

Comprehensive Study of Islamic Texts with regards to Environmental Conservation

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Abstract: Environmental conservation is the subject of concern especially in the present times where the extent of pollution has increased exponentially. Man, in his greed to earn more of the material benefits has forsaken and ignored nature, which has drastically affected the ecosystem and caused huge harm to the ecological balance. Our distortions to environment, has affected both biotic and abiotic components. Where on one side excessive deforestation and limited afforestation has led to erosions, floods and increase in the carbon compounds in troposphere; on the other hand it has equally caused an imbalance in the animal life dragging them to the category of endangered and even extinct species. God had created this world with a balance as is mentioned in Quran, “Verily all things have We created by measure”(54:49). But it is we mortal beings who have been acting as consumers and ripping the environment off its natural resources. At such a juncture where The ultimate consumer (man) has unleashed all his desires and exploited everything around him, only belief in God can restrict him from unbridled exploitation of the very creation of God.

Here I intend to dig in deeper and analyse Islamic Texts with regards to conservation of Environment and it is an attempt to revisit Man and Environment relationship and connect with the surrounding we are a part of. The structure of my entire paper contains following subjects:

Introduction of the Cosmic balance in the Islamic texts, Role of religion in developing the consciousness, and our relation with earth, Description of natural elements in Quran, Rain a source of life and its comparison to revelation, Relation between environment and humans, importance of environmental preservation for human existence, Important lessons from the life of Prophet Muhammad for conservation of resources.

Key words: Islam, nature, signs, conservation, Prophet Muhammad

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I. Introduction

Religion owns the credit of transforming the nations and civilizations, bringing them out of the depths of ignorance and imbecility and introducing them to a whole new era of enlightenment. Be it defining the purpose of creation, or striking a balance between the spiritual and physical aspect of a human being; religion has always been at the forefront in bringing value to our lives. Like many other concepts religion has deliberated upon an essential issue of human soul, and the milieu in which it functions. Environment has been one of the central themes of Qur'an like that of many other scriptures of Abrahamic religions (Taurah and Injeel). There are hundreds of verses in Quran that are related to nature. 14 Surahs (chapters) of Qur'an are named after certain natural elements e.g. “The Cow (2)”, “The Cattle (6)”, “The Thunder (28)”, “The Bee (16)”, “The Ant (27)”, “The Daybreak (89)”, “The Sun (91)”, “The Night (92)”, “The Fig (95)”, “The Elephant (105)”.

As per the themes of Quran water holds a credible significance. Various verses are dedicated to water. Description of rain as its essential role in the growth of plants (a source of life on earth), reflection on conversion of barren lands to verdant fields and drawing parallel of rain with that of revelation is of great significance. The way rain brings a dead land to life similarly revelation rejuvenates our dead souls. As Quran states, “And Allah has sent down rain from the sky and given life thereby to the earth after its lifelessness. Indeed in that is a sign for a people who listen”.

Among other examples of Nature, gardens and animals occupy some space as well. Quran states, “And it is He who sends down rain from the sky, and We produce thereby the growth of all things. We produce from it greenery from which We produce grains arranged in layers. And from the palm trees - of its emerging fruit are clusters hanging low. And [We produce] gardens of grapevines and olives and pomegranates, similar yet varied. Look at [each of] its fruit when it yields and [at] its ripening. Indeed in that are signs for a people who believe”

Moreover the well researched subject on animals and its communities is mentioned in various chapters of Quran like that of surah An'am verse 99, “And there is no creature on [or within] the earth or bird that flies with its wings except [that they are] communities like you”.

1.1 Balance in Universe

There is a striking balance in the cosmos as Islamic text Qur'an states, *"And He raised the sky and maintained a balance. So you do not transgress in balance"*. The balance which our creator had maintained in the entire cosmos should be reflected by us in the world as well. Any distortion in nature's balance makes our destruction obvious and unavoidable.

1.2 Everything glorifies Allah

Environmental conservation begins with the end of human greed and concern for the other creatures as well. Qur'an states that everything glorifies the Creator and deserves to exist; be it belonging to the terrestrial, aerial or aquatic life. Qur'an says, *"Do you not see that Allah is praised by whomever is within the heavens and the earth and [by] the birds with wings spread [in flight]. Each [of them] has known his [means of] prayer and exalting [Him], and Allah knows what they do"*.

