Reflections of Indian Youth Engagement in Environmental Concerns: An Analysis of the Media's Role

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Abstract

Environment has become a key apprehension for the entire pan globe in the 21st century. Climate change in the form of unseasoned heavy rain, increasing surface temperature of the earth, flood, land sliding, hazardous radiation, damage of the ozone layer, etc., has created many challenges in front of the entire living population. In the name of so-called development, humans have indulged themselves in various anti-environmental activities, thereby leading to multifarious environmental deterioration. The exploitation of natural resources ultimately leads to the age of the crisis of resources. Mass media's undeniable role in awaking the youngsters to participate in environmental management is also a concern of study. Delhi, the capital of India, where policymakers make policy on the environment, has no doubt become one of the most polluted cities in the world. This paper focuses on the emerging issues on the environment and role of media on the environmental engagement of youths of the capital of India. From its primary goal to inform, educate and aware, the mass media can encourage, appreciate and motivate the emerging and dynamic youth population on various environmental issues and engage them to protect and guard the environment. This study is empirical in nature with survey method using primary data collection from 360 youth respondents of Delhi. The study corroborates with the fact that media can work as change agents in achieving eco-preservation goals by inculcating positive levels of awareness among the youths.

Keywords: *Climate change, development, environment, media, youth engagement.*

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Introduction

Human existence and survival are cocooned in the natural environment. Simply put, a healthy environment is the foundation of this human life. The environment, which is the sum total of precious resources like water, air, land, and all living and non-living things is the natural habitat of human beings. It functions within the amicable ambit of the living and non-living factors. But on an alarming note, the whole world is currently facing many environmental issues due to quick climate change and its hazardous impact on people. The deteriorating quality of the environment surrounding humankind has become a grave concern among humanity. The environment or humankind's natural habitat fulfills all the diverse needs of people but in the contemporary scenario, it has been heavily exploited due to humankind's unending greed. In the race for globalization and development, developed and developing countries have exploited its natural resources on a large scale. Such activities on the part of people are the core reasons for environmental deterioration in many ways.

According to environmental determinism, the environment decides our lifestyle, culture, social behavior and hence, it directs growth and development of humankind. From birth till death, environment is humanity's fate and savior. Environment is the reason for humankind's existence. Interestingly, there is a reciprocal relationship between humankind and the environment since time immemorial. Oriental approach to environmental protection was much prominent in the olden days as evidence predicted our forefathers worshipping environment. As Singh (2016) rightly says, "Our ancient seers, without the aid of technology, knew and appreciated that living beings are made of five elements, namely water (*Jal*), air (*Vaayu*), earth (*Prithvi*), sky (*Akash*), and fire (*Agni*). Therefore, the approach of our ancient seers was to keep the five elements pure. These elements and their sources were considered as sacred and valuable as life. Since they fulfilled the human needs, they were worshipped" (p. 4). In ancient times, no doubt, nature was respected by humanity. Religious books advocate the importance of nature and its component. In *Shrimad Bhagavat*, it has been rightly pointed out that "a man who with exclusive devotion offers respect to sky, water, earth, heavenly bodies, living beings, trees, rivers and seas and all created beings and considers them as a part of the body of the Lord attains the state of supreme peace and God's grace"(Tiwari, 1989, p. 27).

Modern approach of development advocates the principle of one side relationship in which people try to achieve maximum utility from the environment while the ancient approach advocates the principles of two side relationship in which people nurture and safeguard the environment in lieu of the environment's valuable services to humankind.

According to the *UN Environment Programme*, the planet is under enormous pressure, reflecting the depletion of the earth's natural resources in the form of resources pollution, climate destabilization and species extinction. The modern approach is based on maximum exploitation of resources and as side effects, thereby creating new challenges day by day. In the quest for development and modernization, humans have indulged in various activities like deforestation, air pollution, soil pollution, water pollution, etc., resulting in climatic disasters and environmental weakening such as floods, droughts, global warming and many more. The present situation of the earth and the impending environmental degradation is so grave that it has become a 'do or die' situation for its people. It is humanity once again to save and protect the natural habitat and hence, carve the movement towards environmental sensitivity.

