Islamic Perspectives on Environment

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On 5th June, every year, International Environment Day is observed throughout the world. The time is appropriate to investigate the Islamic dictat on environment and ecology. Environmental crisis is probably the only one issue over which we have universal consensus. The problems of ecological and biological diversity have drawn the attention of the modern world so much so that time and again world summits have been organized to seriously contemplate upon the global environmental crisis. Climate Treaty in 1992, Kyoto Protocol in 1997, Bali Action plan in 2007 and the recent Conference on Environment in Copenhagen in 2009 are a few instances to mention. Unfortunately almost all these deliberations ended up with only half-baked ideas and piecemeal solutions which could not propose any sustainable and viable solutions to the global environmental challenges. This paper is an attempt to project the approaches of Islam to environment as an effective alternative to the contemporary environmental crises.

While delivering the inaugural address in a refresher course at UGC’s Academic Staff College, Aurangabad, Prof. Anees-ur-Rehman of Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi came out with a view that scriptures form a special genre in literature and human beings need to take recourse to them for guidance on various human issues. (Dr. Anees-ur-Rehman: 2008) *The Qur’an* and the Hadith i.e. the sayings and practices of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH)), form the basis of Islamic philosophy. First of all it is to be made clear that Islam is not a religion of Muslims, neither is *the Qur’an* the book of Muslims, nor is the prophet Mohammed (PBUH) the leader of Muslims alone. To say so is to downgrade Islam, *The Qur’an* and
Mohammad (PBUH) of their magnanimity and universality. Islam is a complete way of life for the whole mankind. The Qur’an is a guide for all human beings. When it is a complete code of life, with other issues pertaining to man’s life, it must necessarily address the issues of environment also.

Let us try to see what Islam has to say about environment. According to Islam every man is trustee of nature, he must maintain harmonious relations with other living beings especially, with the flora and fauna around him. Islamic Literature has abundant references to nature. Here, two of them are quoted. Mohammed Kaleem-ur-Rehman observes: “In The Qur’an the verses which deal with nature and use of nature are more in number than the verses in which (other) instructions are given.” (Mohammed Kaleem: p.146)) One of the renowned Imams, (religious leader) Imam Abu Yousuf says: “The person who fails to understand the truth about ecology, environment and nature, can never find a proper way of implementing Islamic methodology.” (Ehsanullah : p. 54)

The Qur’an says that man is God’s vicegerent on earth. (The Qur’an 2:30) Therefore he is bound to obey his creator, who is the creator of the whole universe also. The Qur’an proclaims “we have spread out the earth, set there on mountains firm and immovable, and produced all kind of things in due balance (15:19) Further it is said that the earth, the alternations of night and day, the sailing of the ships through the oceans, the rain that comes down from the skies which causes green life on the earth, the changes of the winds and the clouds… all are the signs of Allah (2:164). So it is man’s duty to try his best to protect, nurture and develop nature. If he neglects his duty and shows dereliction to his responsibilities he is liable to be punished. Man is not free to exploit, overuse or abuse nature and its resources. He must use them properly, frugally and judiciously. In today’s world we see that some countries are over using the natural resources. They
deprive others of the benefits of these resources; or they let others use them at exorbitant prices. According to the World Watch Institute, the world’s richest 500 million people (7% of world the population) are responsible for 50% of carbon dioxide emissions, while the poorest 3000 million are responsible for just 6% of the emission. In the period 1900-2004, the whole of Africa generated only 2.5% of cumulative carbon dioxide emissions whilst the US alone accounted for 29.5%. Islam frames laws to check such exploitive and unjust policies. It is careful enough to see that future generations may not be deprived of their share of the natural resources. In today’s world in the name of scientific experiments, the haves or the neo-colonialists undertake such deeds which cause great harm to the have-nots. The Qur’an warns them: “Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of the hands of men. God may give them a taste of some of their deeds.” According to The Qur’an the characteristics of the selfish and the power hungry are: “They spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and progeny” (2:205)

Islam advocates simplicity. It prompts its followers to shun luxury, since luxuries increase needs that lead to tussle among men and groups for the overuse, abuse and ownership of nature. Islam says that man is not the owner of nature. Though nature is created to serve man, he must not try to conquer it. God is the real owner of nature. A careful scrutiny of Islamic ordinances regarding some elements of ecological cycle reveals the standpoint of Islam towards each of them.

