> It is thus vital that EE includes in its programme the inculcation of certain values which direct the use of information and skills in positive socially-constructive directions.

# Environmental Education or Environmental wisdom?

### *Ashish Kothari*

As we move closer and closer towards ecological collapse, with not just thousands of plant and animal species but also humanity itself perched on the brink of extinction, there is increasing stress on "environmental education" or "awareness". This is especially aimed at the youth. Too often, however, what passes as environment education (EE) is merely a stuffing, into the heads of the `targets, of facts and information. the child grows up with tons of data, but not necessarily with the wisdom to interact sensitively with the natural and human environment.

EE should not be limited to the imparting of information and skills, though these are important components. It must go beyond this to create or encourage in the child the formation of certain values and attitudes regarding its environmental surrounds. In the absence of a strong sense of values, the information and skills passed on through EE can be misused, e.g. knowledge of animal behaviour can be used in killing for `Sport', or knowledge of the social processes underlying environmental issues can eventually be utilised to exploit these processes for purely personal gain. Indeed, information in today's world is power, and such power can be extremly dangerous if used in the wrong direction. It is thus vital that EE includes in its programme the inculcation of certain values which direct the use of information and skills in positive socially-constructive directions. Of these values, there are three that I feel are sadly neglected in most of our formal education and even in quite a bit of our non-formal education. These are :

1. Respectful attitude towards nature and towards one's fellow creatures, including humans.

2. Questioning attitude towards beliefs/ideas dogmas handed down by religion, science, ideology and culture.

3. Radical attitude towards environmental issues, based on an understanding of such issues as essentially social and political in nature.

It appears to me that the incorporation of these, and of methods which bring the child directly and meaningfully into contact with the environment, are essential steps towards the making of an adult who is not merely and "environmentalist", but a wise one...one who knows, even if intuitively, how to behave with the earth and with fellow creatures.

Let me discuss each of the above values in greater detail :

## 1. Sensitivity to and respect for nature and for one's fellow creatures :

Some often these days we hear and speak of " that the conquest of nature", the "taming a of river", the "war against insects", and so on. Often these phrases are used without consciously attaching any values to them, but they have underlying them an attitude of hostility towards Nature and Nature's creatures, a viewpoint which seems to assume Nature as an enemy that needs to be vanquished. Alternatively, Nature is seen merely as a `resource' to be `exploited take the maximum out of it, regardless of what this does to natural processes and to the other creatures which depend on these processes.

It is perhaps not too long a step from this attitude to one which sees fellow humans too as resources to be exploited, or other human communities as enemies to be conquered. This sort of attitude has come many forms, from explicit ones like bonded labour and war, to very subtle ones like the belief that some people must suffer for the sake of a larger number of people (so when a dam is built which displaces a few thousand tribals, it is justified as a `sacrifice' in the cause of some alleged `national interest' ; as one engineer once put it. "You have to break some eggs to make an omelette"!).

In both cases there is a lack of sensitivity and respect, and sometimes outright disrespect, for the lives and lifestyles of our fellow creatures. It is this attitude, drilled into a child by social forces, which must be countered by environmental education. Yet, sadly, in most cases this is not done. What is done is to talk about the food web and the energy cycles and ecological balance and so on, and how removal of any element from these systems disrupts and whole system, and further now this can affect human beings too. This is all essential, but it is not enough, for it does not do much to inculcate in the child the kind of sensitivity that is essential in its interaction with Nature and with other humans. Indeed in many environmental education activities quite the opposite might take place. A classic example of this is the making of a herbarium, or even worse, an insect collection, so common in both formal and non-formal education of India. A child is often encouraged to pluck leaves and flowers and run after butterflies with a net, and is part of large group of children similarly marauding a patch of Nature within it. Such a child is not likely to develop any strong feeling of respect for Nature, or for the individual `specimens' pressed in the plant file or trapped in a jar. It is even worse when the activity is also competitive, i.e., who collects the maximum. A lot of knowledge may be gained, but it is gained in a value system which emphasises exploitation and conquest, not nature and respect. A much more positive approach is unobtrusive, ` non-vivisectional' field observation. Though this may be much more difficult (especially for the teacher!) it can be infinitely more rewarding. Learning under a tree (santivana) rather than in a classroom, as is indeed Indian tradition, is far more effective and long-lasting.

The alternative is to take up activities where ecobalances, ecological diversity, animal

> *So when a dam is built which displaces a few thousand tribals, it is justified as a `sacrifice' in the cause of some alleged `national interest' ; as one engineer once put it. "You have to break some eggs to make an omelette"!*

behaviour, human plurality, and other such concepts and systems are introduced with the stress on their intrinsic worth. Materials, processes, living beings do not exists only for human use, but more importantly they are worthwhile in themselves. A river running into the ocean is not running 'waste', as our dam engineers would like us to believe, but is rather an intrinsic part of an essential ecological cycle important in itself; a river's free running must thus be respected. A frog is as much in love with its life as the human child is with its; the free life of the frog must thus be respected. Similarly a human community very different from our own values its own culture and lifestyle as much as we value ours; human cultural diversity must thus be respected.; And an individual human being wants as clear and bountiful an environment as we do, indeed has an equal right to it, so we must respect this right. What all this leads upto, finally, is a vital thrust for environmental education : inculcating the habit of constantly asking oneself the question "Am I right to live and live freely? If I am, what can I do to minimise the damage I am causing?" Once again, the Indian tradition of ahimsa comes out as infinitely more relevant that much of what we learn in modern education.

