

Care for the Earth: The Statement of the Question

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Caring, if it is understood in its full sense, is something that happens mutually, in an I-Thou relationship. Understood in the background of the principle of cause-and-effect in the natural law and Newton's third law of motion¹. this principle of mutuality can also applied to the relationship between the nature and the humans.² It is in the background of this relatedness that in this short article, I would like to place before the reader some reflections on the question.

I would draw the attention of the reader to the catastrophic experience of natural disasters during the past three years and then indicate some areas that need immediate attention.

Part I: Natural Disasters during the Past Three Years

Two disasters in 2018 will for ever haunt the memories of people in Kerala and Tamil Nadu:

On 8 August 2018, severe floods affected the south Indian state of Kerala, due to unusually high rainfall during the monsoon season. It was the

worst flood in Kerala in nearly a century. Over 483 people died, and 14 were deported mission. The total loss of property was estimated to be a whopping Rs. 400 billion (US\$ 5.8 billion). Beyond the ill effects on natural beauty of “God’s own country” and its tourism, the life of common people itself was much affected by the floods.

Just as Tamil Nadu people too were feeling one with those of Kerala contributing generously, came the cyclone Gaja, which hit the costal districts of central Tamil Nadu: Nagappattinam, Thiruvarur, Thanjavur and Puthukkottai. It was November 11. Though the state had been placed on high alert by evacuating more than 80,000 people in 470 relief camps, the cyclonic storm hit so hard that about 100,000 electric posts, 1000 transformers, 201 electric sub-stations had been destroyed. 5000 fishing boats were fully damaged. 45 persons and thousands of cattle and birds lost their lives. Severely affected were also about 18 hectares of coconut trees, almost totally uprooted, and totally 56 hectares of crops were also destroyed; Tamil Nadu sought 15,000 crores for rebuilding³.

Just as the state is trying to return back from the ill effects of the deadly storm, the Tamil Nadu’s capital Chennai has become the next city in India to be hit by severest water scarcity in recent years. Though the year 2018 had experienced sufficient rainfalls in monsoons, the drought is back again with increased severity. Over 4.6 million people are gruesomely affected by water scarcity, forcing the rationing of water, closing down of lodges and hotels and IT hubs advising their employees to carry out their work remaining at their homes.

The magnitude of natural disasters become alarmingly clear to anyone who browses through the pages of the internet under “worldwide natural disasters” for the past consecutive two years: 2018 and 2017.

2018

From earthquakes in Indonesia, flooding in Japan and a volcanic eruption in Guatemala, thousands have lost their lives in natural disasters in 2018, and hundreds of thousands more were injured or displaced.

Date and month	Place & Type of disaster	Loss of human lives	Other losses
1. February	Papua New Guinea: Earthquake	145	Aftershocks and landslides, magnitude 7.5 5,00,000 people rendered homeless
2. May	Karachi, Pakistan: Heat wave	180	The heat wave coincided with power cuts and Ramadan, a month when many Muslims refrain from eating or drinking during the daytime. Most of those who died were from poor areas, and included children and elderly people.

3. June	Guatemala: <i>Fuengo</i> Volcanic Eruption	425	Surrounding areas were soon engulfed in a deadly pyroclastic flow, a mixture of hot gas and volcanic rock that can move at speeds up to 90 miles per hour
4. July	Japan Uwajima: Floods	220	15" of rain in two hours
5. July	Greece	126: While most victims died in the fire, some drowned in the sea as they attempted to flee the flames.	
6. July and August 5	Indonesia: Earthquake Magnitude 6.9	468	
7. August	North Korea	151	Dangerous flooding and landslides which destroyed more than 800 buildings

8. September	Nigeria: Floods	200	Hit more than half a million people and,, destroyed more than 13,000 homes. The floods struck one third of Nigeria's 36 states, affecting nearly 2 million people.
9. September	Sulawesi Island, Indonesia: A 7,5 magnitude earthquake and subsequent 20-foot tsunami	4783	Levelled entire cities and rendered more than 330,000 people homeless.

2017

We would never forget the Okhi cyclone. How can we, when we have lost more than 600 lives? It all happened on 29th and 30th of November. Most of the dead were fishermen, caught unawares in the midst of the sea. In the mainland the farmers were very much affected with thousands of hectares of coconut, banana and rubber plantation were flattened.

The global picture for natural disaster in 2017 is marked by an outbreak of serious contagious diseases. Some diseases which were thought to have been eliminated returned.

