

Earth-Consciousness in the Poetry of Yayati Madan G Gandhi Sarita Mehta'

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Abstract

The theme of earth-consciousness is concerned with the problems of the threat of global nuclear war and environmental degradation. This theme is complementary to the theme of self-realisation as both of these are part of our two foundations, Dharma and Karma. The two fundamentals may be regarded as prerequisites for the attainment of a more environment consciousness world. This paper analyses the relation of Dharma and Karma.

Keywords: Earth-consciousness, Dharma and Karma, Indian poetry, Y Madan Gandhi Sarita Mehta, Indian writing in English

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The theme of earth-consciousness is concerned with the problems of the threat of global nuclear war and environmental degradation. This theme is complementary to the theme of self-realisation as both of these are part of our two foundations, Dharma and Karma. The two fundamentals may be regarded as prerequisites for the attainment of a more environment consciousness world. The concept of Dharma, including its companion Karma, asks that everyone should "accept two complementary ethics: One of ecology and the other of Self-realization"¹. Ecologically, the poet not only makes us aware of the threat of annihilation of the earth but also tries to explore the solution to the problem.

The beginning of the last third of the 20th century is marked by a sharp deterioration in man's natural environment : air and water pollution; accumulation of all kinds of waste products over wide areas; degradation of soil; extensive use of natural resources; depletion of ozone layer; and other forms of disruption of natural balance. The hazardous effects of human activities are manifested in all major ecological spheres: the biosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere, and a certain part of the lithosphere. This indicates that contradictions between the society and nature have become extremely acute. Man's transforming activities are increasingly conflicting with the

processes regulating the dynamic equilibrium in the ecosphere.

This has produced the imminent danger of irreversible changes in the natural systems—both elementary and global, disastrous shifts in the earth's life-sustaining systems and the resulting perilous effects in the natural conditions and resources for the present and future generations.

The original concept of having stewardship of nature and thus of co-operating with nature has been relegated to the background. The rise of scientism has allowed the man to view the natural environment as a machine supplying resource to meet the increasing human demands. According to O.P. Dwivedi, "We have witnessed the overexploitation of our resources to the point where human intervention in natural ecosystems has caused genetic mutations, the emission of heat and noxious gases into the atmosphere, destruction of forests and many other effects that are heading towards irreversible global damage. These interventions are so drastic in scale and impact that life support systems both logically and globally are being threatened."²

Today, the major problem of human race is the threat of an outbreak of global nuclear war. Environmental degradation is the cause of extinction of certain species, the problem of a nuclear war poses the threat of annihilation on a global scale. For the past few years, a qualitative leap has occurred in the development of the

material means of warfare, the scope of which is historically unprecedented. But nuclear weapons poses an immense destructive power, even the power concentrated within a single thermonuclear bomb is several times larger than the power of all explosive materials employed during the second world war and even during the human race's entire history. O.P. Dwivedi explains the crisis in the following words; "The worst possibility of what can happen with nuclear weapons is absolutely horrendous, posing threat to human life far exceeding the threats of the plague. A tactical nuclear war fought with battlefield nuclear weapons will be more destructive of human life than anything we have every experience."³ Nuclear warfare, as well as the long-lasting physical effect of it, have been clearly depicted by the poet in his poetry. The poet is deeply worried about the atmospheric pollution which is a major problem facing all nations of the world. Rapid urban and industrial growth has resulted in vast quantities of potentially harmful waste products being released into the atmosphere. Societies have simply failed to recognize the limitations of the cleansing properties of the atmosphere. The consequence has been that pollution has affected the health and well-being of people, has caused widespread damage to vegetation, crops, wildlife, materials, buildings and climate and has resulted in depletion of the scare natural resources needed for long-term economic development. In fact,

human activities have affected the whole planet to such an extent that the poet finds no place pollution-free:

Where to escape

Pollution everywhere

On high peaks of snow

In outer space

*Above and below.*⁴

With the tremendous increase in industrial plants, power plants, petrol-powered motor vehicles, automobiles, etc., the concentration of oxides of sulphur, carbon, nitrogen, lead, hydrocarbons and other harmful substances has also increased. The poet pinpoints ghostlike presence of gaseous plants in "Nausea". It reacts catalytically with other pollutants to form sulphur dioxide, sulphuric acid and some sulphates. The sulphates may be responsible for increased asthma attacks, aggravation of heart and lung disease, lower resistance to respiratory disease in children and other air-polluted conditions. Automobiles and chemical industries release oxide of nitrogen which in turn lower the oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood.

