

Virtue Ethics in Sustainable Commercial Practice: A Study with Special Reference to Water Hyacinth Crafts Among the Rural Communities of Assam

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ABSTRACT:

Water Hyacinth considered a menace poses significant challenges to water bodies, disrupting ecosystems and affecting local communities. However, transforming invasive water hyacinth into innovative eco-friendly craft products is a sustainable solution to deal with the associated environmental and ecological problem while generating economic opportunities. This study aims to put a philosophical touch to the eco-friendly commercial product focusing on the invasive Water Hyacinth.

Virtue ethics, which places emphasis on the cultivation of moral character and virtues such as responsibility, integrity, and community-mindedness, serves as a framework for assessing the methods used by the local artisans. This research investigates how the cultivation of virtues have an impact in their practices and interactions, paving a way for their approach to sustainability and community engagement and focuses on how these artisans exhibit virtues in their creations by cultivating a sense of ethical responsibility among the artisans.. The important attributes identified are environmental stewardship, a commitment to quality craftsmanship, and a focus on social responsibility which are manifested in various ways, such as the careful harvesting of water hyacinth to prevent over-exploitation, the production of durable and aesthetically appealing products, and the developing and practicing fair trade practices that benefit the community as a whole. This approach puts special emphasis on the quality of their products, strengthens community ties and promotes environmental conservation and aims to show how the rural communities are more adaptable and sustainable when business practices are in line with virtue principles. This study analyses the intersection of virtue ethics and sustainable commercial practices through the lens of rural communities residing in Assam, India, engaged in crafting water hyacinth based products and their role in effectively addressing the environmental challenges while achieving economic prosperity.

Keywords: Virtue ethics, Water Hyacinth, Sustainable, Eco-friendly

INTRODUCTION

In the recent times the paradigm shifts towards sustainable practices and increased environmental awareness, eco-friendly commercial products call for innovative approach which involves utilizing local,

renewable resources for commercial use. One such example is Water Hyacinth which has become a significant trend in the local as well as global markets. Water Hyacinth which was considered a nuisance has innovatively been transformed into eco-friendly commercial products. The rural communities of Assam who are known for their innovative and resourceful characteristics, have long been engaged in the practices of sustainable commercial crafts. One such innovation of the rural communities of Assam is commercial products using water hyacinth. This practice helps to maintain the ecological balance and contribute towards the socio-economic welfare of these communities. However, there lies a deep conceptual affinity with virtue ethics in the sustainable endeavours. This necessitates an ethical framework that gives priority to character and moral virtues over rules or consequences.

The philosophical view of virtue ethics, specifically the teachings of Plato and Aristotle, provides a meaningful framework to get an insight into the moral foundations of these practices. The manner in which the rural artisans maintain a balance between traditional knowledge, ecological responsibility, and economic necessity are reflected in Plato's cardinal virtues—wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. The Golden Mean concept propounded by Aristotle reflects a balanced, moderate approach in all actions, which is reflected in the sustainable practices of these communities, as they refrain from exploitation of resources and total disengagement from economic activities. The anthropocentric and the ecocentric philosophy further emphasizes on maintaining a balance between upliftment of human beings and responsibility towards environment.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand how the core virtues of Plato's virtue ethics principles—wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice—are cultivated in rural communities of Assam engaged in Sustainable Commercial Crafts using Water Hyacinth
- To analyse how Aristotle's Golden Mean is applied in the sustainable practices of rural communities in Assam.
- To get a glimpse on how the Sustainable practices relating to Water Hyacinth among rural communities align with both anthropocentric and ecocentric ideologies.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to throw light on the fundamental virtues of Plato's ethical philosophy which are cultivated in the daily lives of these rural artisans, impacting their decisions and actions in the crafting of water hyacinth crafts. It also seeks to examine how Aristotle's Golden Mean paves a way for the sustainable use of natural resources, ensuring that neither surplus nor shortage characterise their craft practices. The study further explores into the wider ideological alignment between the anthropocentric focus on human welfare and the ecocentric emphasis on ecological preservation, demonstrating how these communities strike a balance between human prosperity and environmental stewardship.