II. Role of Religion in Environmental Conservation:

2.1 Purification , Key concept of Islam

Environmental conservation in the broader perspective refers to its preservation from all sorts of polluting elements and persistence on the part of human beings for maintaining its pure state. Purification is one of the key concept of Islam. No worship is valid in the state of impurity; be it importance of ablution for salah, or importance of pure intention for any deed. It is narrated by Umar ibn Khattab (R.A), Allah's apostle said, *"The reward of deeds depends upon the intention and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended..."*. Further, It is narrated by Abu Ma'ud (R.A) : The Prophet said, *if a man spends on his family (with the intention of having a reward from Allah) sincerely for Allah's sake then it regarded as charity on his part..* Islam focuses on both physical and spiritual purification of self which further extends to the society and is well manifested by our actions both in private and public.

2.2 Building Consciousness

The second primary role that religion has to play in the preservation of environment is to build the consciousness and a sense of belongingness. It infuses a sense of gratitude and makes us think, reflect and ponder over the things we receive in abundance. Quran invites man to look and consider what he eats, *"Then Let man look at his food, How We poured down water in torrents Then We broke open the earth, splitting [it with sprouts], And caused to grow within it grain And grapes and herbage And olive and palm trees And gardens of dense shrubbery And fruit and grass - [As] enjoyment for you and your grazing livestock."*

The food we eat comes through a process and becomes a part of us. Thus it is imperative to eat halal food (pure) [earned through halal means of course]. Even pronouncing name of Allah before eating develops a sense of gratitude within and reminds us of our position in this world as a creation of God.

Quran also imbibes a feature of observing nature in us. When it states, *"Then do they not look at the camels - how they are created? And at the sky - how it is raised? And at the mountains - how they are erected? And at the earth - how it is spread out?"*

Today we have been so much obsessed with our worldly lives and have been living a busy life that we don't even get time to spend some moments with nature, observing the creation, sitting under the vast sky and observe its magnificence, pleasing our eyes with the lush green trees and plants and awe striking feeling while observing the firmly erected mountains. The preservation of an entity begets from the consciousness of its presence.

2.3 Signs to Reflect

The verses of Quran are called ayat (p. Ayah) as Quran states, *"And you should not follow the vain desires of such as treat Our Ayat (proofs, evidences, verses, lessons, signs, revelations, etc.) as falsehoods, and such as believe not in the Hereafter, and they hold others as equal (in worship) with their Lord."*

In Arabic, the word ayah means signs. Same word Allah uses in Quran for His signs in the horizons. As is mentioned in surah Fussilat (41:53) *"We will show them Our ayah (signs) in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth..."*

Thus it builds a relation between the Book of Allah (revelation) and His signs in the entire cosmos we are a part of. Every single thing in our environment reminds us of His presence; and destruction of this very nature is the like of destroying one's own soul and metaphysical aspect of one's being.

Quran states, *"[It is He] who has made for you the earth as a bed [spread out] and inserted therein for you roadways and sent down from the sky, rain and produced thereby categories of various plants. Eat [therefrom] and pasture your livestock. Indeed, in that are signs for those of intelligence"*.

2.4 Developing a Concept of Public good:

“And let there be [arising] from you a nation inviting to [all that is] good, enjoying what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and those will be the successful”.

This verse of Quran although inviting us to a greater good of directing people to a straight path and forbidding them from deviating from the path of truth ; it also develops a sense of responsibility in us to encourage good and forbid all sorts of corrupt practices. And today one of the grave corrupt practices in this world are inflicted with regards to the ecosystem. It is the moral duty of humans as ordained by our creator to act as a source of hope and inspiration and not that of despair and destruction.

2.5 Making us aware of purpose of Creation:

Quran states, *“And We did not create the heavens and earth and that between them in play”.* One of the many roles that religion plays in our lives is to make us aware of the purpose of our existence in this universe. It humbles us knowing the importance of each and every element of this creation of which we occupy the last position of consumers in the entire chain while the rest of the elements have been put to our service.

2.6 Description of a healthy environment in Quran

Quran portrays and presents the picture of our environment. It mesmerizes our souls thus allowing us to reflect on the ayat of Quran and look for these signs in the farthest of the horizons and the environment we live in. It not only brings us close to our creator but also fills us with gratitude and instills a sense of belongingness while making us responsible and conscious of our actions.

Here are a few verses from the Islamic Text, [Quran] to illustrate the same:

“And We have sent down blessed rain from the sky and made grow thereby gardens and grain from the harvest.”
“And We placed therein gardens of palm trees and grapevines and caused burst forth there-from some springs.”
Surah An’am verse 99 gives a wholesome description of the entire water cycle .Starting from dripping of rain till the final produce of various kinds. Quran states, *“ And it is He who sends down rain from the sky, and We produce thereby the growth of all things. We produce from it greenery from which We produce grains arranged in layers. And from the palm trees- of its emerging fruit are clusters hanging low. And [We produce] gardens of grapevines and olives and pomegranates, similar yet varied. Look at [each of] its fruit when it yields and [at] it’s ripening. Indeed in that are signs for those who believe”.*

III. Our role in Environmental conservation:

In Islamic Context, humankind’s role on earth is that of a khalifah [vicegerent or trustee of Allah]. We are Allah’s stewards and agents on earth. It belongs to Him and not to us; and He has entrusted us with its safe keeping. Environmental degradation symbolizes our failure in safeguarding the gift of Allah essential for our own existence.