Oxides of carbon are carbon monoxides and carbon dioxide. Carbon monoxide is produced by incomplete combustion of fuel. If inhaled, it leads to laziness, exhaustion, reduced vision, nervous disorders and even death. Such type of ill effects compels the poet to say, "Chaos enters with a triumphant smile/ darkness and death in its train."⁵ Carbon dioxide is produced by

cigarette-smoking and burning of fuel in houses, industries, power plants and automobiles. This gas causes nausea and headache. All of these gases are not only harmful to human beings but to plants and animals also. The poet perceives that this "gaseous poison curling up the sky"⁶ would eat up the universe like "ants". The smoke coming out of industries would engulf the earth and after that, it would embrace "globes and galaxies". He contrasts this smoke with that coming out of Havans, once performed by Rishis in order to please Gods as well as to purify the air: "These columns of smoke/ curling up the sky/ are no remains of offerings."⁷

Concern for depletion of ozone layer has been expressed in a number of poems. In the "Luminous web" he pinpoints:

*Patches have worn thin,
The sky wears holes
of the size of the earth,
The ozone layer torn.*⁸

The ozone layer is "a layer of relatively high concentration of ozone located in the stratosphere." Oxides of nitrogen from agricultural activities and nuclear-weapon tests; a global increase in the atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration; and increased domestic and industrial use of a number of stable chlorine-containing compounds are assumed to be the cause of ozone layer depletion. The

layer is important because, through absorption, it controls the ultraviolet solar radiations reaching the ground. Ultraviolet radiations are known to cause ageing of the skin in people. Besides, because of the high co-relation between sunshine and skin cancer, it is accepted that ultraviolet exposure of skin is directly linked to skin cancer. The poet is so much scared of these hazardous effects that he wonders: "Will life revive on the earth?"¹⁰ He identifies himself with the earth and feels as if the ozone layer holes were in his own skin: "I see many holes., ozone layer like,/ in my skinny coat."¹¹ He feels a desert all around him. His "prismatic body" is no more able to withstand the "chemical combustion".

The poet is very conscious about the possibility of "total annihilation / caused by the nuclear radiation."¹² Radiation is "an another."¹³ Nuclear radiations are those which are emitted by radioactive materials such as radium, thorium, uranium, etc. These materials are present in the human environment as the result of natural processes and the human technological developments. These materials produce ionizing radiations such as X-rays, gamma rays, alpha particles, beta particles, electrons, protons, neutrons and cosmic rays which ionize the atoms of substances they penetrate.

Ionization is defined as "the process by which a fast-moving quantity of energy is transferred to some of the atoms of the material through which it is travelling" leaving them as electrically charged ions."¹⁴ Ionizing

radiation has severe effects. Evidence radiation has severe effects. Evidence for the effect of ionizing radiation on people is derived from several sources. The survivors of the atomic bomb detonations at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 provide evidence on the effect of substantially uniform "whole body" irradiation on people of all ages. The poet points out the happening as well as radiation-induced disorders and diseases such as abnormalities in cell development, chromosomal damage, leukaemia, cancer of the thyroid, lung and breast, impairment of growth and development. The fate of some others is described in the following lines:

*Incapacitated for ever,
riveted to a wheelchair,
artificially breathing,
intravenously fed.¹⁵*

The poet is deeply concerned with the "man-made hole" of "nuclear waste" because radiation from human sources is ever increasing through accidental releases of radioactivity from nuclear reactors, nuclear explosions, medical uses of radiation and nuclear weapon testing. Radioactive isotopes, such as uranium, are used as fuel to bring about the disintegration of other atoms. The process releases a large amount of energy as heat. This heat may be used to produce steam for turning large turbines, which produce electricity. Both fuel elements and coolants contribute to radiation pollution. Wastes from atomic

reactors also contain radioactive materials. These materials, if not properly disposed of, harm the living systems. They are dumped, cause havoc. Inert gases and halogens escape as vapours and cause pollution by settling on land or reaching the surrounding water with rain which in turn has harmful effects upon plants as well as animals. That's why the poet says, "fissions and fusions create a hell."¹⁶

The greatest source of danger for subsequent generations and for all living nature are nuclear weapons, their tests and the threat of their use as a means of mass destruction. Nuclear weapons possess an immense destructive power. According to the poet, nuclear blasts are "cancerous" and would eat up "every fibre", "every cell" of life and would turn earth into cinders demolishing the roots of life. Atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons produces global contamination. Some radio-isotopes released during testing give an external gamma-ray dose and others become internally deposited in the body either by direct absorption or via a food chain which may cause genetic mutations. Sometimes the process makes the place dead. Bikini is a scale model of what can happen to vast regions throughout the world in the event of a global nuclear war. It is widely known that in the early 1950's the United States carried out a series of atomic tests in this island which once again have ended in failure and the island continues to be lifeless.