Thus, this study focuses on the emerging role of Virtue Ethics in Sustainable Commercial Crafts emphasizing on Water Hyacinth practiced among the rural communities of Assam, thus providing a philosophical touch to the Eco friendly Commercial Products.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The increasing need for green marketing, focusing that the current consumption levels are not sustainable. It underscores the importance of shifting consumer behavior towards environmentally

friendly lifestyles. Despite being aware of the environmental challenges, many consumers still lack adequate knowledge about green products, and this low awareness has created a hesitant attitude to embrace environmentally sustainable products. (*Jacob Cherian and Jolly Jacob, 2012*). Water Hyacinth, which is considered a nuisance to water bodies, has been adapted as a substitute for cane and bamboo in traditional handicrafts. This creative use of a problematic plant highlights a successful environmental management strategy. In a time period of less than three years, the Artisan Development programme has been successful in training over a thousand artisans. The rapid expansion reflects how well the initiative has done in generating new economic prospects. The eco-friendly products have found a strong market presence, showcasing both consumer interest and the project's ability to meet the growing market demands. The project has had a major impact on the lives of rural impoverished people. Special focus has been laid on rural women in the North Eastern region. This reflects how the effort supports empowerment and economic development. NEDFi is considering to establish a raw material bank to ensure a steady supply of water hyacinth stems, even during the winter. This move aims to sustain production and satisfy the ongoing demand. The project faces barriers in scaling up, such as including more participants and creating opportunities for the unskilled. Addressing these issues is of utmost importance for broader impact and inclusivity. (*Borah.N, 2018*). The efforts of organisations like the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation (NEDFi) and Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM) to promote water hyacinth crafts through training and market linkages is emphasized upon. Initiatives such as branding the craft products under the name 'Aqua Weaves' and the creation of biodegradable yoga mats showcase the utility of water hyacinth. The craft helps in waste management by reducing the menace and creates products that can be marketed in local as well as international market. Through structured training and financial support, many artisans have turned into entrepreneurs, and this has created a significant impact in the economic condition of the entrepreneurs. (*Bora. B, Baruah.N and Sahariah, B., 2019*).

The consumer behaviour can be assessed based on virtues that promote human flourishing, rather than self-interest alone. Drawing from Aristotle's concept of "eudaimonia," they contend that ethical consumption practices align with virtues like temperance, prudence, and justice. Temperance, for example, addresses moderation in consumption, counteracting tendencies toward overconsumption and its environmental impacts, while justice emphasizes fairness, promoting equitable practices toward workers and communities. This virtue ethics framework diverges from conventional theories that focus on utilitarian or profit-maximizing approaches, offering instead a model where consumer practices contribute to both individual and societal well-being. The authors highlight the mutual role of consumers and businesses in fostering ethical consumption, suggesting that businesses can encourage virtuous choices by prioritizing transparency and aligning with socially responsible values. Their approach is recognized for its unique contribution to consumer studies, shifting the focus from the external impact of consumer choices to the character and intentions guiding them. This model enriches ethical consumption literature by proposing that consumption should foster not only personal benefit but also the broader social good, integrating individual character with communal responsibility. (*Ruiz P.G and Lluesma. C.R., 2014*). MacIntyrean virtue ethics can be applied to business ethics. Wang engages with Alasdair MacIntyre's framework of "practices" and "institutions" to analyze ethical behavior within business organizations. Practices, according to MacIntyre, are complex, cooperative human activities that have internal goods and standards of excellence. Institutions, on the other hand, exist to support practices but are primarily concerned with external goods like money and power. Wang argues that business