Date and month	Place & Type of disaster	Loss of human lives	Other losses
1. August	Indonesia: <i>Agung</i> Volcano eruption	No human loss	35000 displaced
2. September	Many Districts of Rwanda: Heavy Storms	Not reported	Widespread devastation
3. September	France, Nederlands: Hurricane <i>Maria</i>		
4. September	South Sudan Floods	Deaths reported, numbers not known	11000 people displaced
5. September	Mexico: Earthquake Magnitude 8.1	Deaths reported, No numbers	Tsunami warning for Mexico, Gautemala, El Savador
6. October	Zambia: outbreak of cholera	15	Case fatality reported as 1.8%
7. November	Viet Nam Typhoon: Damrey	29	Destroyed 600 houses and damaged 40,000 houses

8. November	Iran/Iraqe: Earthquake of magnitude 7.3	407	6700 injured
9. November	Yemen: Diphtheria outbreak	At least 20, more deaths reported	189 confirmed cases
10. November	Albania: floods	No deaths	The populated areas most affected by the rivers overflowed

Part II: The Urgency of Caring for the Earth

Laudato Si places before us the question: “What is happening to our common home?” and then in clear and concrete terms the main aspects that we need to pay attention to: pollution and climate change, the issue of water, the loss of biodiversity, breakdown in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society, and global inequality¹. The alarming situation today has been caused because of the “war on creation” that has been going on intensely especially because of the opening the flood-gates of globalization. This “war on creation” has affected “our common home”, the earth, in all aspects: the land or lithosphere, the water or hydrosphere, air or atmosphere, the life itself or biosphere and personal-social consciousness or the noosphere².

The statement of the question, then, can be worded or viewed in the following terms of the following nodal points:

1. Universalism, the Macro Aspect:

The word comes from the Greek *oikos*, meaning “household,” “home,” or “place to live”.³ The eco system is our home, the place where we live.

but the system includes not only the earth but the immense, unlimited number of systems of sons and stars and planets all belong to one ecosystem and that is our “home”, not only the “tiny”⁴ earth. Every big or small star is connected to every other planet by the distance, orbit and the magnetic and gravitation pull between them. Needless to say, that the human interference into this one eco system will be self-destructive. Secondly, since the earth, the home within the ecological broader home, is a common home for all those living on it, all that affects the earth has the impact on all parts of the earth, on all nations, on all human beings and indeed on all life. For example, the challenge of climate change is not an individual but universal problem: “The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all”.⁵

Just a glance through the list of natural disasters occurred within one particular year makes one understand that these calamities are now a global experience. One or other natural disaster hits every part of the earth. The oneness of the ecosystem necessitates all come together, going beyond the differences of colour, religion, caste, tribe, language, culture and nationalism. Thus, for example, the “green house gas” contributing to the global warming, affects not only every human being or every living being of living organism on the face of the earth, but even the so-called “inanimate objects and masses” such as rocks, hills, ice-bbergs, glaciers, seas, rivers, air and fire. The carbon dioxide emitted already is going to be there for a century, even if all emissions are stopped today⁶, and a warm earth is warm for all.

2. Particularism, the Micro Aspect:

Universalism is a concept, but particularity is the experience. In other words, the universal effect of ecological crises is experienced in concrete by individual places, organisms and human beings. The radio-activity, for example, that is found to be present in the districts of Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli, Thoothukkudi and Thiruvananthapuram in water, the soil and the air is said to

be the cause of bigger percentage of people affected by cancer. The Indian Rare Earths Limited (IRE) is surely beneficial to India's nuclear projects and atomic weapons and missiles and the Electrical energy harvested from the Koodankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KNPP - the largest nuclear reactor in India), and the Sterlite Copper of the Vedanta at Thooththukkudi are said to be affecting the atmospheric and ecological health with the ill-effects not only on water, soil and air, but also on many individual areas of land, sea, fish, animals and humans living here, irrespective of their caste creed or cult⁷.

Who are the worst affected? It is the poor and the labourers, exposed to direct radiation because of the living and working conditions. Writing on the effects of global warming, John Deroshers, states, "The consequences of global warming will affect everyone, rich and poor. But the poor will have to bear the greater burden."⁸ Pope Francis writes, "Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited"⁹ It is our experience that every year there is a problem of land erosion, caused among others by rising levels in sea water due to the melting of the glaciers. It is the poor fishing population that is affected immediately. Several houses are washed away by high tide waves.