Sometimes serious accidents take place in the nuclear fuel industry. The Chernobyl accident is a living example of it, as has been highlighted by the poet. The accident occurred on 26th April 1986 when an explosion produced uncontrollable fire which lasted several days and led to vast quantities of radionuclides being fitted into the atmosphere. Derek Elsom writes, "The plume of radionuclides was swept across Europe during the following 7-10 days, exposing up to 400 million people in 15 nations to high levels of ionizing radiation. In areas where heavy rainfall scavenged the radionuclides from the atmosphere, radiation levels peaked up to several hundred times higher than background levels."¹⁷ Not only one, but our history provides us with several such examples and compels the poet to think, "this way lies instant doom, / the abyss of impenetrable gloom."¹⁸

Wars have left their mark on social development in all historical ages but the threat that is now hanging over the world is unlike anything that has been known in the past. The lives of hundreds of millions of persons and the destinies of entire countries and peoples and of all mankind are in danger. The development of fundamentally new military technology, especially nuclear missiles, has transformed the entire globe into a potential theatre of military operations. A general nuclear war may mean the extinction of the aggressor as well as the defender. The poem titled "The aftermath" reveals the

fact: "A time comes / when burning becomes a problem/
when there are countless dead/ and no gravediggers."¹⁹

During the first half of the twentieth century, mankind was subjected to two global wars which produced countless victims, "incapacitated" for the whole of their lives. Although these wars took tens of millions of human lives and destroyed enormous material wealth yet there is the possibility of a war involving the use of weapons of mass destruction. The destructive properties of nuclear weapons are increased by the possibility of using them on a massive scale with the help of ballistic missiles which are the principal means of delivery. Such missiles have an unlimited range, are practically invulnerable, follow high altitude trajectories at enormous speeds and are able to carry nuclear warheads of any magnitude. Besides, these can act against large numbers of targets, both at the front and far behind the lines.

If a nuclear war happens to be there, it would not be possible to limit the encounter of opposing forces within the boundaries of a particular theatre of military operations. As an effective defence against nuclear strikes is impossible, the potential targets include not so many military forces as the territories of both warring countries and numerous other countries and the whole of their populations,---- industrial, administrative, political and cultural centres, agricultural and transportation networks. The entire globe could become the battleground. The dead would number not tens of millions of persons as in

the first and second world wars, but hundreds of them, significantly from the effect of lethal radiation, disease and hunger. The scale of destruction of material values would be lifeless deserts contaminated by radioactive materials. There is even a possibility of extinction of the entire human race, as is suggested by the following lines of the poet:

*Shall the earth mother ever conceive
a new crop,
shall the blasted bomb ever deliver
another homo sapien?²⁰*

In view of the poet, “nuclear winter” can descend over the earth soon after the outbreak of a nuclear war. Richard Turco defines the term as: “nuclear winter is a metaphor embracing all of the long-lasting physical effects of nuclear warfare—the destruction by blast and fire; the deadly fallout, both prompt and delayed; the smoke and the dust; the cold and the dark. Serious biological consequences to man and all the other species of the planet follow from these physical manifestations of nuclear winter.”²¹

This type of war may be unbearable not only for the losers but also for the winners. There is also a possibility for the winners to be either dead or see no significant advantage for themselves as compared with the losers. The poet rightly says, “Who will be there for the dead to mourn/if

nuclear winter is let in?"²² Considering the data obtained in numerous test detonations, it has been inferred that massive fires would be ignited in urban areas subject to nuclear bombardment. If a large combustible materials were present inject smoke high in the atmosphere, would cause major climatic act observed by scientists about smoke, particularly soot absorbs sunlight, preventing it from reaching the ground. The solar energy absorbed in the smoke cloud may cause the smoke to rise, spread out and stabilise. When all the above conditions prevail, a gloomy winter can ensue:

*No eclipse, but a blackout the sun caught in the
man-made snare*

of catastrophic nuclear winter.