organizations are often institutionally driven by profit motives, leading to ethical compromises. However, excellent business practices emerge when organizations focus on internal goods such as integrity, fairness, and community engagement. By aligning business practices with virtues like honesty and justice, businesses can maintain ethical integrity while achieving long-term success. The paper emphasizes that organizations must create a balance between institutional demands and the cultivation of virtues to foster ethical business conduct. Wang's work contributes to the discourse on corporate ethics by showing how MacIntyre's schema offers a robust framework for understanding how virtues can be incorporated into everyday business practices, promoting a sustainable ethical culture in corporate settings. (*Y Wang ,2016*). The connection between consumers' virtuous character traits and their propensity to engage in socially responsible consumption. Rooted in virtue ethics, the study posits that individual moral virtues—such as honesty, empathy, and compassion—predict behaviors aligned with social responsibility in consumption choices. Unlike consequentialist or deontological ethics, which focus on outcomes or rules, virtue ethics emphasizes character traits, suggesting that consumers with stronger virtuous dispositions are more inclined to make ethical purchasing decisions. The study reviews key character traits and investigates how these virtues may influence consumer behavior toward environmentally sustainable, fair-trade, and ethically sourced products. Findings indicate that consumers demonstrating higher levels of virtue traits are indeed more likely to consider social and environmental impacts in their purchasing choices. This aligns with the notion that virtuous individuals seek to act in ways consistent with their moral values, including in their consumer behavior. The research concludes that fostering these virtues can be instrumental for businesses aiming to promote socially responsible consumption, suggesting that marketers could leverage these insights to target ethically inclined consumers effectively and encourage broader sustainable consumption habits across various demographics. (*Young Song & Youn-Kyung Kim ,2018*). The sustainable marketing through the lens of virtue ethics to address socio-ecological challenges. Their approach contrasts sharply with traditional marketing focused on profit maximization and consumerism, which they argue often perpetuates ecological harm and social inequality. Instead, they advocate for marketing practices grounded in virtues—qualities that benefit both the individual and society, such as justice, wisdom, and care. This virtue-based framework emphasizes collective well-being, advocating for sustainable consumption and production that align with ecological limits and social needs. The authors suggest that sustainable marketing can create authentic, meaningful exchanges by promoting products and practices that support environmental sustainability and social equity. By shifting focus from individualistic gains to broader societal and ecological impacts, this approach fosters responsible consumption and ethical stewardship of resources. Dyck and Manchanda argue that marketing guided by virtue ethics could lead to a paradigm shift, addressing both current and future socio-ecological challenges by encouraging businesses to prioritize sustainability and societal benefit alongside profit. This integration of ethics with marketing represents a pathway to address pressing issues like climate change, resource depletion, and inequality, ultimately fostering a more resilient and sustainable world. (*Dyck and Manchanda, 2021*).

RESEARCH GAP:

The Research gaps identified is the limited exploration of philosophical perspectives, especially virtue ethics, in the context of Water Hyacinth Crafts. The literature reviewed on sustainable practices mainly laid an emphasis on economic and environmental impacts but overlooks how the virtues viz., wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, are based on the principles of Plato and how it shapes ethical

craftsmanship. Also the concept of Golden Mean of Aristotle in achieving balanced, sustainable practices remains underexplored. Again it has been found that there is inadequate knowledge as to how these practices align with both anthropocentric and ecocentric values.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Methodology is a way to systematically solve the research problems by carrying out a careful investigation or inquiry especially through search of new ideas, facts and figures in any branch of knowledge.

- **Research Design**

This study is based on qualitative research design, grounded in philosophical inquiry and ethics. The emphasis is on secondary sources. The study aims to find out the relationship between virtue ethics and the sustainable commercial use of water hyacinth in rural Assam and for this textual analysis have been made. Various scholarly work, journals, historical records, books, reports, online sources, etc. have been analysed.

- **Data collection**

Data have been collected from the Secondary sources which include books, thesis, dissertations, journals, news articles, conference proceedings, reports, websites, etc.

- **Theoretical Framework**

The application of virtue ethics to real-world practices, particularly in rural communities involved in sustainable crafts, will be a central aspect of the theoretical framework.