3.1 Relation between humans and environment:

The Islamic narration about the origin of human beings evolves from the theory of creation where in the first human being to ever step on the face of this earth was made of clay. Quran brings this concept of creation into account in Surah Hud verse. 61; *“And to Thamud [We sent] their brother Saulih. He said, “O my people, worship Allah; you have no deity other than Him. He has produced you from the earth and settled you in it, so ask forgiveness of Him and repent to Him. In deed my Lord is near and responsive”.* (Al Quran 11: 61) Allah also while addressing our creation states, *“From the earth We created you, and into it We will return you, and from it We will extract you another time”.*

3.2 Environmental conservation and Human survival:

Environmental conservation substantiates human survival. All sorts of air, water, soil, marine, thermal pollutions; faulty solid waste management and nuclear hazards have risked our own survival on the face of this very planet.

Quran states, *“And We made the sky a protected ceiling, but they are turning away from its signs”*
The upper stratosphere consists of considerable amounts of ozone, which acts as an effective screen for UV light. This region is called “the ozone layer” and extends upto 60 km above the surface of the earth. Manufacture and use of many CFC (chlorofluorocarbons) releasing products e.g, perfumes, room fresheners, foam for mattresses and cushions, disposable Styrofoam cups, glasses, packaging material for insulation , cold storage, etc. has cause depletion of ozone layer thus causing “Ozone hole” .

This increase in UV radiation has led to certain health problems like Sunburn, Cataract, aging of the skin, skin cancer apart from weakening the immune system by suppressing the body’s resistance to certain infections like measles, chicken pox and other viral diseases that elicit rash and parasitic diseases such as malaria introduced through the skin.

3.3 Environmental Depletion a human handiwork:

The unfathomable and awe striking balance in the universe is disrupted by the careless and selfish acts of human beings who in the quest of material prospectus do not mind to disrupt the ecological balance. Quran reprimands corrupters and condemns corruption in all forms and shape.

“And cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation...”

“Do good as Allah has done good to you. And desire not corruption in the land. Indeed Allah does not like corrupters”

Pollutants presents in three basic fundamental units of life Air , water and soil are due to the malpractices of humans. Although air may become polluted by natural causes such as volcanoes or forest fires. However , unlike pollutants from human activity, naturally occurring pollutants tend to remain in the atmosphere for a short time and do not lead to permanent atmospheric change.

- Carbon monoxide, produced on the incomplete combustion of organic materials (e.g gas , coal or wood), Nitrogen oxides and lead; finds vehicular exhausts as the single largest source of its exhaustion. Cigarette smoking is also responsible for the greatest exposure to carbon monoxide.
- Unethical practice of discharge of human wastes in water bodies causes an increase in the level of Escherichia and Streptococcus faecalis bacteria thus causing gastrointestinal diseases.
- Chemicals in fertilizers and pesticides pollute the soil and water. While excess fertilizers cause eutrophication (Excessive growth of algae and other aquatic plants due to water-soluble nitrates and phosphates).

The pollution at this level has cause more harm to the planet earth than ever in the past. This is the handiwork of humans and we are bearing the brunt of our actions.

- Exposure to a negligible percentage of carbon monoxide for several hours can cause collapse, coma and even death. Nitrogen oxides, especially NO₂ , can aggravate asthma or chronic bronchitis and also increase our susceptibility to respiratory infections, like influenza or common colds.
- Particulates (small pieces of solid material e.g. smoke particle from fibres , bits of asbestos, dust particles and ash from industries) are carcinogenic and repeated exposure to these particulates can cause them accumulate in the lungs and interfere with the respiration.
- Many volatile organic compounds and toxic particulates can cause mutations, reproductive problems or cancer. The repeated inhalation of ozone; a component of photochemical smog causes coughing, chest pain, breathlessness; and irritation of eye, nose and throat.

Allah has already reprimanded us of our evil actions in Quran:

“Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by what the hands of people have earned, so He lets them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness]”

IV. ETHICS: Advice of Luqman to his son.

Conservation of environment is more of the matter of ethics and good mannerism. Luqman, one of the wise persons to walk on the face of this earth is found counseling and advising his son in the most compassionate manner. The words were strong enough for the God al mighty to quote it in His last and final Testament [Quran].

Quran states the words of Luqman, O son! *“Be moderate in your pace and lower your voice; indeed, the most disagreeable of sounds is the voice of donkeys”*.

