

Curriculum is the total educational plan and program of the school which is divided into four primary components, viz. 1) program of studies, 2) program of experiences, 3) program of service, and 4) hidden curriculum [18]. Curriculum includes both curricular and co-curricular activities. Secondary school level includes class IX to class XII which is further divided into Secondary (class IX and X) and Senior Secondary (class XI and XII). Science of Secondary School Curriculum consists of Biology, Physics and Chemistry. CBSE Secondary School Curriculum has given major emphasis on integration of environmental education in various subjects beginning from class one to twelve.

Constructivism

Constructivism is basically a learning theory according to which, man construct his knowledge and meaning from his own experiences. As NCF 2005 stated:

'In the constructivist perspective, learning is a process of the construction of knowledge. Learners actively construct their own knowledge by connecting new ideas to existing ideas on the basis of materials/activities presented to them (experience)...

Allowing children to ask questions that require them to relate what they are learning in school to things happening outside, encouraging children to answer in their own words and from their own experiences, rather than simply memorising and getting answers right in just one way — all these are small but important steps in helping children develop their understanding' [16].

Needs for inclusion of Religion

Bhagwat, Dudley and Stuart (2011) tried to find out quantitatively whether religions have the potential to conserve the biodiversity. They worked on countries belonging to Conservation International's List of Biodiversity Hotspots and found out that these countries have low ecological footprints and high religious people. This may mean that religions provide certain ethical norms and gain public support that eventually decrease ecological footprint in these hotspot areas. Mcleod and Palmer (2015) suggested for a systematic approach that will directly engage, make effective partnerships, discuss on a common ground despite of having potentially divergent worldviews, and establish supporting mechanisms with religious communities to get conservational support. Religions are basically moral norms that guide its followers to teach how to behave and how to develop and nurture good character [6]. Therefore, pro-environmental behavior, as a component of good behavior, could be instilled among students through religious activities. World Bank (2006) provided a comprehensive guideline to use religious inspirations in environmental conservation. This could be summarised as follows:

- 1) There are various environmental and natural processes in religious practices that help to sustain our life. Therefore, these can be taught to people so that they can understand its importance.
- 2) They can take leadership roles in various practical environmental interventions. They can motivate their members so that each one develops a moral obligation to protect their environment.
- 3) They can guide on the various ways to use environmental management (World Bank Report, 2006, pp 1-2). In the word of Al Gore, a moral and spiritual revolution is much needed [10].

Religion and Environment

Every religion is standing upon a philosophy. This paper tried to document the different codes and ethics enshrined within the major world religions (Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism) and their philosophies that have an inherent role to play in conserving the nature. Let us take examples of few major religions of the world:

- **Buddhism:** Buddhist traditions believe that every action has its consequences. The main element of Buddhist lesson is Karma that reflects the values of conservation and responsibility for the future. It is said that the present morality of our actions shapes our character for the future that reflects the idea of sustainable development. Dalai Lama very aptly stated how various human activities are causing threats for survival:

'Peace and survival of life on earth as we know it are threatened by human activities that lack a commitment to humanitarian values... Our ancestors viewed the earth as rich and bountiful, which it is. Many people in the past also saw nature as inexhaustibly sustainable, which we now know is the case only if we care for it.' [11]

He also mentioned that it is the responsibility of this generation to heal the damage that is made to the environment.

• **Christianity:** There are more than hundreds of verses in the Bible that speak about protection of the environment. Christians take the responsibility of the environment and thus encourage behavioral change for the benefits of the present as well as future. 'When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted' (*John 6:12*). *The Pope (2015) also asked people to keep faith on the Creator and to revive the lost humanity to protect the environment:*

'The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.' (Pope Francis, 2015).

Moreover, Christianity seeks for justice in everything. Justice to them is a core element of moral character of man. Environmental hazards are also considered as justice issue to them. Unless we live sustainable, the environmental issues will affect the vulnerable section of the society most. Pope Francis calls for stopping this environmental injustice by developing new good habits for conserving the nature.

