LAND AND LIFE: A NATIVE PERSPECTIVE

JITENDER MOR*

*Assistant Professor,
Shahid Udham Singh Government College,
Matakmajri, Indri, India.

ABSTRACT

Land is now the most important source of economic riches. In fact, imperialism was an exercise aimed at getting control of the lands of Native people who were living a very contented life in their native lands. The arrival of the imperialists altered the situation and the native people were displaced from their lands. This created severe health problems for the natives because for them land was not only a commodity; it was an ancestor, a nourisher, fountain head of their culture and existence. So once they were removed from their lands they became distressed and developed the diseases which were unknown among them. The current paper studies the problems generated by the theft of land among the Aborigines.

KEYWORDS: Land, native, health, suicide, environment.

INTRODUCTION

Recently a video of a Jarawa girl made headlines in all the national dailies. People were concerned about how a nude girl was forced to perform in front of the police officials. The video was indeed a cause of concern, but it was not a cause of concern because of the nudity of the girl. The nudity among the Jarawas and many other tribes is very common, the cause of concern was how the proud people were degraded to perform their livelihood. Jarawas like many other tribes are among the hunter-gatherer communities, but they are unable to live that kind of lifestyle because their land has been shrinking. The government has been pushing them away from their land. To compensate they are provided with the food by the government which is unsuitable to them. Traditionally they used to eat food which was rich in protein, but now they are forced to eat sugary carbohydrate rich food which is paving the way for diseases which were earlier unknown to them. In fact, whatever has happened with Jarawas is happening all over the world.

In the present society land is one of the most important sources of economic riches. Earlier the economic utility of land was dependent on agriculture only, but now a days economic utility of land has transcended the agrarian aspect and land has become what is called “real estate.” While people continue to earn money from land, there is a community in almost every corner of the world which is developing severe psychological problems because of the exploitation of land. Though the modern man has erased all the memories from his conscious mind of a time when land and man shared a relationship of son and a mother, yet there are still people in the world who still continue to bound themselves with this anachronic relationship with the mother earth.
people are sometimes called First Nations people, sometimes Aboriginals and sometimes the Natives. Whatever may be their name these people are the most oppressed people on the planet. They have no place in the modern nation states because their life styles are outdated and they considered to be the remnants of stone age. The modern nation states have disturbed their life styles and created severe problems for their populations in the name of development. In fact, the impact has been so devastating that some experts have called “gentle genocide” (O’Malley 46).

The current paper discusses the impact of land theft among the natives. The protest is getting louder now. Earlier the voices were drowned under the loud colonial propaganda, but now the native writers of Australia and Canada are writing about their problems and concerns. And what is important is that they are being read by the people across the world. The writings of these native writers make it clear that their lives are closely associated with land. In their writings, land appears not only as an economic commodity, but as a living being that has a past and present:

People talk about country in the same way they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalized or undifferentiated type of place, such as one might indicate with terms like ‘spending a day in the country.’ Rather the country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind and spirit; heart’s ease. (Bird 6)

Earlier the colonial masters were not ready to accept this relationship between the people and the land. But now these relationships are not only accepted but are studied because these relationships seem to offer safety to the planet. It has now been established that the problems like global warming, environmental degradation and pollution are plaguing the world because man has forgotten the relationship which was nurtured by these people in the past. In fact, it has now been established that local cultures should be respected and preserved because these cultures emanated from the land and were best suited under those circumstances. Unfortunately, under the policy of imperialism, the imperial masters not only tried to plant alien civilizations on the native lands, but also alien cultures which were not suited for those lands. The best example is available in Australia where the Aborigines did not become agriculturalists because as the driest continent in the world, the land was not suitable for water intensive activities like agriculture.

In fact, the process started with the arrival of imperial masters in the native lands. The invaders knew that their cruel land grabbing exercise has to be justified somehow so they dehumanized the natives from the outset. The natives were degraded to the level of beasts, so when these helpless people were slaughtered no questions were asked by anybody. The degradation of the Australian Aborigines is clear in this early description where the writer justifies the land grab in the name of civilization:

When Captain Cook landed at Botany Bay probably there were not 500,000 natives in all Australia. And if the white man had not come, there probably would never have been any progress among the blacks. As they were then they had been for countless centuries, and in all likelihood would have remained for countless centuries more. They had never, like the Chinese, the Hindus, the Peruvians, the Mexicans, evolved a civilization of their own. There was not the
slightest sign that they would be able to do so in the future. If there was ever a country on earth which the white man had a right to take on the ground that the black man could never put it to good use, it was Australia. (Fox 35)

It in indeed ironic that in the same account while trying to degrade the Natives, the writer paid a tribute to the Aborigines. In the same book he wrote:

Australia produced no grain of any sort naturally; neither wheat, oats, barley nor maize. It produced practically no edible fruit, excepting a few berries, and one or two nuts, the outer rind of which was eatable. There were no useful roots such as the potato, the turnip, or the yam, or the taro. The native animals were few and just barely eatable, the kangaroo, the koala (or native bear) being the principal ones. In birds alone was the country well supplied, and they were more beautiful of plumage than useful as food. Even the fisheries were infrequent, for the coast line, as you will see from the map, is unbroken by any great bays, and there is thus less sea frontage to Australia than to any other of the continents, and the rivers are few in number. (Fox 34)

The above account makes it clear that the Aborigines of Australia must have been very intelligent people to survive in such a continent where according to Fox’s account there was such a scarcity of food. But, white man did not pay any attention to the achievement of the Aborigines because he was only interested in grabbing the land.