India, the second most populated country in the world, crossing more than 1.3 billion population has garnered public attention for environmental pollution woes. As per a report by the Global Alliance on Health and Pollution (GAHP), "India leads the world in pollution-linked deaths" ("India suffers most pollution-linked deaths," 2019). According to a report of *NITI Aayog* (2018), 70% of Indian pollution is unable to get pure water. India is on 120th position out of 122 countries on the basis of quality indicator of water due to its huge population. As per the report, India has 17% of the world population while resources for pure water are only 4%. Every year, a huge area of the country faces drought. Around 33% of the world's land area is covered by forest. Covering the earth like a green blanket, forests not only produce innumerable material goods but also provide several environmental services which are essential for life. Forest cover has reduced to only 12% in India. "A report of the IPCC on climate change makes it clear that the world will witness a greater sea-level rise, higher frequency of droughts and floods, and heat waves and countries like India with large populations dependent on the agriculture and fishery sectors would be highly impacted" ("IPCC report: India," 2018).

As a matter of fact, environmental degradation has already taken its toll. Lack of humanism to the environment has grown up with the pace of industrialization in India too. Ramachandran (2003) appropriately writes, "The concept of environmental protection and conservation is not new to India. The idea and practice have always been an integral part of our customs, traditions, and laws. From ancient times, the emphasis has been laid on the five elements of nature which have been both revered and worshiped" (p. 137). In order to come up with greater responsibility of protecting the environment by the Central Government, *Environmental Protection Councils* (EPCs) were set up in different States and Union Territories of the country in which representatives from different sectors

of society have been nominated by concerned Ministry for safeguarding the environment (Sharma, 2009). *National Green Tribunal* is another agency which looks after numerous environmental issues (Rajagopalan, 2013). Environmental law concerns regulation, protection or prohibition of activities affecting the environment, which includes the air, water, plant and animal life.

The Indian Government, nevertheless is trying to make people sensitive towards the environment, understand the value of natural resources, and participate in activities related to environmental protection. The Government has included the concerns of the environment in its 17 points Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) wherein goal 13 on climate change aims to integrate climate change measures into national policies and strategies, and further aims to plan and promote mechanism for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management. According to the *SDG India Index, Baseline report*, 2018, the Government has fixed a target to be achieved by 2030 mentioned in SDG-13.3 as "improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction, and early warning" (p. 153). A number of pollution-related rules and policies have been introduced by the State as well as the Central Government to make India pollution free. The Indian constitution is perhaps one of the rare Constitutions of the world which contains specific provisions relating to environmental protection. Lot more efforts have also been made by certain agencies and civic groups to save our environment such as the infamous *Chipko Movement*, *Appiko Movement*, *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, *Save Ganga Campaign*, etc. (Rajagopalan, 2009). In the light of the diverse efforts made to save our environment, it has therefore become pertinent to know whether such efforts garner public support or not.

Rationale and Objectives of the Study

Delhi, the capital city of India, where constant measures and planning for a better environment are made, has become one of the most polluted cities in the world (Dasgupta, 2019). People of the Indian capital are facing numerous environmental problems which indicate danger ahead. The river *Yamuna* has become a drained river leading to huge water crisis every year. Adaptation of water harvesting system can help meet some of the issues of water crisis in Delhi but would only be possible if the public are aware of the water harvesting system. The *National Forest Policy of India* recommended that one-third of our land should be under forest cover in order to maintain an amicable ecological system. The master plan of Delhi also advocates the same for Delhi region while the truth is far away. But the question still arises whether what percentage of the population are truly aware of

the fact that forest help in the regulation of climate, reducing global warming, decrease pollution level, and maintain oxygen in the environment.

