

Environmental Degradation and the State of Quality of Life in an Indian Urban Setting

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“We won’t have a society if we destroy the environment”

by, Margaret Mead.

Introduction:

There is close relationship between quality of life and environment (*Diener & Suh, 1997; UNECE, 2009*). People’s lives are strongly affected by the health of their physical environment. The impact of pollutants and hazardous substances on people’s health is sizeable. Environmental Quality also matters intrinsically because most people value the beauty and health of the place where they live and care about the depletion of its natural resources (*Brajsa-Jganec, Merkas, & Sverko, 2011*). Preserving environmental and natural resources is also one of the most important factors in ensuring the preservation of well-being over time (*Van Liere & Dunlap, 1980*). Environmental policies have a critical role to play in dealing with global health priorities, as well as improving environmentally responsible behavior and lives (*Reto & Garcia-Vega, 2012*).

Environmental quality is a key factor in people’s well-being because quality of life is strongly affected by the health of the physical environment ((*Holman & Coan, 2008; Kahn, 2002*). More extreme environmental events, such as natural disasters (earthquakes, cyclones, floods & droughts) and epidemics may also cause elevated levels of death, injury and disease. In the long term, drastic changes in the environment may also impair human health through climate change (*Ahmad & Yamano, 2011*)

Aside from affecting people’s health, the environment also matters intrinsically because many people attach importance to the beauty and health of the place where they live, and because they care about the degradation of the planet and the depletion of natural, resources (*Balestra & Dottori, 2011; Kahn & Matsusaka, 1997*). People also directly benefit from environmental assets and services, such as water, clean air, land, forests and access to green spaces, because these allow them to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy free time and the company of others. In this article an effort is made through secondary sources to understand relationship between the environmental degradation in urban setting and the urban quality of life, the impact of environmental degradation on the urban quality of life. It is witnessed in this study that there is strong relationship between the environmental degradation and the quality of life in urban setting, the degradation of urban environment has profound impact on the quality of life of urban dwellers. Environmental degradation has brought many hazardous problems such as polluted air, polluted water, contaminated soil, unbearable climate etc which in turn has made the urban quality of life unsatisfactory.

Concept of Environmental Degradation:

“Environmental degradation is one of the biggest challenges we have. I think a question that we ‘re not asking ourselves, isn’t humanity committing suicide with this indiscriminate and tyrannical use of nature”

by Pope Francis

Environmental degradation has emerged as a major global concern for human survival at the beginning of 21st century. In the opinion of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), the future generations are to face an ever-increasing environmental decay, poverty, hardships and a more polluted world.

Environmental degradation is the deterioration of the environment through depletion of resources such as air, water and soil; the destruction of ecosystems; habitat destruction; the extinction of wildlife; and pollution. It is defined *“as any change or disturbance to the environment perceived to be deleterious or undesirable.”*

Environmental degradation is one of the ten threats officially cautioned by the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change of the United Nations. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction defines environmental degradation *“as the reduction of the capacity of the environment to meet social and ecological objectives, and needs”.*

It is the process by which our environment i.e., air, water and land, progressively contaminated, over-exploited and destroyed. Degradation can be mainly grouped into (a) eco-system imbalance, (b) forest deterioration, (c) freshwater degradation (d) soil degradation (e) air pollution and (f) global warming.

Concept of Quality of Life :

“The Quality of life is more important than life itself”

by Alexis Carrel

Environment, Degradation of environment and Urban setting, are well-defined terms, but ‘Quality of Life’(QOL) is a new concept, therefore, prior to the present study it is necessary to explain the concept of quality of life, particularly QOL in urban areas.

Quality of life is an off-quoted phrase used in various contexts with many shades of meaning. What distinguishes man from the other species is the quality of life, the manner and the extent to which it has changed through history. The history of mankind can be written in terms of evolution of the quality of man’s existence. The concept of quality of life is interdisciplinary in nature and widely studies in sociology, anthropology and economics, similarly several international and national agencies have conducted studies related to QOL for policy making and development. It is not easy to define what quality of life exactly is? In fact, quality of life is a relative term, varies from nation to nation, society to society as well as from person to person. *Small and Witherick (1995) have defined QOL as: “A complex notion concerning the general state or condition of a population in a given area.*

Undoubtedly, it has an important psychological dimension which takes into account such states of mind as satisfaction, happiness, fulfillment and security. It also has an environmental dimension which embraces such criteria as diet, housing, access to services and safety. Other aspects include considerations such as social opportunity, employment prospects, affluence and leisure time”.