## 2. A questioning attitude towards beliefs and ideas :

So often do we accept and act out of, without questioning, the ideas, dogmas, and beliefs handed down to us by culture, science, ideology, religion, etc. This is especially true if the idea is proclaimed by a ' prominent personality' -so if the Prime Minister say that better technology is the answer to all our environmental problems, that is accepted as the ultimate word. Bring in 21st century technology, and all will be solved. We tow the same line, and many other cliched lines, in many of our EE programmes "Population explosion is the root cause of all our problems"; "it is because of poor management and primitive technology that our environment is being destroyed"; "the poor people are destroying all our natural resources", and so on. So what do we do?-curb the growth of population, bring in sophisticated technology, let society be run by efficient managers, don't allow the poor access to natural resources and there, presto, vanish our environmental problems.

Surely, it is time we ourselves started questioning these beliefs, and encouraging children to start questioning them? By propagating such distorted and often untrue ideas in the guise of EE (and it is sad that many environmental groups in India still do this), we not only dstort and oversimplify reality, but we also reinforce the system which creates these ideas by not allowing any scope for the child to question them. We have to do the reverse-we have to place at the child's disposal ideas which challenge the existing ones, and then actively help in the child's process of judging which is more truthful, or which is more in consonance with its own experiences. To give examples from the same themes mentioned above, here are some questions that environmental education must encourage the child to ask : Is it the growth of population in itself which has caused environmental destruction, or is it more a problem of who consumes how much, a small minority consuming far more than the majority? Is it, therefore, the poor who are destroying our forests, or is it rich people needing furniture, wood panelling, big houses, paper packing, etc.? Or is it both, the former out of necessity, the latter due to certain 'wants' of comfort? What about own lifestyle-is it environmentally very destructive? Is it sophisticated Western technology, be they traditional or modern? Is the path of 'development' we are following either sustainable or equitable? And if not, can some other path be found out (children must learn not to be afraid of being labelled "anti-progress" and "anti-national" when they ask this question!). And can we solve our problems simply through greater efficiency and better management, or are there deeper, more complex issues involved? Which brings me to the third value.

## 3. Radical attitude towards environmental issues

The environmental problems are not merely a result of demographic, managerial, or technical/technological factors, but are essentially social and political in nature is increasingly being realized. But unfortunately this realization had yet to be transferred on to the environment education process. We still favour the well-worn out 'safe' answers mentioned above, and are very obviously afraid to venture into the more complex, challenging, and radical world of socio-politics. Indeed, to most educationists politics still has very dirty connotations, a world to be avoided at all costs. And so we end up with the simplistic answers of population explosion, mismanagement, and primitive technology.

It is time we went beyond this. We have to do two things. First, bring to the child the understanding that environmental problems emerge, at least partly, from certain kinds of power structures and social relationships. How natural resources are used and for whose benefit is determined by who has control over them. A powerful minority need not bother much about resource depletion and the consequent effects on the majority, so long as it can meet its needs and wants at least for the present generation. Our city dwelling elite can corner the best and largest part of the forest for its 'needs' of furniture, wood panelling, products packaging, and so on regardless of the fact that this forces the rural poor to depend on smaller and smaller patches of forest, thereby ultimately crossing way over its carrying capacity. Our landlords with huge holdings can afford to neglect a lot of their land, while simultaneously forcing poor farmers to over-use their tiny holdings-in both cases, the result is land degradation. The U.S.A. with a small fraction of the world's population but with a lot of its clout, can easily consume far more than is its fair share of the world's resources.

> Our city dwelling elite can corner the best and largest part of the forest for its ' needs' of furniture, wood panelling, products packaging, and so on regardless of the fact that this forces the rural poor to depend on smaller and smaller patches of forest.

Britain ' developed' on the basis of the raw materials it stole from its colonies starting off several chains of environmental destruction there. And so on, Gandhiji' s famous quote regarding need and greed, as also his perceptive observation that if India wanted to get to the level at which the British lived, it would have to strip the world bare like a swarm of locusts.

Once this understanding is reached (a rather difficult task in itself, for it involves challenging accepted ideas and beliefs), then comes the second crucial step. The child must be encouraged to transform the understanding into some action, and the most effective and necessary action is to intervene in the socio-political systems from which environmental problems emanate. There should be no mincing of words here-the only lasting solution to such problems is a change in the socio-political system (a revolution in the true sense, not in its much-derided form), and to do this each concerned citizen needs to get involved, to boldly challenge prevailing beliefs and structures, to publicly protest against environmentally destructive activities and against the forces (governmental or non-governmental) which indulge in such activities. Radical attitudes and radical action, both based on a strong sense of ethics, are absolutely necessary, and EE must take upon itself the task of inculcating these in the child. ◆

**Ashish Kothari is the founder member of Kalpvriksha**