Amidst the recent scare of high levels of smog in the atmosphere, Delhi is facing a new challenge in the form of poisonous air. An alarming report by SAFAR (System of Air Quality Weather Forecasting and Research) states "the running average of PM 2.5 and PM 10, dominant ultrafine particulates in Delhi's air, were 130 and 236 micrograms per cubic meter respectively, as against 60 and 100 that are considered safe" ("R-day air quality," 2020). These alarming factors directly indicate the need to know as to how much awareness level people have regarding the rising environmental pollution status of Delhi. One of the first stages of social change is to form a proper base for information and education. According to a United Nation's report, despite India being the second most populous country in the world, India has the world's largest youth population ("India has world's largest youth population," 2014). According to the National Youth Policy, 2014 (NYP-2014) of India, youth population of the country is expected to constitute 34.33% of the total population by 2020. These statistics support the proven fact that the youth population of India is extremely high.

It is an undeniable fact that the potential growth and development of a country is decided by the dimensions of its youth population. The present study, thus places a valid rationale from two perspectives. Firstly, considering the youth population as the subject of the study, the research focuses on analyzing the knowledge of the youths regarding the present environmental woes. Secondly, considering the capital of the country, Delhi as the area of the study, it focuses on the dire need to address the issues of environmental pollution in the heavily populated capital city. With the main concerns of analyzing the awareness level of the youths of the capital city regarding the environmental issues, the objectives framed for the study are:

- To know the mass media exposure level of youths on environmental issues.
- To study the role of mass media in engaging the youths of the capital city for environmental concerns.
- To analyze the behavioral change of youths towards environmental issues.

Environmental Management and Engagement of Youth

Environmental engagement is an act or behaviour of a person or a community, and

work for environmental protection as their social responsibility to tackle an environmental problem. It demands participatory approach with four major things, i.e., beliefs, concerns, attitudes and behaviour. Saxena (2003) emphasizes on environmental management as humankind's priority and further observes that "one of the most important aspects of environmental management is environmental education which is the need of the hour and priority should be given to it so that in phases the entire society will become aware of environmental issues" (p. 313). In 1975, UNESCO came out with idea of environmental education in which the main focus was on awareness, knowledge, attitude, and participation of people. Its main goals were to develop a world population that is aware of and concerned about our environment and its associated problems, and commitment to work individual and collectively towards solution of current problems and the prevention of new ones.

According to Sharma (2012), "Chief goals of environmental education in India must be to improve the quality of environment, to create an awareness among the people on environmental problems and conservation, and to create an atmosphere so that people participate in decision making and develop the capabilities to evaluate the developmental programs" (p. 587). Environmental protection must be a primary concern for the entire population. To protect the environment, the public and the society collectively have to adopt a change in the approach towards the environment because day by day it's degrading. Indeed, the concept of 'I for Environment' can help to meet out many environmental problems, focusing on each individual's role in the conservation of the environment.

Shanthakumar (2017) emphasizes that the concept of environmental resource management requires a large-scale participation of the people. According to him, "the Government alone cannot bridge the existing gap in the awareness and education of the masses regarding environmental issues caused by the relentless pursuit of material progress at the cost of environmental degradation" (p. 365). In order to educate the masses and to increase their awareness level, different sources have to be explored such as the media, educational institutions, non-Governmental organizations, social movements, etc. In this context, more specifically, youths can be engaged in the environmental protection process by making them aware of the limited availability of natural resources and the impending dangers of the pollution issues in the environment.

Nonetheless, the Government is also trying to meet out numerous environmental problems and has started public campaigns such as *Namami Gange Project* and *Clean India Mission* to sensitize people on environmental issue. Efforts for engaging the youths in various environmental activities at school and college level are taken up by the Government. Ban

on the use of plastics and plantation drives are few efforts by the Government to sensitize children and youths for ensuring their participation to protect environment. The campaign *One Student, One Tree* engaged a huge number of college students planting trees in their surrounding areas. The Media Cell of *Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change* (MoEF & CC) is mandated with taking up awareness campaigns using print, electronic, and other mass media to enhance awareness about various environmental issues which would in turn facilitate better compliance with environmental regulations (Annual Report, 2018-19, MoEF & CC, Govt. of India). The Ministry "is running media campaign through various audio-visual creatives on topics like save water, no plastic, green good deeds on Lok Sabha TV, Prasar Bharti, Doordarshan, TV News Channels and Digital Cinemas" (ibid, p. 174).