Compare the moderate pace to the road rage on our streets and the low tone to the deafening sounds of the stereos, factories and even loudspeakers in the name of religion or amusement, causing adverse effects on the surroundings.

Raising of voice is not just a matter of polluting the environment rather pollution of soul as well. Shouting, screaming, quarrelling or showing any such kind of inappropriate behavior is never encouraged in Islam. For the same reason Islam reprimands human beings from raising their voice in front of parents or screaming and lamenting someone’s death.

Noise may not seem as harmful as the contamination of air or water, but it is a pollution problem that affects human health. The most direct harmful effect of excessive noise is physical damage to the ear and the temporary or permanent hearing loss often called a ‘temporary threshold shift’ (TTS). Apart from this emotional or psychological effects such as irritability, anxiety, stress, lack of concentration and mental fatigue are significant health effects of noise.

V. Preservation Of Environment A Source Of Earning Continuous Rewards

5.1 Sayings (ahadith) of Prophet (ﷺ) with regards to conservation of environment:

Islam instills a strong sense of conservation of environment along with maintain a state of purity which involves purification of one's self (both physical and spiritual), personal as well as interpersonal and social. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has said, "Avoid three actions that bring people's curses: defecating in water sources, on roads and in shade". These are the three places which earn displeasure of people and a cause of harm, discomfort and anguish.

The Prophet (ﷺ) said: *A man never did a good deed but removed a thorny branch from the road; it was either in the tree and someone cut it and threw it on the road, or it was lying in it, he removed it. Allah accepted this good deed of his and brought him into Paradise.* This Prophetic saying is an epitome for elimination of all sorts of environmental pollution we witness today. A similar hadith throws more light on the subject. No deed is too little for earning the reward, nor apparently insignificant act, is too inconsiderate. The preservation of environment can earn the reward as well as the wrath of God. Prophet (ﷺ) has said, "The deeds of my people, good and bad were presented before me and I found the removal of something objectionable from the road among their good deeds and the sputum mucus left unburied in the mosque among their evil deeds".

Jabir (R.A) reported Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) as saying, "Whenever a Muslim plants a tree, they will earn the reward of charity because of the food that comes from it and likewise what is taken from it, what the wild beasts, birds eat out of it and what the people sale from it is charity for them."

Increase in uncultivated and barren lands, deforestation, and land mafia sucking the best out of our biodiversity has caused ecological imbalance and reviving the dead land is an act of worship. Prophet (ﷺ) has said, "Whoever revives a dead land has right to do it, if beasts and birds feed from it, he who revived it will have it as a sadaqah". Even if it was at the verge of the doomsday, the ambition and zeal for the conservation of our ecosystem must not die down. "If the day of resurrection comes upon anyone of you while he has seedling in hand, let him plant it"

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) manifested all these eco-ethics in his personal life. He was very particular about the quantity of water he used even if it was near the stream of the river. It is narrated by Anas (R.A) the Prophet (ﷺ) used to take a bath with one Sa' up to five Mudds of water and used to perform ablution with one Mudd of water. (Sahih Bukhari hadith no.200). Safinah narrated "The Prophet (ﷺ) would perform wudu with a Mudd, and he would perform Ghushl with a Sa".

5.2 Environmental Conservation-A Continued Legacy

This legacy was carried forward by the companions of the prophet (ﷺ) as well who would always take due concern about the environment and its preservation. This is clearly evident from the societies of the Islamic Civilization be it Umayyads, Abbasids or Fatimids; who transformed the face of the areas that came under the Islamic governance. Construction of dams, conversion of barren lands into fertile produce, advanced techniques of irrigation and increase in the domestic production of food grains, fruits and plants reflects their interest in the environmental conservation. Even the Mughal gardens of Kashmir, speaks loads about it.

One such example of this is from the hadith in which the narrator narrates that Abu Bakr as-Siddiq was sending armies to ash-Sham. He went for a walk with Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan who was the commander of one of the battalions. He advised him of several things which reprimands from any sort of destruction. He says, "I advise you ten things Do not kill women or children or an aged, infirm person. Do not cut down fruit-bearing trees. Do not destroy an inhabited place. Do not slaughter sheep or camels except for food. Do not burn bees and do not scatter them. Do not steal from the booty, and do not be cowardly."

VI. Conclusion

Syed Hussain Nasr while talking about Environmental conservation puts it right that, "there is near total disequilibrium between modern man and nature as attested by nearly every expression of modern civilization, which seeks to offer a challenge to nature rather than to co-operate with it". Thus Environmental conservation is more than coming up with the renewable alternatives, pollution free vehicles, and limited use of chemicals. In the broader perspective it involves contribution of each one of us in raising our standards and incorporating best morals within.

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