• **Hinduism:** Hinduism is a religion that treats nature as mother. The sacred text (Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita) has many mentions of divinity related to nature, such as mountains, rivers, animals, trees, and the earth. Hinduism encourages environmental protection and there are organisations that promote sustainable development and support the protection of the environment through awareness campaigns and actions. In Bhagavata Gita it is beautifully explained how every element of environment are mutually interdependent:

'According to the different modes of material nature — the mode of goodness, the mode of passion and the mode of darkness — there are different living creatures, who are known as demigods, human beings and hellish living entities. O King, even a particular mode of nature, being mixed with the other two, is divided into three, and thus each kind of living creature is influenced by the other modes and acquires its habits also.' (Bhagavata Purana 2.10.41).

Amma (2011) stated, 'There is an inseparable bond between man and nature. For man, there cannot be an existence removed from nature.' (as cited in UNEP, n.d.).

• **Islam:** Hundreds of Qur'an verses support the protection of the nature. Many Islamic organisations safeguard the relation between Islam and sustainability. The responsibility of humanity is to save and ensure the unity (Tawheed) of all the creation of God. They believe no one can take the position of God and control the nature. Moreover, Islam prevents the excessive intake of resources the planet provides to the humanity (Qur'an 7:31, 6:141, 17:26-27, 40:34). Qur'an mentions wasteful consumption (Israf) as the 32nd greatest sin which reflects the concept of minimalistic living. In 17th surah of Qur'an it is stated that 'Do not strut arrogantly on the earth. You will never split the earth apart nor will you ever rival the mountains' stature' [6]. Like

Buddhism, Islam also makes human responsible for environmental degradation and thus asks them to take the responsibility to repair the damages with humility.

• **Jainism:** Verbally, physically and mentally, Jainism focuses on a peaceful and disciplined life. Kindness to animals, self-restraint and vegetarianism with the avoidance of waste are the parts of Jain's life. As cited by Singhvi (1990), 'Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture, or kill any creature or living being' (Mahavira).

Instances of eco-friendly religious activities: Many religious activities from different parts of the world are proved to be environmentally beneficial and help in its conservation directly and indirectly. Woodhouse, (2012) studied the role of Tibetan Buddhism in environmental conservation under changing socio-economic conditions in China. The aim of the study was to get an empirical basis of how Tibetan Buddhism modifies people's relationship with the natural environment in the light of environment conservation. The study found out that Tibetans are orientating themselves towards the nature or environment by incorporating gods and spirits in the landscape, ideas of karma, and moral precepts of Buddhism. The forest protection law has incorporated religious norms to implement them. A community in northern Ghana, for nearly three centuries, has preserved a small forest as they believe this forest houses a local spirit. These holy patches of forest are called 'sacred grove' and are found in different parts of the world. Threatened for many years by activities like road-building, mining, and electric-pole installation they still persist and this is due to community's strong religious beliefs [26]. Indigenous people of Central Himalayan region had developed/adopted their own system for conserving their bio-resources. They used to plant most of the commonly used tree species in some sacred groves maintained in that region [24]. Tibetan people consider KhawaKarlo to be a sacred mountain which is situated in the eastern Himalayas. Internationally this place is registered as a biodiversity hotspot. Indigenous Tibetan people interact with KhawaKarlo in such a way that is said to be beneficial from conservation perspective as they consider a large portion of the mountain as 'sacred'. The remote sensing report indicated that these 'sacred' sites are found to be blessed with greater species richness, bio-diversity, and endemism than any randomly selected non-sacred sites. Buddhist monks believed that many new plants and crops grow during rainy session and so they tried to stay in one place for at least three months. This is because they believed, otherwise those tender small plants would die under their feet. In India, different elements of nature are treated as God and Goddess following ancient Indian traditions. Many mentions of tree prayer can be found in Ancient Harappan civilisation. Indian ancestors have related trees of great importance with spirituality to protect them. For example, bel and Rudraksha were associated with lord Shiva, Peepal tree with lord Vishnu, with lord Hanuman and Ashoka tree with lord Kamadeva [14]. These are some of such examples of religious rituals that help in conservation of nature.