- **Data Analysis**

Data driven from secondary source have been analysed 'Thematically' and 'Conceptually'. Thematic Analysis involves identifying and categorizing data according to themes that align with Plato's virtues (wisdom, courage, temperance, justice) and Aristotle's Golden Mean. For Aristotle's Golden Mean, Conceptual Analysis have been done in order to examine the balance between excess and deficiency in community practices.

MEANING OF VIRTUE ETHICS

Virtue ethics is a philosophical approach that emphasises on the character and virtues of a person as fundamental subjects of ethics, instead of the consequences of their actions (as in consequentialism) or adherence to rules or duties (as in deontology). The basic idea of virtue ethics is that morality is mainly about cultivating a virtuous character i.e. good traits or virtues.

ROLE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES OF ASSAM WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON SUSTAINABLE CRAFTS

- **Environmental Stewardship:** Virtue ethics helps in developing a deep respect for nature, which ultimately drives the artisans to use resources like water hyacinth in a sustainable manner.
- **Community Well-Being:** Artisans focus on well-being of the community, i.e. collective welfare, with virtues like cooperation and fairness which helps in the equal distribution of benefits.
- **Moral Integrity:** In Virtue ethics honesty and responsibility plays a crucial role. These helps in shaping ethical business practices and ensuring and enhancing transparency and fair trade in the industry.

- **Practical Wisdom (Phronesis):** The Artisans make use of practical wisdom which helps in maintaining a balance between economic needs, environmental sustainability and long-term goals.
- **Cultural Preservation:** Significant focus is given on Traditional values and virtues. This helps in preservation of the cultural integrity of sustainable craft practices in Assam.
- **Human Flourishing (Eudaimonia):** The emphasis is on achieving individual and community well-being through virtuous living and engaging in sustainable craftsmanship.

SUSTAINABLE COMMERCIAL CRAFTS USING WATER HYACINTH

Water Hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*), popularly known as ‘Paani Meteka’ in Assamese is considered a menace which poses significant challenges to water bodies, disrupting ecosystems and affecting local communities. However, transforming invasive water hyacinth into innovative eco-friendly craft products is a sustainable solution to deal with the associated environmental and ecological problem while generating economic opportunities. The various sustainable Commercial Crafts using Water Hyacinth are Baskets and Storage Containers, Mats and Rugs. Handbags and Accessories, Home Decor Items, Footwear, etc.

Aristotle’s concept of the ‘Golden Mean’ represents the concept of moderation or balance between two extremes- excess and deficiency which leads to a way of ethical behaviour. Virtue, according to Aristotle, can be said to be the mean between these extremes and can be enhanced through regular practice.

The rural communities of Assam, specifically those engaged in sustainable crafts using water hyacinth, can be understood as cultivating virtues which are pertinent to their unique environmental, social, and economic conditions. Virtue ethics emphasizes moral character, focusing on the development of virtues like prudence, courage, generosity, and justice.

This philosophy provides a view lens to understand the ethical guidelines showing the practices of rural communities of Assam who are engaged in sustainable commercial crafts using water hyacinth. The Golden Mean focuses on finding a balance in the use of natural resources like water hyacinth representing the ethical behavior. It emphasises on the concept of moderation embodied by the rural communities focusing on neither over-exploiting the environment nor under-utilising their resources. This results in assuring that their actions maintain ecological integrity as well as economic well-being.

In these communities, virtue ethics is a lived reality than mere an abstract idea. The artisans, engaged in water hyacinth—a plant considered a menace known for its invasive properties—harness its abundance in a way that demonstrates a balanced approach. Ignoring its opportunities could result in economic stagnation while its overuse could lead to the degradation in the environment. An ethical balance is being obtained by transforming water hyacinth into eco-friendly commercial products aligning with the notion of practical phronesis i.e. practical wisdom by Aristotle. This implies the ability to act virtuously by striking a balance between two extremes.

