

Views on Environmental Ethics in Sant Kabir's Philosophy

Sudha Pandit,
Ph. D. Student,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Pune, Pune

The world of our experiences may be divided into two : The Given World and The Created World. There is something which is given to man, which he has not created and there is something which he creates out of the given.¹ Under this view point we can say that the Environment which surrounds us is the given one. It may be for the worse or for the better than that of present world. From times immemorial, irrespective of ages, human have lived 'in it', 'with it' and created, invented many things 'out of it' with respect as a part of it or as independent entity, having a special identity. It's a different question that our status as thinking and rational being higher or lower, as an intelligent and stronger animal we should survive more as rule says stronger survive longer. But we as human try to live 'with it', 'in it' and or create 'out of it'. And thus, it establishes a relationship between us and environment. We are living 'with it' means it is something separate entity with which we are living and we may live without it also and vice-versa. Whereas, living 'in it' means we are a part of its totality and we may also end with it's end. And creating 'out of it' means we are doing value addition our surrounding i.e. 'Environment'. And in this way our relationship with environment depends on the basic thought of the identity of ours and as well as of environment. We can built relations in many ways with environment. But do we need to think on 'Environment' through the glasses of ethic? Do we think of Environment as an independent entity? Do we have any 'Ethical' relation with it? 'How our ancestors understood 'Environment'? Did they have the same problem as we are facing now?' 'Do we find answers for today's problems in our ancient literature or philosophies?' Limiting ourselves to India and not going beyond the medieval period of 'Bhakti Movement' and particularly in the saying of Sant Kabir, is the focus of this essay.

¹ Prof. V. N. Jha, *Dhimahi*, pp. 118

Before we enter into discussion on Sant Kabir's view on Environmental Ethics, let us in brief look into the meaning of 'Environmental Ethics'.

Environmental ethics is a newly developed philosophy. It deals with, of course 'Nature' or 'Environment' yet essentially it talks about 'Human' relationship and concern with 'Nature'. American environmentalist Aldo Leopold says, in his book 'Sand County Almanac' that "we can be ethical only in relation to something that we can see, feel, understand, love or otherwise have faith in."² Totally agreed with Leopold's statement. Yes, we are ethical only with which we see, feel, understand, love or have faith in it. Obviously, we can see and feel the environment directly. But the question is HOW? The question we can be understood by the following discussions.

'Environment' according to Sant Kabir's Philosophy

Sant Kabir accepted the doctrine of the creation as Lila, the play or sport of God. The forms so produced are actual. He felt that the concept of Lila brought out the idea of creation as springing not from necessity but in perfect joy from God's free creative act. Sant Kabir felt that God's nature was love, which pervades the whole creation. No one, neither Pir, Murid, Kazi, Muslman, deity, Sur, Nar, Gan, Gandharwa, Brahma, Dev nor Maheshwar, has ever unwrapped the mystery of His 'Trigunatmak' and 'Panchmahabhutak' creation.

In a special context to the earth Sant Kabir say that the earth is the property of 'Sadhus'- the holy people and not of thieves. Thieves are burden on the earth and earth is for holy people who receives the blessings of God.³ He describe the qualities of 'Sadhu' in many ways, but the one we need is, a 'Sadhu' is not only 'Gurumukhi' but also 'aparighrahi' (un-hoarded) who does not store more than needed. Because he is always in communion with God, and trusts in His providence.⁴

² Aldo Leopold, Sand County Almanac, pp.

³ SGGs, p. 1375 Fifth Mehl: "Kabeer, the earth belongs to the Holy, but it is being occupied by thieves. They are not a burden to the earth; they receive its blessings. ||210||

⁴ KG, Besas ko anga, 'sant na bandhe gathadi, pet samata lai | sai su sanmukh rahe, jahan mange thahan deyi ||10||

Nature - Human Relation

In Sant Kabir's Bani, he describes various human relationships with environment. According to him, the mortal is exalted from the earth.⁵ After the death some humans are cremated (again it is a reformation of body by turning into ashes) and some are buried in the earth.⁶ Sant Kabir states, not only humans but also all 84 millions of species will become soil and get mixed with the earth.⁷ He believes that encroaching environment is same as to disrespect God because God dwells in each and every part of environment.⁸ Sant Kabir says, '..... they wrench their hair as part of their important ritual but they offer flowers of champa, darva to the idol of their God. As if they wrench hair of the earth and this way they waste their life.'⁹ He does not pray environment as God but do have respect for the environment.