The definition given by World Health Organization Quality of life (WHOQOL) Group (1995) state: *‘QOL is an individual’s perception of their position in life in context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, values and concerns, incorporation, physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relations, personal beliefs and their relationship to salient features of the environment... , quality of life refers to a subjective evaluation which is embedded in a cultural, social and environmental context’.*

Myers (1987), has offered an “implicit” definition of quality of life, in a community, *“A community’s quality of life is constructed of the shared characteristics, residents’ experience in places (for example, air and water quality, traffic or recreational opportunities) and the subjective evaluations residents make of those conditions”.*

Quality of life in the general well-being of individuals and societies, outlining negative and positive features of life. *It observes life satisfaction, including everything from physical health, family, education, employment, wealth, religious beliefs, finance and the environment.*

At last in simple we can define, *“someone’s quality of life is the extent to which their life is comfortable or satisfying”.*

Objectives:

1. To understand the concept of ‘Quality of Life’.
2. To understand the relationship of Quality of life and Environmental degradation.
3. To understand the impact of environmental degradation on the quality of life in urban setting in India.

Methodology:

The present study is mainly based on the secondary sources, such as literature pertaining to quality of life, the findings of the study or research existing and the various reports of the government and authorized institutions.

Environment and Quality of life –Relationship:

Environment and the quality of life in urban setting are significantly related. The quality of the local living environment has direct impact on the urban health and well-being. An unspoiled environment is a source of satisfaction, improves mental well-being and allows people to recover from stresses of everyday of life and perform physical activities. Access to resources such as green spaces, forest and rivers is an essential aspect of quality of life of people. Economics rely not only on healthy and productive workers, but also on natural resources like water, timber fisheries, plants and crops

(Zheng, 2010). The environmental services and amenities has a direct impact on people's quality of life and conversely the quality of these services is affected by human behavior.

Impact of Environmental Degradation on Quality of Life in Urban setting of India:

“Problems of environmental degradation and climate change are not threats to the earth at large. They are challenges to human survival”

Environmental degradation has emerged as a major global concern for human survival at the of 21st century. In the opinion of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) the future generations are to face an ever-increasing environmental decay, poverty, hardships and a more polluted world. The strains of the environmental crisis are so apparent that the pressure to preserve and protect the environment has become the primary requisite of the economics of development. The resource squeeze has led to an ever-intensification of ecological damage, land, water, and air are being polluted every minute. The green revolution, has turned red. Deforestation is proceeding at an alarming rate depleting the genetic stores and mega technology has created problems of waste disposal and industrial revolution has now become a great hazard to the environment as well as to humanity.

Chairman of Karnataka State Human Rights Commission(SHRC), **S. R. Nayak**, speaking after inaugurating the ‘World Environment Day’, organized jointly by the Gulbarga University and the academy of commonwealth education and humanity studies, expressed that, time has come to check the degradation of the environment and courts should exercise their judicial powers to ensure this without hesitation. He further opined that the intervention of the judiciary in environmental matters did not mean that every development program would be hindered, but it was necessary to maintain a proper balance between the development and the environment.

Among the most important environmental indicators is, air quality, the basis of the environment with a direct impact on humans, a non-replaceable part of human life connected with a fundamental physiological need to breathe. The impact of air quality on the quality of human life is in fact undeniable. The essential problem is that unlike other types of pollutions (water, soil) it is difficult to protect people from its’ effect. Due to industrial activities, transport and other potential sources, the most endangered group is residents of big cities who can be (many studies made by the WHO, such as **Krzyzanowski** 2010, prove that they actually are) exposed to excessive concentrations of air pollutants.

One of the major indicators of the quality of the urban environment is the presence of accessibility in it of so-called green areas. Generally speaking, they include not only vegetation elements (trees, lawns, flower beds, bushes etc) but also inanimate elements (roads, stair cases, benches, playgrounds etc). Green areas are mainly parks and landscaped areas, a forest, cemeteries, parkways, and gardens at individual buildings. The greenery is part of the environment of the city and its urban structure and fulfills especially ecological, recreational, cultural and aesthetic functions (**Supuka**, 1991). The ecological function is provided by trees and plants through their physiological process and they influence the climate of the city and have positive impact on its air quality.

According to new research by the University of Massachusetss and Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, recently published in Environmental Research, the cities across India are undertaking a variety of land-use, transportation and housing projects, but most plans do not consider

the connection between the built environment and health of residents. More than 99 percent of India's residents live in areas that do not pass the world health Organization's air quality guidelines. Taken together, India and China accounted for half of all deaths attributed to ambient air pollution worldwide in 2015. In many Indian cities, large numbers of people live in close proximity to road traffic and spend a great deal of time commuting.