After constant efforts from the Government, civic agencies, NGOs and media, still a lack of responsibility towards the environment can be noticed easily. The point here lies with public participation and collective efforts for the betterment of the environment. Participation will take place only when the people are fully aware of the grave concerns associated with the environment. Kaushik and Kaushik (2008) write, "public awareness about the environment is at the stage of infancy. Of late, some awareness has taken place related to environmental degradation, pollution, etc. but incomplete knowledge and information and ignorance about many aspects have often led to misconceptions" (p. 246). According to Leelakrishnan (2019), "Public participation in environmental decision-making augments measures of environmental protection, and reflects the aspirations of the present as well as those in future generations. Once people become conscious, mass movements gain momentum and their role in the governance of the country is accepted" (p. 315). These are clear indications showing that proper information is required to increase awareness level among people towards environmental issues.

As per the directives of the Supreme Court in *M. C. Mehta vs Union of India*, in order to ensure a clean and healthy environment to the citizens of India, environmental awareness and literacy should be spread by launching of environmental education not only at the school level but also at the college level (*AIR 1992 SC 382)*. Many Indian environmentalists and social workers have tried to engage people to save environment by eco-movements in which youth participation was highly appreciable. In this regard, the media has the power to engage the most energetic part of society, that is, the youth population to motivate, engage and participate in numerous initiatives of protecting the environment and our nature.

A Review of Relevant Literature

Media, a vehicle of mass communication inform, aware, educate and motivate people for environmental protection through its effective messages. It creates a feeling of environmental protection and changes the behavior of people on environmental issues. Outdoor media is also used by Government agencies to circulate environmental messages among the people. Environmental messages are displayed constantly on road sides, vehicle panels, wall sides through hoardings, banners, posters, etc., to give maximum impact on the public. Television with its visual impact has also proved to be one of the most powerful media. Through its numerous campaigns, TV channels draw attention to various environmental issues and make people aware of the environment. Radio channels also run various campaigns on issues of environmental concerns such as preserving water, planting trees, cleanliness initiatives, etc. Not only the electronic media, but all such environmental messages get space in national dailies, local papers, magazines, etc., frequently.

Media help people to understand the value of environmental resources and motivate them to participate in the action of environmental protection. Concerns for the environment have become one of the utmost necessities of the society taking into consideration the deteriorating status of the environment from all fronts. At the same time, a wide array of researches on numerous environmental issues has also been done by a multitude of researchers and scholars. Many researchers observed the fact that mass media reports draw attention to environmental issues but the Government and people are not much aware about environmental degradation and lack of efforts in bringing attention to the concerned issues was felt heavily.

Mishra (2006) in his work on 'Impact of Media on Environmental Perception' focused on the environmental perception of people and media impact on their environmental behavior. His study further observed that mass media, owing to its widespread use by the people can motivate and urge people to achieve eco-preservation goals and directly address the woes of the environmental degradation. Mass media can definitely be used as an effective tool to bring awareness about environmental conditions in the society. Kaushik (2006) observed that proper communication channel is necessary to sensitize the public regarding solid waste disposal system and relevant environmental concerns. Sarkar (2012) in the study, 'Environmental ethics and environmental issues' emphasized on the issues of environmental pollution and its impact on human life. The study suggested having an integrated understanding of environmental ethics and the need for guidelines for preservation activities which can be circulated among the masses. This takes into account the role of

mass media in informing the masses about important environmental messages.

In the last few years, productive works have been done by many researchers who suggested the Government to make a strong policy to protect the environment and sensitize people on environmental issues. Various national and international agencies are also promoting research on environmental issues. Rajagopalan (2013) provided a valuable insight on various aspects of environment - from numerous global environmental crisis to probable solutions of such environmental concerns with eco-friendly alternative measures. Khan (2016) observed that media plays a very important role in shaping public awareness about environment awareness i.e. global climate change and associated actions. Baruah (2019) found that mass media plays a major role in shaping perceptions and awareness of environmental issues and amongst the various mass media forms, the broadcast media established itself as the most potential source of environmental education to the public. Media's efforts in sensitizing the public about environment issues have indeed been widely researched.