As stated in first paragraph we have multiple relations with environment which can be understood by living with it, in it and created out of it. According to Sant Kabir's philosophy I would like to discuss on HOW humans are related with the environment. According to Sant Kabir the relationship is not the 'Animism' (worshiping nature as God). He says, 'Worshiping the idol of stone as the 'Creator' of the world and have faith in it, will drench in 'Kali-dhar' i.e. in worldly things'¹⁰ Rather he says, 'instate of seeing God in Shaligram ('Shaligram' i.e. round stone worshiped as Lord Krishna), see God in every 'Jivatma' (the soul) and consider 'Sadhus' (i.e. real disciples of God) as gods on earth. It is better to see God in every 'Jivatma' than to see god in 'Shaligram' i.e. stones as worshiped entity.'¹¹ Using a metaphor of a gardener he said, 'You tear off the leaves, O gardener, but in each and every leaf, there is life. That stone idol, for which you tear off those leaves is lifeless. In this way, you are mistaken, O gardener. The True Guru is the Living Lord.'¹² In this way the philosophy of Sant Kabir is not an 'Animism'.

⁵ SGGs, p. 1252, raag Sarang.

⁶ SGGs, p. 329, raag Gauree.

⁷ Shabad-41, lakh chaurasi nana basan I so sabh sari bho maati II KG. p.

⁸ SGGs, Raag Gauree, p. 331. "God, the Lord and Master, is totally permeating the water and the land. II4II40II"

⁹ Bijak, Ramaini - 30 'Jaini dharama ka maram na jana, pati tori dev ghar ana I davana maruva champa ke phula, manahu jiv koti sam tula I o pruthvi ke rom uchare, dekhat janam apano hare II30II

¹⁰ "pahan kera putala, kari puje kartar I Ehi bharose jo rahai, te bude kali dhar II1II KG. Bhram Vidhoshan ko Anga

¹¹ "jeti dekhi atma, teta saligram I sadhu prtikhi dev hai, nahi pathar su kaam II3II KG. Bhram Vidhoshan ko Anga

¹² SGGs, Raag Asaa, pg. 479

However, he respects the nature and all species as they are. He says, 'trees are benevolent who with grace gives us fruits without any expectation in return. They are only living who are real donors. Birds without giving back to the tree, flies away to their destiny from the tree but the tree still is prosperous.'¹³ The environment is generous enough to offer itself even we humans destroy it heartlessly. In a very poetic manner Sant Kabir express this idea with an instance of sandal wood having taken to that place where it is unknown and people assumed it as '*palas*' an ordinary tree and started burning it. As it started burning the fragrance of sandal increased.¹⁴ By this copulate we can say that the environment even if it is taking its' last breath it gives all good that it has. We made many changes into the given environment. These changes in the environment have been both advantageous and disadvantageous for human as well as for the environment. On this regard Dr. S. K. Jain in his article '*Human Aspects of Plant Diversity*' says, 'Different human societies have different biodiversity in food habits, ailments, occupations, daily routine, social customs, needs. Having different domestic animals, they had different veterinary diseases to manage. These circumstances have given rise to very diverse experiences among indigenous societies. This has made very rich additions in the interrelationships between man and plant wealth around him. Faith, traditions, taboos and several such associations with forests and particular plant species have helped in conservation of plant diversity. The richness of plant diversity in any area, is not evaluated merely by the number of species occurring there, but by the intensity of associations and dependence of the indigenous communities on that plant wealth. Respect for this indigenous knowledge, and relationship helps in conservation.'¹⁵ We have interrelationship with nature. In the mountains of Himalaya or Leh-Ladhakh people live in the Nature, it does not matter whether the environment is suitable for man or not. The people and the environment have developed a relation of part and whole. They live in it and nature continues to work in its way. Of course, this differs and changes according to territories. The definition of 'Developed', 'Underdeveloped' or 'Forest-dwellers', I think, it all depend upon how 'learned' we are.

¹³ KG. Sanjivani ko anga, 'Data tarvar daya phal, upgari jivant I pankhi chale disawara, birkha sufal falant II7II'

¹⁴ KG., Aparikh ko anga, 'chandana rukh videsh gayo, jan jan kahe palas I jyon jyon chulhe zonkiya, tyon tyon duni baas II4II'

¹⁵ Dr. S. K. Jain in his article '*Human Aspects of Plant Diversity*'

Sant Kabir expresses his views against the destruction of the nature with an instance of log, 'O my brother blacksmith, don't burn me. A day will come when I will burn you.'¹⁶ When you are destroying nature without any mercy, a day will come when you also will have the end of your existence. We are consuming nature so badly that if I want to say in Sant Kabir's Bani, it will be, 'a burned log (in davagni) standing and screaming, 'don't get trap in the hands of blacksmith because he will again burn us.'¹⁷ In a forest-fire (daavaagni) all tree and logs become coal and blacksmith burn that coal again for his business, as if coals are afraid of humans and screaming that don't get in hands of humans beings.