About plants and trees prophet Mohammed (PBUH) says: “One who plants a tree and does farming if human beings and birds get benefit of his endeavor, such a person will get reward from God. The one who transforms a barren land into a fertile one shall also be rewarded” (Abdullah, p.74-76). According to Islamic philosophy every living thing on the earth is inseparably twined with all other living things. Therefore the relations
among them must be harmonious. Followers of Islam are permitted to pluck
and eat the fruit of a tree; but they are warned not to harm the branches of
the tree. Trees, flowers, fruits and timber are boons for man. The Qur’an
states: “It is He who sends down rain from the sky. From it you drink and
out of it grow the vegetation on which you feed your cattle. He produces for
you corn olive, date-palms, grapes and every kind of fruit.”(16:10-11)
Therefore trees must not be felled. They must not be cut even in war.
Though a tree is advantageous to the rival in war, Islam orders not to cut it.
Soldiers are instructed not to damage or destroy fields, crops and towns.
(Abul Ala Maududi: p.227-31) Today’s war strategy is diametrically
opposite to this commendable virtue. After the atom-bomb attack on
Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even today a single piece of grass does not grow
there. Same is the case with Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries where
cluster bombs and missiles were rained. Planting tree is a noble deed in
Islam. Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) advised his followers: “Even if you see
dooms-day taking place, and you have a plant in your hand to put in the soil,
complete your task of planting it.”(Hadith)

Water is freely and abundantly available natural resource. It is God’s
boon for man. It is source of life for human beings, animals and plants.
Without water all living things die. It is the means for cleanliness and
transportation. The Qur’an observes: “His are ships sailing smoothly
through seas, lofty as mountains.” (55:24). Islam orders its followers not to
urinate or defecate in water whether it is stagnant or flowing. It has been
said: “Even if you sit on the bank of a river, use only the sufficient quantity
of water (for Vudhu)” (Hadith) . Withholding of surplus water is a sin. In a
commandment the prophet of Islam said: “People who withhold surplus
irrigation water (depriving selflessly some other beneficiary) Allah will say
to them on the Day of Judgment today I will withhold my grace from you as
you withheld that water which was not your creation.”(Jaleel: p.97) This
policy is ignored in the present day world. So we have unending legal battles among countries and states over the issues of surplus river water. For instance the disagreement between India-China, Bangladesh-India or the discord between the states of Karnataka-Tamilnadu.

Polluting air is discouraged. You must not cause harm to others by emitting smoke uncontrollably. Earth is a great facility for you. Earth houses rivers, seas, mountains. It is your floor. You get grains from it. Don’t abuse it. Regarding animals *The Qur’an says*; “He created cattle for you. You derive warmth and various benefits from them. You eat meat, they carry heavy loads. You drive them home in the evening and to pasture in the morning. He created horses, mules and donkeys.”(16: 6-8) Rights of animals are utmost important in Islam. Keeping domestic animals hungry invites wrath of God. The owner must not extract more work from them that may leave them half-dead. Prophet proclaimed: “When you travel, go slow, let the camel have its share from the greenery of the land. You may drive speedily when there is no grass.” (Jaleel: 169) Birds tied to a pole must not be made objects of archery. Hunting for the purpose of eating flesh is allowed, but it is not allowed for fun or pastime. It is true that slaughtering of animals is permitted. Care must be taken to use a sharp knife so that the animal must be given quickest relief from agony. Hitting on the face of an animal or loading it beyond its capability is a sin. Inciting animals to fight against one another for sport like bull fighting or cock-fighting is strictly prohibited. Zoos and circuses are discouraged since, rights of animals are violated. Muhammad (PBUH) admonished the person who burnt an ant-hill. He said: “Punishing with fire is prerogative of the creator of the fire alone.” (Jaleel: 172) One of the followers of Muhammad (PBUH) reports: “We were on a journey with the prophet. He left us for some time. In his absence we saw a bird with two nestlings. We caught hold of them and the bird began to hover over our heads. Perceiving the bird’s distress Muhammad
(PBUH) asked ‘Who has caused it pain by snatching its nestlings? Return them to her’.” (Jaleel: 172)

Regarding sound pollution Islam has a diktat. Loud noise must not be made to trouble others. Out of the five prayers a day, only obligatory parts of the three are said loudly; other prayers are said silently. The Qur’an says: “Lower thy voice, for the hardest of sounds without doubt is the braying of the ass.” (31:19)

Ecology includes healthy relations of among human beings. Islam prohibits sodomy, gay and lesbian relations, live-in relations or co-habitations. Such practices are violation of rights of both the sexes and mankind in general. We see that these practices have given rise to diseases like HIV and AIDS. Islam promotes marriages among men and woman which result into healthy relations and help populate earth. It prohibits abortions or killing of children in the womb. By practicing these evils the world is facing the problem of disproportion in Child Sex Ratio. Maharashtra’s child sex ratio in 2011 was 883 girls to 1000 boys as against 913 girls per 1,000 boys in 2001. According to 2011 census; in Mumbai we have only 822 girls, the national average being 914, per 1,000 boys. In Punjab, in the district of Fategarh Sahib, the figure is, shockingly, 754. Coming to this city which is hosting this International seminar, Aurangabad, the number of the girls per 1000 boys is only 800. (Lokmat Times: 2012) Islam motivates parents to bring up a girl-child. Mohammad (PBUH) said “The person who nurtures two girls, educates and trains them and marries them off will be close to me (like two fingers) in heaven.”(Mohammed Farooq: 161)

In this way Islam offers solutions to various ecological maladies the world is facing with. Therefore our think tank and other concerned authorities in the power corridors must provide space to discuss Islamic
ideology for curative purpose in respect of the environmental and ecological ailment.

References:
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