Research Methodology

A descriptive research method is adopted in the study wherein primary data has been collected through survey method. Random sampling technique has been used to select 360 youth representative sample from the capital city, Delhi. For the purpose of this research study, the definition of 'youth' is people in the age group of 15-29 years (as per the National Youth Policy – 2014, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Govt. of India). A questionnaire was structured as a tool to get the information from the respondents. Secondary data has also been used with due references which are taken from related books, research journals, Government websites, and media reports published in newspapers and magazines, campaigns run by electronic media, organizations, etc., for further analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The responses of the respondents are thoroughly analyzed as per the questions presented in the questionnaire accordingly. The analysis of the results reflecting specific environmental issues are presented below:

- Regarding the awareness of environmental issues - Awareness of issues have always been the primary stage of any kind of engagement. People can engage themselves in any kind of environmental activities if they are aware of the concerned issues.

Most of the respondents (88%) are aware of environmental issues such as pollution, climate change, etc., evident in the capital city. Only few respondents (7%) were not much aware of the current situation of environment and related issues in Delhi while few other respondents (5%) could not express any opinion regarding the awareness of environmental issues.

- Regarding the efficacy of mass media for environmental news - Media has the capacity to disseminate any kind of messages among heterogeneous public within fraction of seconds and draw attention towards its messages. Majority of the respondents (36%) say that television is the most effective media for dissemination of environmental news because of its audio-visual impact. This was followed by the print media (27%), radio (22%) and social media (15%) in terms of the respondent's choice for considering as an effective medium.

- Regarding the role of media in sensitizing towards environmental issues - Media has always played a dynamic role in changing the social structure by bringing a better understanding of the relevant social issues. Most of the respondents (83%) accept that media plays an important role to sensitize them towards various environmental issues. Only few respondents (7%) gave their opinion that media do not play any role in sensitizing towards environmental issues while 10% respondents were unable to express their opinion.

- Regarding the major environmental problems of Delhi - In last few years, Delhi has faced many environmental problems. Delhi Government, National Green Tribunal (NGT) and the Supreme Court issued many guidelines towards the alarming issues of the environment in the capital. Majority of the respondents (65%) see air pollution as the major environmental problem in Delhi as the capital has become a gas chamber in the last few years making the public face worst air conditions ever. 23% of the respondents provided the opinion that water pollution is the most important problem because people of Delhi face many challenges to get pure drinking water while the rest (12%) felt that shrinking green area, garbage, etc. are the major environmental problems.

- Regarding the knowledge of environmental protection laws - Environmental protection law can force people to follow the guidelines on environment and fear of punishment can reduce the chance of violating the rules made for environmental protection. Majority of the respondents (68%) know laws of environmental protection as they have information of at least three laws on this issue. However,

a good number of the respondents (22%) are not aware of these laws as they have only little or no information about these laws and few (10%) are not sure of their knowledge of environmental protection laws.

- Regarding the sources of information on environmental protection laws - Majority of respondents (52%) accept that media is the main source of information about environmental protection law stating that the media disseminate information regarding this issue to the public on a regular basis. A good number of respondents (28%) also consider books and their teachers as the main source for such information. The rest of the respondents (20%) say that NGOs working for environmental cause play an important role to make them aware of the environmental laws.

- Regarding the development of eco-friendly feeling by the media - Mass media has great impact on the society. With its appealing content, media has the power to generate a sense of intense feeling on the existing environmental concerns in the society. Majority of the respondents (62%) accept that media has developed eco-friendly feeling among them taking into consideration the media's intensive messages floating continuously amongst the public for urgent concerns in environmental conservation. However, a good number of the respondents (20%) also do not find media's role in generating eco-friendly feeling among them and another 18% still are unable to provide a decision on the same.

- Regarding the changes in behavior towards environment - Majority of the respondents (63%) feel changes in their behavior towards environment in last few years as they started developing concerns towards the environment. This can be attributed to the respondent's awareness and exposure to the existing major concerns of the environment disseminated by the mass media continuously. However, a section of the respondents (17%) express that they do not have any behavioral change in their approach towards environmental issues, which is quite a concern for the society. Interestingly, still 20% of the respondents are unable to decide on whether they experience a change or not.