All activities and development of humans are to get happiness it may be protecting nature or using it but in reality do we get any happiness out of it. Sant Kabir says, 'the man thinks false happiness as real happiness but does not know that we all are bite of 'kal' i.e. death. Some are on the lap and some are in the mouth of 'Kal' i.e. death, not knowing when they would die.'¹⁸ We always want more and more without thinking how much really we need. Sant Kabir says, 'why do you build multistory buildings with tall walls. At the end of your life you will need only 6 to 6 and half feet of land.'¹⁹ In other words, a man needs very big palace to live in his life but after death the body is to be buried within 6 feet grave.

Man-Animal Relation

After describing the 'Man and Nature' relation, I would like to discuss about 'Man and Animal' relationship in the light of Sant Kabir's Bani. In his Bani he says that 'the flesh of man is same as that of animals. All eat animal-flesh but no one eats the flesh of man. you made gods of mud and killed the souls for it. If your god is a true god why had he not taken the animals while gazing? says Kabir, all these (rituals) are for taste of tongue and nothing else.'²⁰ Sant Kabir never accepted animal killing as a ritual to worship God. He says very unambiguously that only greed of man and for the taste of the tongue man made two pathways

¹⁶ KG., Kal ko anga, 'mera bir luhariya, tu jini jarai mohi I ek din aisa hoyiga, hon jarogi tohi II43II'

¹⁷ KG., Kal ko anga, 'dho ki dadhi lakadi, thadhi kare pukar I mati basi pado luhar ki, zale duji baar II6II'

¹⁸ KG., Kal ko anga, 'Zuthe sukh ko sukh kahe, manat hai man mor I khalak chabina kalka, kuch mukh me kuch godII1II'

¹⁹ KG., Kal ko anga, 'kaha chunave mediya, lambi bhitti usari I ghar to sadhe tin hath, ghana to pone char II6II'

²⁰ KG. Sabad - 70, 'jas mas pasu ki tas mas nar ki I rudhir rudhir ek sar ji II

towards God. The both communities i.e. Hindus and Muslims are not in position to listen. Hindus do fasting and drink milk whereas Muslims keep full day Roza in Ramzan and in the evening kill chicken. In a way they are praying to God and at same time they are killing, how God will accept their piety.²¹ The point is on the one side, in the name of the religion you behave as if you are doing merits and on the other hand you harm environment and other living and non-living parts of environment inclusive of all from smallest bacteria to biggest and intelligent humans by any way may be physically, mentally or orally, you are not doing merit but harming God's creation. Destroying and disrespecting God.

We live in the environment. We also live with the environment. Humans in the stone age also have given added values to the animals and Nature. The cave paintings are the evidence of it. In ancient times, after stone age and invention of metal, when man was a new trader, he used seals made of metals with having engraved pictures of bull, tree, boat and many other nature's aspects as their symbol of trade and their face-marks on coins. From the face of coin, historians come to know about traditions, culture, deities, and prosperities of particular king or kingdom. Hence, we always had, have and will have relationships with environment as a part of it. Although, many species have disappeared from the earth, we are still alive living with the hope that we will continue till the earth ends. As in the case of 'Mammoths' disappeared from the earth long ago and we cannot bring them back, moreover the atmosphere now we have is not suitable for them to survive. But if we think about the history of human kind it states that we had problems with our surroundings in one way or the other. The examinations of scholars, the site of Quetta Valley which was well developed city prior to Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa civilization and even Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa cities faced problem of flood and now they are an age history for us. After having a long historical background in relationship with environment, this is an effort to find answers for environmental relations. Sant Kabir says that the 'jogis' lived in the forest and ate roots of different trees but did not come to know with which root the body will become immortal.²² In any way, the mortal beings will not become immortals. It is only with the grace of God and teachings of Guru will save us.²³

²¹ Bijak, Sabad - 10, 'Santo raah duno ham ditha I Hindu Turak hata nahi mane swad saban ko mitha II'

²² KG., Sangivani ko anga, 'kabir jogi bani basya, khani jaye kandmul I na jane kis jadi the, amar bhaya asthol II2II'

²³ KG., Kal ko anga, 'jo paharya so fatasi, nav dhariya so jayi I kabir soi tat gahi, jo gur diya batai II2II'