Fakhruddin (1991) in his study on "Quality of Urban Life" in Lucknow city evidenced, that the urban environment in Lucknow has degraded and that housing, city infrastructure, civic amenities which condition the urban environment, show spatial disparities in their distribution. As regards the water and electricity supply the situation of the city is not satisfactory. In the inner outer residential zone poor people continue to use oil lamps and depend for water supply on public hydrants which are very few and far between and on wells, ponds and rivers. The sewerage and sanitation facilities, one of the vital elements of the quality of the environment is very unsatisfactory. Stagnant pools of water and flooding of low lying residential areas by rain water are a common sight. As such green areas concerned Lucknow was formerly known as the 'garden city'. However due to the lateral expansion of the built up area, open and green spaces are largely disappearing.

H. M. Saxena and **M.Z.A. Khan** in their UGC major research project entitled "Urbanization, Environmental Degradation And Quality of life"(A case study of one lakh and above cities of Rajasthan), has come out with findings or results 'as urbanization is a main cause of degradation of environment. Urbanization has brought with it many problems, including shortage of housing, inadequate water supply, sanitation, waste disposal facilities, congestion, traffic problems, pollution as well as unsafe social environment. All these urban problems are responsible for lower quality of life in many parts of the cities. Further they witnessed :

- Quality of environment in urban areas has deteriorated over the period of time.
- Pollution is the main problem of environmental degradation in cities of Rajasthan and pose serious threat to the life of inhabitants.
- Among most important causes of increasing pollution are fossil fuel burning, increasing vehicular traffic and disposal of solid and liquid waste without treatment.
- Existing system of generation, collection and disposal of the solid waste is grossly unsatisfactory and is ill-equipped to meet the changing consumption habits that accelerate the face of solid waste generation.
- In Rajasthan, desertification, land degradation, drought, deforestation, scarcity of water are major problems of environmental degradation, which should be done in solving these problems.
- The cities of Rajasthan are facing problems of air, water, land and noise pollution as well as problems of sanitation, waste disposal, drinking water, etc.
- Another aspect of urban pollution is their spatial pattern, i.e. within the city there are certain areas which are highly polluted, while others are lesser in terms of air, water and land pollution.
- In Indian conditions QOL can be determined on the basis of following variable; housing conditions, street conditions, drinking water facilities, internal drainage facilities and waste disposal facilities.
- Slums, now known as 'Kachhi Basti' have developed in all the cities of Rajasthan. It has been observed that bigger is the city, more are the slums.

- All the slums are having lower QOL and highly disease prone areas.
- Urban centers facing problems of housing, slums, sanitation, sewerage, waste collection and disposal, drinking water, health as well as air, water, land and noise pollution which are responsible for lower urban quality of life.

Samuel Paul, Kala Seetharam Sridhar and *A.Venugopal Reddy*, by studying 15 cities in Karnataka revealed that air quality in urban Karnataka that is ‘Respirable Suspended Particulate Matter’ (RSPM), is more than acceptable level which means the quality of air is not good. And as far as water quality is concerned the turbidity of water is acceptable in many cities but Belgaum water turbidity is unacceptable, the scarcity of potable water could be seen in most of the urban setting and the quality of such available water is also not of standard.

As far as recreation facility is concerned, Bangalore being known as the garden city, has a total of only 512 parks, accounting for only 10 per lakh population, Bijapur less than 2 parks per lakh population, Belgaum had only 1.8 parks per lakh population. This confirms that cities did not have adequate usable walking or green spaces available for the public.

According to Worldwide Quality of Living Survey, conducted by *Mercer*, human resource consultant, India’s two best cities Delhi and Mumbai are ranked at 150-29 positions behind Colombo ranked at 121 and even behind Senegal’s capital Dakar. India’s Asian rival China fared better with its commercial, capital Shanghai at 103rd positions and Beijing with 122 position.

India may have become one of the preferred global business destinations but when it comes to quality of living in its cities- the country is so far behind that it lags behind even a country like Srilanka.

Conclusion:

In conclusion we can say that, the urban population is growing at a fast rate and similarly urban settlements are also increasing in size and number. Cities are important to national and or regional economies because they are focal points for important activities like trade, commerce, industry and government administration. Cities are also centers of education, health care, technological innovation, entrepreneurship and governance. But despite these advantages, most of the cities face significant problems. A large segment of urban population suffer from the problems of degradation of environment and lower quality life, which is proved by various studies conducted in India. Environmental degradation in urban India is at alarming stage which has directly impacted and responsible for lower quality of life in urban setting in India. This situation can be improved by joint action of the government and public. Proper planning is necessary so as the peoples’ participation to control degradation of environment and improvement of Quality of Life, because cities will continue to grow at a rapid rate.

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