Aristotle emphasised on the significance of community and relationships in the growth and development of virtue. The rural communities of Assam, through group engagement in craft-making, develop virtues like cooperation, patience, teamwork and responsibility. These virtues promote a sustainable approach to resource management and social cohesion. The making of eco-products have become a moral activity where individuals contribute to the common good rather than just a means of livelihood. The economic benefit derived from the sustainable use of water hyacinth uplifts the community, while the environment

benefits from the long-term availability of resources, demonstrating a balance between ecological care and human welfare.

This is how, the application of Aristotle's Golden Mean in the sustainable practices of the rural artisans of Assam reveals shows how virtue ethics based on moderation, can promote resilience and ethical decision-making. These communities represent a philosophical ideal where economic activity and environmental sustainability coexist in harmony, contributing to both individual and community well-being.

CORE VIRTUES OF PLATO'S VIRTUE ETHICS PRINCIPLES

Plato's Virtue Ethics focuses on building of good character traits, or virtues, as the base for ethical living. Key virtues in his philosophy—wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice—offer a profound framework for comprehending the ethical dimensions of rural communities in Assam who are engaged in sustainable commercial crafts using water hyacinth. Through these virtues, one can examine how these communities promote towards moral and social well-being while contributing to sustainable development.

- **Wisdom (*Sophia*):** Wisdom as per ethics of Plato shows a combination of practical knowledge and philosophical knowledge. The rural artisans in Assam with specific reference to the Water Hyacinth products, demonstrates this expertise as they have a deep understanding of natural resources, specifically water hyacinth, and how to use those in a sustainable manner. They exhibit ecological understanding and foresight to strike a balance between environmental concerns and economic needs by transforming this invasive plant into valuable crafts products. The decision to adopt sustainable practices exhibits a form of wisdom that puts priority on long-term ecological health in comparison with short-term financial advantages. This shows their understanding of the interconnectedness of nature and commerce, which makes wisdom a significant factor in ethical decision-making.
- **Courage (*Andreia*):** Plato defines Courage, as the strength to act rightly in the face of fear or adversity. There are numerous challenges faced by the rural communities viz economic instability, limited access to markets, competition from mass-produced goods, etc. Despite these challenges, artisans remain dedicated in manufacturing sustainable craft products, and resist more profitable but environmentally harmful alternatives. This is specifically significant in Assam, where livelihoods are closely linked to natural ecosystems. At times, the financial security might be threatened but courage is apparent in their tenacity to uphold and maintain eco-friendly practices.
- **Temperance (*Sophrosyne*):** Temperance, according to Plato is about moderation and self-control. The rural artisans, manage the resources carefully i.e. the temperance can be seen. They maintain a healthy relationship with nature by harvesting water hyacinth in a manner that do not harm the local ecosystem, maintaining a moderate relationship with nature. As the artisans are mindful of not over-exploiting resources for immediate financial benefit, this practice represents Moderation. In doing so, they avoid the excesses that could cause a harm in their environment and their community. This virtue is of utmost importance to sustainable commerce, where long-term ecological balance is put a priority over short-term financial gain.
- **Justice (*Dikaiosyne*):** In the ethics of Plato, Justice is about harmony and fairness, for both individual and society. In the context of Water Hyacinth craft industry in Assam, fair practices within the community is reflected in justice. In this manufacturing women and underrepresented

groups are included, thus demonstrating the fair sharing of the opportunities derived from such products.

Ethical work practices and equitable resource and profit sharing ensures that that no one is left behind. As sustainable practices ensure that the local ecosystem is respected and conserved for future generations, thus, it can be said that justice also extends to the environment.

The virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice of Plato line up with the practices of rural communities who are engaged in sustainable crafts. These virtues foster a balanced, ethical relationship with nature and the society. In Assam, sustainable water hyacinth crafts are not just a means of livelihood but a manifestation of moral character, where ecological and social harmony of the community are achieved through ethical virtues. Through their practice of virtue, these communities provides a framework of ethical living that gives priority on sustainability, fairness, and collective well-being of the community.

