

Health, Society and Environment

In his book *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1998), Pulitzer prize winner Jared Diamond argues that one of the reasons that different people have different histories is the differences in their environments. It is the environment that largely determined the culture and society of a people—whether they became warriors, were peace loving, became hunter gatherers or farmers. Giving the example of the people inhabiting isolated Polynesian islands in the Pacific Ocean, he points out that the fates of people inhabiting these islands, particularly the Maoris and the Morioris, were sealed by the environment in which they evolved.

The many islands have widely varying landscapes and climates, dictating the variations in lifestyle and behaviour patterns of the people inhabiting them since ancient times. The original dwellers were all descendants of Polynesian farmers, who lived in New Zealand around 1000 AD, but as they spread to the different islands, they grew vastly different from each other. The Moriori were a small isolated group of hunter-gatherers, using simple technology, inhabiting the cold Chatlam Island, with no agricultural resources. These were peace-loving people who knew no violence. On the other hand, the Maori inhabited the densely populated New Zealand's North Island with fertile lands and tropical climate. They became farmers and had to engage in fierce wars. They were also technologically superior. The fact that the two communities had a common origin did not stop the bloodbath between them, which finally resulted in the annihilation of the Morioris by the Maoris in 1835.

Health, society and environment constitute an integrated complex within which human life is embedded. The health of society and environment is needed for the health of individual/human life and vice versa—they are the constituents of social ecology and dynamics of the relationship between humankind and nature are implicit in them. The ecological infrastructure of human society (soil, water, flora, fauna, climate etc.) conditions the evolution and development of human life, political relations, social structures and ideology. At the same time, human intervention itself reshapes the natural environment in its own image (Guha, 1994). The balance between these domains rests on an awareness of their interdependence of the reciprocal relations between culture, polity, social structure, economy,

ecological infrastructure and health. Implicit in the idea of reciprocal interdependence is an acknowledgement of the ability of each element to act on and affect the other.

“Environmental problems are not only problems of technology and industry, of ecology and biology, of pollution control and pollution prevention. They are also social problems. Environmental problems are problems for society- problems that threaten our existing patterns of social organization. Environmental problems are problems of society-problems that challenge us to change those patterns of organization. It is people who create environmental problems, and it is people who must resolve them” (Bell, 2008).

Two important discourses have shaped the understanding of the relationship between environment and society or social ecology. The first is an anthropocentric discourse located in the geological epoch of Anthropocene – humankind is viewed as controlling the environment, and as responsible for its destruction while nature is the passive, mechanical recipient. Implicit in this is the Cartesian dualism that perceives humans as separate from nature.

Countering this is the New Materialist position which decenters humankind and removes all binaries – separation of humankind and nature – binding them together in an intricate, reciprocal web of interconnectedness. In this discourse, both humans and nature have agency. Nature is not a passive recipient, as is clear in the narrative of nature’s revenge, in which its action is mostly in terms of a reaction to what humanity does (Hannigan, 1995). It has the agency to bring about ecological transformations, to shape and mould societies.

The first issue of *Vantage* explores the interactions between environment, health and society. The articles address a wide range of social and scientific concerns such as menstruation, gender, issues of sexuality, tribes, purification of water, preserving nutrients of fruits and vegetables, homeopathic medicines, exploring ways and means to improve the environment, health and more.

Life originated in water and hence, the conservation of water is central to environmental concerns. Four papers in this issue focus on different aspects of purification of water. Contamination of water by industrial effluents and oil spillage from oil tankers are a major threat to the environment. The papers **“Eco-friendly Magnetic Biopolymer Nanocomposites for Removal of Organic Dye/Heavy Metals from Wastewater”**, and **“Green Synthesis of Copper Nanoparticles Designed from *Ocimum sanctum* for Purification of Wastewater”** seek ecofriendly solutions using biopolymer chitosan and nanoparticles designed from Tulsi. The paper **“Synthesis of Iron Oxide Nanoparticles and**

its Application for Oil-water Separation” explores the potential of iron-oxide nanoparticles in clearing oil spills in oceans.

Readily accessible and safe drinking water is crucial for health. Every human being has the basic right to safe, sufficient and continuous supply of potable water. The paper **“Assessment of Bacteriological and Physico-Chemical Parameters of Drinking Water to Check the Efficacy of Water Purifier Systems”** attempts to understand efficiency and utility of water purifiers to provide us with clean drinking water, without depleting the nutrients, important for health.

Environmental problems are also problems of social inequality. Not only are the effects of environmental problems distributed unequally across the human community, social inequality is also deeply involved in causing those problems. Social inequality is both a product and a producer of pollution, overconsumption, resource depletion, habitat loss, risky technology, and rapid population growth. Social inequality influences how we envision our environmental problems, nature itself, for inequality shapes our social experiences which in turn shape all our experiences (Bell, 2008).

The influence of factors such as genetic predisposition, behavioral aspects and environment on health have been well-documented. In recent years, a growing body of evidence has highlighted the impact of social and cultural variables such as socio-economic factors, race, ethnicity, gender, social network, support, and job-related stress on health. These variables create a social and cultural environment that can affect health in general and also impact the etiology of disease. The current COVID 19 pandemic is a live example of this inter-dependence.