*It'll extinguish the very root of life
for billions of light years.*²³

The poet says we are facing the possibility of the destruction of not only human life but this beautiful earth also, with its trees, flowers, animals, birds, fish and all other creatures. This earth and this earth alone is the home of human species and there are chances of life disappearing from it also into oblivion. According to the poet, the man himself is responsible for creating such a critical situation. He depicts the fact in "The invisible jury". In the poem, the poet's own shadow after growing larger, encompassing the whole of the space, questions him with a grin if he is not responsible for spreading pollution everywhere, for puncturing the silken ozone layer, for disastrous incidents of Chernobyl and Bhopal, for making

poisonous gases for chemical war and for unleashing
“annihilation on earth/and the outer surface/to efface life
from the cosmic womb?”²⁴

The poet not only presents the problem but also seeks the
solution. He does not rely upon the one sought by
politicians as “the balance of terror” termed also as MAD.
He thinks it to be merely self-deception which will not last
long :

*How long shall we sleep
in doomsday dread
in the balance of terror
in MAD syndrome ?²⁵*

The theory is not a “plea” for peace but a “doomsday
siren”²⁶ in view of the poet. It is a “plea” of the war-
makers of the world who have the lust for power and use
their nations for the satisfaction of their own lust in the
name of “isms”. They have tremendous material
resources at their command and even the psychological
resources for awakening the passions of patriotism and
nationalism and working people into a kind of fury against
some enemy state.

According to the poet, all the treaties of disarmament are
also false. They are just pieces of paper which can be torn
apart. Besides, one suspects the other. Deep material
distrust separates the nations of the world. Indians do not
believe that Pakistan can ever be trusted to keep their

promises, nor the Pakistanis believe Indians. The same is true for other nations. The vast majority of the citizens of every state believe that it is a vital necessity to keep armed forces and latest nuclear bombs adequate for defence. Those who emphasise universal disarmament, use the agenda only as an instrument. Each side tries to deceive the other and makes itself appear to be the "peace-loving nation". They only hurl thunderbolts "wrapped in love balloons,/on neighbours' roofs."²⁷ Each side fears whether the other would keep its word about disarmament or the other might launch a great nuclear war.

In consonance with the spirit of the sages, prophets, reformers and pioneers of old, Gandhi prescribes the solution of the troubles on a moral and ideological plane. He holds that the same rules of morality that guide individuals in their social conduct must also guide groups and nations in their mutual intercourse. It should be as immoral and sinful for nations to cheat, deceive and injure each other as it is for individuals to do so in their civil life. He reminds the whole mankind of the concept of "Vasudev Kutumbkam" of ancient Vedic seers. The poet is against narrow nationalism. All the pleas in the name of "nations" and "isms" are false as all the fights fought for "flag and freedom"²⁸ results only in dead sons of "mother earth". He wants that human beings must get beyond patriotism and nationalism. Man is one, humanity is one and we are citizens of one world. Being a follower of M.K. Gandhi in childhood, the poet believes in the "essential goodness" of man. In his poem "Admission to Redeem",

he tries to awaken in common man the latent feeling of “unified cosmic consciousness”. Each person possesses everything in it. The only need is to bring forth those good traits. What one becomes depends on one’s thinking: “Your thoughts, the treasury of human race.”²⁹ The poet believes in the capability of transformation: hatred into a fraternity, combativeness into cooperation, and suspicion into mutual confidence. He reminds the common man of his potentialities:

*You are the most enlightened seer,
the philosophy you have lived and died for—
the truth common to all religions,
above the din of dissensions.*³⁰

The poet dreams of the war-free earth through the consciousness of the common earth. This dream will be accomplished only through eternal values of love and compassion. A spirit, which is full of love, becomes mightier than “zeta bomb”. Spirit of love can bring the release of mankind from the shackles of hatred, false religions and “isms”. Peace and disarmament are the dream of every person and it can be achieved if each person tries to sow the seeds of love in the others’ heart: “Let every earth born strive/for a new Eden to arrive/with love-seeds flowering/into a million-eyed spring.”³¹ In view of the poet, victory must be won on the moral and spiritual plane. The leaders of different nations must reform their minds and purify their hearts. This is very

difficult but unless everyone reaches that level some day, peace will remain a pious dream.

Thus, the poet expresses a deep concern about the problem of environmental pollution, highlights the perspective of nuclear weapons, focuses specifically on the physically horrendous shape of destruction as a consequence of nuclear winter. The poet senses that the stability of mutual trust is diminishing. He helps us to realize that there are limits to our dominance and control over the animate and inanimate world and that our arrogant manipulation of nature can bring disastrous results. He realizes that life cannot be measured by material possessions alone and that the ends of life go beyond conspicuous consumption. He also performs the function of awakening awareness of that dimension of human personality which is not affected by scientific or technological reasoning. War and violence must be totally abandoned if civilization is to survive. Either the great nations of the world must honestly agree to renounce the use of the newest type of weapons or the world will speedily be brought to an end. If everyone has faith that in the hearts of all beings everywhere, whether they are Russians or Chinese or Pakistanis or Americans, whether they are statesmen or financiers or ordinary men and women, there is an essential element of goodness, which can be released if they see that their neighbours have faith in them, love them, then there is hope that the world can turn from collective suicide to a new era of fruitful cooperation.

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