- Regarding the area of environmental engagement - Engagement of youth in environmental protection can save our environment and at the same time boost the environment sustainability goals of the Government. Majority of the respondents (44%) say that they do not use crackers after 2017 as they are aware of the consequences of the degraded air quality while good numbers of the respondents (28%) have discontinued using polythene bags. 18% of the respondents have started

planted trees while rests (10%) have started car-pooling for a better environment.

The results of the study, totally justifies the mass media's basic purpose of informing, educating and bringing awareness to the people. The media has always worked as a guiding tool for the society by playing the role of the torch bearer. As evident from the results of the study, the media plays an important role in creating awareness about environmental issues by disseminating messages in diverse forms to a large extent. Most of the youths of the capital city are aware of the major environmental issues and show concerns about the speedy climate change and its hazardous impact on their lives. The media has also successfully instilled the sentiments of eco-friendly attitude among the youths by making them connected with the environment through various environmental campaigns popularized through the media channels.

The *Save the Tiger* campaign of *NDTV* helped people to understand the decreasing number of the tiger in our country and developed feelings of protection. It also drew the attention of the Government towards decreasing numbers of tigers and helped them to come out with a plan and make an effective policy regarding this. *Clean Ganga* was the wonderful television campaign run by Zee *News* which disseminate central Government policy at mass level and helped every citizen of India to understand the importance of river 'Ganga' in our life. It was a unique campaign in which channel asked the citizen to participate for cleaning the 'Ganga' and ensured their participation by making a call on a toll-free number. The awareness campaign which drew the attention of thousands of people towards an increasing level of pollution in the river Ganga.

The media also acts as a source of motivation by inculcating behavioral change amongst the youths in regard to environmental protection and its related issues. Youths have successfully engaged themselves in matters of environmental concerns with basic gestures such as non-indulgence in pollution inducing elements such as using of crackers and polythene bags, practicing carpooling policies, etc. This ultimately suggests that media motivate and encourage youths to understand the importance of the environment stand for the protection and conservation of the environment. But still there are some sections of the youth population who are not affected by the alarming environmental issues. So, there stands an urgent necessity to instill in the minds of these ignorant sections of the youth to engage in environmental concerns through proper information and education about the existing environmental issues.

Conclusion

A clean environment is the key to a healthy and peaceful life. But in the era of advance living standards, the environment is getting affected to a great extent by means of air pollution, soil pollution, noise pollution, acid rain, and other dangerous disasters created by a human through technological advancements. In view of the rapid change in climate and the hazardous consequences associated with it, issues of environmental protection have become the core concern of the society. One of the most important and effective ways to protect the environment is to increase the participation of people to protect the environment. In Delhi, the capital city of India, where environmental degradation has become an alarming situation, youths have taken a positive approach of protecting the environment by engaging themselves in matters of environmental protection.

The present study as observed that the young people of the capital are highly exposed to diverse forms of mass media which ultimately serves as a source of generating awareness on environmental issues and the impending concerns of environmental conservations. The study further observed that various mass media forms play an important role in sensitizing the youths towards various environmental concerns such as issues of air pollution, water shortage and degradation, environmental cleanliness, etc. Since the youths are highly exposed to mass media, youths have started to adopt a positive behavioral change towards environmental issues. The youths have successfully engaged themselves in the process of 'thinking' for a better and healthy environment. The stages of 'acting' and 'saving' are still in its primary and infancy level and hence, this has to be inculcated in the minds and actions of the youngsters to achieve holistic efficacy in the preservation of our so-called precious home, 'environment'.

Environmental situations cannot be improved only with the introduction of environmental laws. It is people's engagement for the environment and their level of awareness that can be a revolutionary path in environmental preservation. A proper communication strategy through the diverse platform of mass media is the key to engage more and more people for the betterment of the environment. The adaptation of 3R (Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle) policies by youngsters can be one of the simplest and effective efforts to meet the current challenges of the environmental issues and its necessary protection. It is high time that the major sections of the society, that is, the media, the youths and the Government participate effectively in the process of protecting the most precious gift of nature and save the environment.

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