VIRTUE ETHICS BRIDGING GAPS BETWEEN ANTHROPOCENTRIC AND ECOCENTRIC PHILOSOPHIES

Anthropocentrism, which focuses on human well being; their needs and interests, views the environment primarily as a resource for human benefit. Ecocentrism, in contrast, advocates for the preservation of nature placing intrinsic value on ecosystems and all living things. As anthropocentrism favours short-term human gains, while ecocentrism advocates for long-term ecological sustainability, so initially it may seem incompatible. However, rural communities in Assam demonstrate how these ideologies can coexist through virtue ethics, which emphasises character traits that promotes harmony between humans and nature.

In Assam, rural communities those who work to create sustainable water hyacinth products exhibits virtues such as responsibility, care, and respect—both towards their livelihood and the environment. These communities follow sustainability practices, because it preserves their local ecosystem as well as boosts the economy. For instance, water hyacinth, an invasive species that disrupts the water bodies, is transformed into commercial crafts, lessens its ecological damage. By encouraging environmental stewardship, this approach aligns with eco-centric ideals while also serving anthropocentric goals through increased economic empowerment and enhanced quality of life.

By focusing on virtues like prudence, moderation, and respect for nature, these rural artisans strike a balance between human-centred and nature-centred philosophies. Their practices exemplifies the virtue of practical wisdom and they maintain ecological preservation with human development. According to the virtue ethics framework, these sustainable practices provides a holistic kind of well-being by contributing towards the upliftment of health of ecosystems and the flourishing of the human communities.

Thus, it can be said that virtue ethics build a moral bridge between anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives by encouraging a character-based approach, where sustainable practices are viewwd as both morally good for human communities and intrinsically valuable for the environment.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The researchers have put in their sincere efforts to produce an unbiased report but certain limitations have crept in despite disciplinary initiatives. The limitations of the project report are assembled hereunder –

- The paper felt prey of time constraint for which the researchers could not give the study its due.
- The study is based on Secondary information and hence there is a lack of control over its accuracy, completeness, and relevance. Thus, the data may not directly address the role of virtue ethics in the specific rural communities, leading to a gap between available data and the focus of the study.
- The study is confined only to the state of Assam.

CONCLUSION

The role of virtue ethics in rural communities of Assam engaged in sustainable commercial crafts using water hyacinth shows a strong link between traditional ethical values and sustainable practices. By examining how Plato's core virtues—wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice—are fostered in these communities, it becomes clear that these virtues are important in directing moral action in their earning their livelihood. Wisdom is resembled through the indigenous knowledge of the water hyacinth's varied uses viz, bravery in adjusting to environmentally friendly practices in the face of financial problems, temperance in striking a careful balance between use of resources and its conservation, and justice in the equitable allocation of resources and duties within the community exemplifies wisdom. The application of Aristotle's Golden Mean is seen in the communities' equilibrium approach to using water hyacinth, where overexploitation is avoided, and the resource is used for economic and environmental benefits in a sustainable manner. This equilibrium shows the communities' natural awareness of and understanding of moderation, avoiding extremes of overuse or underuse, and promoting sustainability of long-term. Also the sustainable practices centering water hyacinth aligns with both anthropocentric ideologies, and ecocentric perspectives. These communities demonstrate a harmonious coexistence of both worldviews, showing that their actions are not only beneficial for human livelihoods but also for the larger ecological system.

Thus, it can be concluded that the rural communities of Assam engaged in sustainable crafts using water hyacinth represents a lived philosophy of virtue ethics. Their practices offer an example of how ethical principles can direct sustainable growth while ensuring environmental stewardship and social justice. The blending of traditional ethical thought with contemporary sustainability practice shows a deep moral commitment to both human and ecological well-being, representing these rural communities as significant contributors to sustainable rural economies and environmental conservation.

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