Menstruation is another case in point. The biological process cannot be viewed in isolation from the socio-cultural beliefs and practices in which women are perceived as being closer to nature, an association rooted in the biological process of reproduction, and men as being closer to culture. Nature in this perception is seen as inferior to culture, hence, women are seen as inferior to men. The paper **“A Sociological Study of the Stigma and Silences around Menstruation”** reflects on this issue. It examines various cultural and religious taboos such as silence and secrecy surrounding menstruation and their implications on mental, physical and reproductive health of young girls in India.

The normative gender ideology also creates a derogatory image of women, which gives men the license to perceive and treat them as objects of sexual pleasure. Sexual harassment is a manifestation of this. The #MeToo movement was a protest against this sexual harassment by women across the world. It was a major initiative by them to question and break out of this

image and take a step towards the creation of a healthy social environment at the centre of which is freedom, equality and social justice. **“Social Media and the Mobilization of Collective Action on Sexual Violence against Women: A Case Study of the ‘#MeToo’ Movement in India”** focuses on this issue and looks at the role of social media in rallying the women’s rights movement in India.

The LGBTQ+ Community constitutes a section of society marginalized due to its deviation from the dominant, patriarchal sexual narrative where heterosexual, marital and reproductive sex is the norm. The mainstream pushes those with alternative sexual orientations to the margins, depriving them of their right to be who they are. Their identities are not recognized and they are denied access to resources as well as the right to live a healthy life with dignity. The paper **“Representing the LGBTQ+ Community: A Study of Indian and American Popular Culture in the Last Decade”** discusses some of the issues associated with the LGBTQ+ community through a cross-cultural comparison of society’s attitude to alternate gender identities of the LGBTQ+ spectrum in selected American and Indian movies and web-series over the last decade.

Cinema is an important means to engage with, and understand social reality. It is often referred to as the mirror of society. It is an agent through which ideologies are constructed, destroyed, consolidated and spread. Its role in justifying or challenging the hegemonic discourses of a society and its ability to promote or challenge social health is unquestionable. The paper **“युवा वर्ग पर बढ़ता सिनेमा का प्रभाव”** focuses on the negative impact of cinema on youth today.

Good governance is the key to the health, development and prosperity of a society, and a critical factor in achieving economic and social development objectives. The paper entitled **“A Comparative Analysis of Socio-Economic and Governance Dimensions of Political Regimes in India”** examines the significance of good governance and socio-economic performance of different political regimes in India from 1996-2018 and highlights the role of the government as crucial for social health.

Shifting the focus to physical health, the paper **“Post Harvest Treatment for Preserving Antioxidant Properties and Total Phenolic Content of Tomatoes and Litchis”** examines how the nutrient elements of fruits and vegetables can be preserved. Many disorders like non-communicable and degenerative diseases can be prevented by antioxidants and polyphenols present in fruits and vegetables. They are highly susceptible to bacterial and fungal spoilage. When refrigerated, they lose their antioxidants properties. The paper seeks an eco-friendly and economical solution to this problem.

A large section of the population prefers Homeopathy as an alternative to Allopathic medicine. Homeopathic medicines have been used to cure several diseases like respiratory tract infections, depression and even AIDS, yet it is a system of medicine dismissed by the practitioners of modern medicine who believe that the effect of homeopathy is nothing more than a “placebo effect” with no real medicinal value (Haresnape, 2013). The paper **“Influence of the Homeopathic Medicine, *Arsenicum album*, on Selected Biochemical Parameters of Avian and Mammalian Blood *in vitro*”** challenges this perception and tries to explore the cell-based evidence of therapeutic functions of homeopathic medicine.

Artificial sweeteners have gained increasing importance in today’s world where diabetes has become an epidemic. However, being chemically synthesized, they have many side effects. The paper **“Relationship between Molecular Structure and Relative Sweetness of Various Artificial Sweeteners”** seeks to compare the relative sweetness of different artificial sweeteners by studying the association between its molecular structure and sweetness using computational methods. They propose that by simple reconfiguration of the structures, the relative sweetness can be altered, and their dose can be reduced thus limiting the side effects.

The articles in this introductory issue of Vantage are products of research projects undertaken by undergraduate students of Maitreyi College, University of Delhi, mentored by the faculty of their respective disciplines. They not only delve into the nature of the relationship between health, society and the environment, but also seek to provide solutions to bring about a balance between these important drivers of the quality of human life. For Russian author Leo Tolstoy, the pursuit of science was meaningless because it did not provide an answer to the question “What shall we do and how shall we live?” What he said of the sciences is true for all disciplines - knowledge is only meaningful, if it is applied for the good of the people.

Vantage is a small step in this direction. Offering perspectives on a theme from varied vantage points, it strives to generate, and contribute to, a meaningful body of knowledge.

8. REFERENCES:

- Bell, M.M. (2008). *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology* (3rd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, C.A: Sage.
- Diamond, J. M. (1999). *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The fates of human societies*. W.W. Norton & Co.
- Guha, R. (1994). Introduction. In. Guha R. (ed.), *Social Ecology*. Oxford University Press.

Hannigan J.A. (1995). *Environmental Sociology* (2nd Ed.) Routledge.

Haresnape, C. (2013). An exploration of the relationship between placebo and homeopathy and the implications for clinical trial design. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine Short Reports*, 4, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2042533313490927>

How to cite this article: Editorial (2020). Health, society and environment. *Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis*, 1(1), 32-40.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52253/vjta.2020.v01i01.01>

© The Author(s) 2020.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits its use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.