Importance of including eco-friendly religious activities in School Curriculum at the Secondary Level: Age of students at the secondary stage ranges from 14-18 years.

They belong to adolescent group which is regarded as the transitional phase from childhood to adulthood. According to Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, at this Formal Operational stage three areas of cognitive development occur. I) Students develop reasoning skill, II) they learn to think abstractly, and III) they examine hypotheses logically and deductively. This is the right time to inculcate environmental values. At this age they are capable of thinking about environmental issues and environmental conservation logically and rationally. As they become abstract thinkers, they can think spiritually as well. They develop the ability to integrate science with religious beliefs, use proper justification and act accordingly.

Support from Constructivism: According to constructivism we learn from our experiences. We construct our own knowledge based on previous experiences. Curriculum thus provides the scope and environment to its learners so that they can construct their own knowledge. This approach to learning advocates the inclusion of eco-friendly religious activities in secondary school curriculum. Students from various religious and cultural background come to school and make a heterogeneous peer group. Each one carries his/her own religious faiths and believes when they come to school. This faiths and beliefs are something that has been instilled in them from an early age via his/her family and community. So when they find their religious customs and activities in their text books or school activities they can easily relate to them. This will easily internalise in their value system and will develop pro-environmental behaviour. Sometimes science is unsuccessful to make them understand why environmental conservation is so important or unable to modify their behavior to act in a sustainable manner but religious faith can provide an obligation to show pro-environmental behavior. Negi, C.S. (2005) stated:

'For most cultures, religion is a primary means of defining right and wrong. Since nature has spiritual powers, it commands respect and is included in the religious code of morality and etiquette by all religions, even though they may differ in their ways and means. These ethical beliefs and religious values influence our behaviour towards others, including our relationship with all creatures and plant life.' [17]

Scope of Secondary School Curriculum to include Religious Activities to develop Pro-environmental Behavior: The school curriculum is divided into curricular and co-curricular areas. The curricular area consists of various disciplines. Mainly the science subjects viz. Biology, Physics, Chemistry are the source of developing environmental awareness. At the same time the role of social science subjects are not at all of less significance. In every subject area (new knowledge) there are ample scope to cite or refer to known or interesting religious activities (known experience) that are eco-friendly and beneficial for environmental conservation. Along with these curricular areas, co-curricular activities provide vast experiences to the students. Students may practice certain religious activities that lead to environmental conservation. These could be taught through hidden curriculum as well. All of these are supported by constructivism because the new learning is anchored upon their well-known religious faiths and rituals.

3. Conclusion

The aforesaid suggestion has the capability to bring success because, i) Every religion opines that conserving life on earth is a noble cause that can provide fulfillment and self-realisation to individuals pursuing it. This is the ultimate goal of life. ii) The God fearing religious devotees follow religious leadership backed up by inspiration from sacred texts, which can be a factor in fostering environmental conservation action. iii) People have the natural inclination to contribute to a noteworthy cause, provided it is of social significance and confer prestige, and religion helps to establish them. iv) When the community or cohort leaders make certain behaviors a priority, others follow [8]; [19]. People have an obligation to maintain their relations with others and they seek for belongingness. [2]; [26]. As schools reflect the needs and philosophies of the society, the above mentioned reasons make it noteworthy to include eco-friendly religious activities in secondary school curriculum. The major barrier working here is that including religious matter can violate the secular system of education. Ethical issues may arise. So one of the major tasks for the curriculum planners would be to select and include religious references from a neutral view point, without harming the sentiments of any religious community.

4. Further Suggestion

The paper is solely based on qualitative research. This opens up the scope for quantitative research in this area and its successful application. Historical and ethnographic research is required to explore more eco-friendly religious rituals from different parts of the world and to evaluate their effectiveness to cater to environmental conservation. Different levels of education system might be explored for implementation of these research outcomes.

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