The Aborigines shared a special relationship with the land. The land is treated as a living entity. The land is not only a source of food but also the fountain spring of culture and life:

Land is closely linked with kinship. The land is often referred to as parent, sometimes father, and more often mother. Therefore if land is mother of all things, the members are all related as brothers and sisters and share associated rights, responsibilities, and dreaming. From these spiritual links with the land flow relationships between the members of the group and as part of these relationships, the language and skin groups of each member give Aboriginal people their associative bonds. (Bishop, Coluhoun et al 5)

So when these people were moved away from the land. It created severe complications for them. Most of these people developed severe psychological problems. One of the problems is described by the Canadian Native writer Carol Snow Moon Bachofner in her poem “Land Sickness”:

I’m flung away, far from the edges
Of ocean, beneath brown, unsettled skies;
I have no salt spray on my hair, no chill
Gray sand beneath my feet. I am bereft
Of crisp ocean kisses and wild seaweed,
Dancing like a sultry lover around my ankles.
Perhaps I will die from land sickness… (68)

This land sickness is caused because people are dislocated from their land. These people who lived in the forests in the natural surroundings and practised the hunter-gatherer life styles were forced to settle in the places where they could not hunt or gather food and had to depend on carbohydrate rich food provided by the governments. The camps were often crowded where the people lived like prisoners. The suicide rates among these people are highest because they live in the places which are like prisons to them and suicide is a welcome liberation from such depressing and hopeless life. A lot of research has been done among a rural Brazilian tribe, the Guarani Indians:

Their suicide rate in 1995 was 160 per 100,000 markedly higher then it was a year earlier and dramatically higher then the U.S. rate of about 12 per 100,000. The reason for this high suicide rate may be found in a sudden change in their living conditions. The Guarani have recently lost most of their ancestral lands to industrialization. Communities that used to live by hunting and fishing are now crowded on to reservations too small to support that way of life. Nearby cities tempt the Guarani with consumer goods that they desire and yet can ill afford on their low wages. Because hunting, farming and family life have religious signification, their demise has significantly affected religious life. Life has lost its meaning for many of the Guarani. (qtd. in Davison and Neale 274)

Similarly, Australian Aboriginal novelist Alexis Wright writes that displacement from home land is another source of alcoholism for her people also. In Grog War, she tells how the Warumungu Aborigines were brought to the brink of starvation on their own land because the land was given to the miners which disrupted the food supply of the Aborigines. It was during this time that the Warumungu people realized that alcohol can relieve their distress at least for sometime:

In those times it must have been a revelation to the Aboriginal people who had succumbed to alcohol, to know that the grog could make you forget just about everything that reminded you who you were (Wright,1997, p. 36).

The problems faced by the Waramungu people can be easily generalized to the other tribes of Aborigines also who were dispossessed by the whites and the best lands were taken for agriculture and cattle stations and for mines. Mudrooroo, the noted Aboriginal writers writes:

It is said that the health of us mob depends on the health of our land, that is land suffers, so do we. Thus if sacred sites are destroyed, if the dreaming tracks of our ancestors are severed, is affects our bodies. For the Indigenous person, life and land are intimately connected, and if the land is harmed so is the person. (1996, p.126)

In fact, it has been established in so many researches that the hunter gatherer communities live a healthy and long life if they are allowed to live in their natural surroundings. On the other hand, if they are removed away from their lands and are forced to alter their life style then they become affected by diseases like diabetes, depression, schizophrenia etc. and their life spans become shorter:
Although life expectancies of hunter-gatherers are low by modern European or American standard, they compare favourably with expectancies for displaced hunter-gatherers, many subsistence agriculturalists, and impoverished urbanized people of the tropics today. Typically, life expectancies decrease when hunter-gatherers are settled, not increase. Their life expectancies are thought to be lower now then they would have been at the turn of the 20th Century because of the negative impacts of the outsiders, such as the stealing of land, depleting of food stocks and the spreading of diseases. (Goodman and Grigs 2)

The most important thing that we should understand at this juncture is that land is an important ingredient of the lives of the native people. These people should be allowed to live on their lands which not only nourishes their life and health but also their spirits. Their right to live on their land should be respected and that right should not be taken away.

REFERENCES