3. Global Responsibility:

It is accepted by all today that eco conservation is a global responsibility. the Earth Day is celebrated every year from 1970. With the same responsibility, in 2005 the United adopted 22 April as the Earth Day to be celebrated by all countries.¹⁰ Though much is spoken and written on the global responsibility, very little is done. Writes Pope Francis, "It is remarkable

how weak international political responses have been. The failure of global summits on the environment make it plain that our politics are subject to technology and finance. There are too many special interests, and economic interests easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans will not be affected".¹¹ For the leaders, be in at the international level or at the national and even local levels, the vote-bank politics play a role and they proceed with their eyes on the next election rather than on a far-sighted goal for the future of the earth and its inhabitants.¹²

Sometimes it can be frustrating to people who are in the forefront in the struggle to save the earth. During the recently held General Assembly of the United Nations, the 16 year old activist, Greta Thuberg of Sweden spoke these words to the world leaders including President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi: "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words..... People are suffering, people are dying".¹³ Tamil Nadu will never forget what some politicians and one famous actor observed about the shooting and killing of 13 persons among those who demonstrated against Sterlite Copper, that those killed were all like antisocial!

There have been some commendable actions too carried out by the government: The All India Radio broadcasts every day several bits for the promotion of ecological awareness among the people through the FM channels. But how many are listening? Another good move is prohibition of single use plastic throughout the state of Tamil Nadu from Jan 1, 2019. Prime Minister Modi too speaks a lot against the use of plastics, though the Clean Ganga project does not seem to have borne much fruit. Yet the Indian Government has intended to issue an order of Prohibition of single use plastics from October 2, the 150th birth anniversary of the Father of the Nation.

4. Local responsibility:

The Caritas India promoted the celebration of the Earth Day and the following resolutions were adopted at the Kottar Diocesan level rally held at Kandervilagam by the Rural Motivation Programme (RMP), at the behest of the Kottar Social Service Society (KSSS).

- Zero tolerance against use of plastic.
- Keep home and premises clean.
- To implement rain-water harvesting at all home premises within a year. Avoid wastage of water.
- Make the earth fruitful by home vegetable gardening in such a way as to begin local Sunday vegetable market within next three months.
- Conserve trees: if one tree is to be felled, two should be planted.

That these resolutions were put forward by women who play important influential role as wives and mothers. They also decided to have a monitoring body and to present quarterly report at the unit meetings and come out with names for the best performing family at the next year's World Earth Day. Care for the earth is the responsibility for everyone. Are we aware of it? If we do not care for the earth, the earth will not care for us!

Endnotes

- ¹ *Wikipedia*, "Newton's Laws" downloaded 26 Sept. 2019.
- ² Clearly implied, I think, in the idea of "ecological conversion" in *Laudato Si*, Nos. 216-221. see also No. 125.
- ³ These details are available from browsing in Google, *Wikipedia*, dated 26 June 2019.
- ⁴ *Ladato Si*, Nos. 17-52.
- ⁵ Rayappa A. Kasi, *Rush to Riches: The War on Creation*. Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2011. In this ground breaking work the author presents in a unique way the harm that the humans have caused to the mother earth. There is also an earlier work by the same author, *Earth: the Lost Paradise of Happiness*. Vellore: Lokavani Southern Printers, 2009 is also commendable.

- ⁶ The word “ecology was coined by the German geologist Earnst Haeckel (c. 1870). He applied the term *oekologie* to the “relation of the animal both to its organic as well as its inorganic environment.
- ⁷ “Tiny” in comparison with many other larger planets that we have discovered, whereas there may be many more we do not know yet.
- ⁸ *Laudato Si*, 23.
- ⁹ Royappa A. Kasi, *Ruch to Riches: War on Creation*, p. 201.
- ¹⁰ In site radiometric survey carried out in 81 revenue villages of Kanyakumari District, Tamil Nadu, India, using a portable radiation dosimeter/detector, revealed the existence of radiation hotspots along the coastal belt. A close observation of the coastal villages specifically revealed high background radioactivity in 14 coastal villages. A very high intrinsic anomalous radioactivity of 41.03 $\mu\text{Sv h}^{-1}$ was observed, in a famous tourist spot in the coastal belt of Kanyakumari District. This is the highest level of radiation registered in South India, which is extremely higher than the permissible world average and is suggestive of causing severe clinical problems on continuous and prolonged exposure. See *Natural Gamma Radio-activity in the Villages of Kanyakumari District*, March 2013, downloaded from Google, 28 September 2019.
- ¹¹ John Deroshers, CSC, *The Climate Change Challenge*. Banglaore: NBCLC/CSA, 2012, 23. This is a very comprehensive, realistic and thorough study, carried out with commitment and responsibility to the masses, from the perspective of the struggle for justice. I have not come across any work so clear and organized.
- ¹² *Laudato Si*, 25.
- ¹³ Wikipedia, “Earth Day”
- ¹⁴ *Laudato Si*, 54.
- ¹⁵ John Deroshers, *The Climate Change Challenge*, p. 20.
- ¹⁶ Donald Trump tweeted in a mocking way about this bold observation of the young activist and racked up more than 16,000 responses in just about three hours. *The Hindu*, September 25 p. 12.