

Sustainable Development and Environmental Issues

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Background:

The idea of sustainability is inherently exists in Indian tradition. Our culture is based on 'sharing' and not on consumption for 'self comfort'. High consumerism is the part of 'corporate-culture'. Giving food to hungry or helping have-nots may be philanthropy but beyond that it has a great potential for strategic sustainability. However, our culture is being eroded by western model of development, mainly by British, till World War II. This has continued by first world economies in the 'cold war' period and after globalisation. It was widely accepted fact that industrial revolution has created environmental issues with increasing rate. The rate of degradation has become so fast that we have reached to a point of no return. Our father of nation has warned us about this phenomenal destruction about 100 years ago. According to him the direction of development in the west is such that we may strip the planet to the extent that very existence of human race would be in danger. He advocated '**appropriate technology**' suitable for achieving **inclusive growth**. High and highly centralised production activities based on heavy machinery always lead to violence and deprivation. Therefore any production activity should be based on participation of people. The western culture proudly advocates 'abundance'. This is well pointed out by the famous American writer Mark Twain, "**Civilization is limitless multiplication of unnecessary necessities**". Gandhiji was also against maximisation of production. He is not just the father of India but also **the father of modern civilisation**, which is based on human values. According to him industrialism would be curse for mankind as it entirely depends on your capacity to exploit. Ernst Friedrich Schumacher has written a book, "**Small is Beautiful**". The book is based on Gandhian philosophy. He emphasised the idea that **poor of the world cannot be helped by mass production but production by masses**. According to him, "**the technology of mass production is inherently violent, ecologically damaging, self defeating in terms of renewable resources, and stultifying for human person**". Nehru has criticised machine age initiated by himself. He admitted, "**The fact remains that large number of our people are not touched by the**

machine age and will not be for a considerable time". Thus, the development based on industrial growth affects seriously on environment and in turn poor section of human population.

Similar such impact of profit oriented mass production activities has been stated in the book, "**Silent Sprigs**" authored by Rachel Carson (1962). The book, of which more than two million copies have been sold, has alerted the people significantly about the profit-oriented strategy of development. It has put forth a powerful case for the idea, "**if humankind poisoned nature, nature would in turn poison humankind**". It is recognized as the environmental text that "changed the world." She aimed at igniting democratic activist movements that would not only question the direction of science and technology but would also demand answers and accountability. This has led to mass movements for environmental conservation especially in developed world. Later on, after her death, the first '**World Environmental Day**' was celebrated on April 22, 1969.

The United Nations has taken cognizance and initiated the debate on Environment conservation. However, the debate was based on the central idea whether we want development or conservation of resources. The third world started thinking that so called 'Environment' is elitists' baby and hence poor countries need not bother about it. UN at Stockholm convened the first major conference on **Human Environment**, June 5-16, 1972, addressing international environmental issues. This has been instrumental in developing international environmental politics by establishing UNEP.

It was well-felt fact that whosoever may be responsible for environmental degradation the impacted communities are from poor countries. As a result of continued debate UN has formed the '**World Commission on Environment and Development**' mainly to formulate "A Global Agenda for Change" as per the urgent call by the General Assembly of the United Nations. This has main aim to frame long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development by the year 2000 and beyond and to recommend ways how the concern for the environment may be translated into greater co-operation among developing countries and between countries at different stages of economic and social development and lead to the achievement of common and mutually supportive objectives that take account of the interrelationships between people, resources, environment and development. The main reason why environment must be protected is to protect the interests of

weaker sections of world community, which is prone to severity of the effects of environmental degradation. The developed countries share major causes of environmental degradation, while underdeveloped share most of the ill effects. It must seriously be noted that with improving technologies, man's power to abuse environment is increasing to the level of increasing risk of human life on the planet. The commission was chaired by the great politician, health care and environmental expert former Prime Minister of Norway **Gro Harlem Brundtland**, Oslo. She has put forth the concept of sustainable development in the report, **"Our Common Future"**, published on 20 March 1987. The commission has defined, **"Sustainable Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"**.

At individual level, **"Sustainable income is the maximum amount an individual can consume during a period and remain as well off at the end of the period as at the beginning."**

The report of the commission has been accepted in the **first world summit** called as **Rio Summit** in 1992 in which **Agenda 21** was principled and elaborated and revisited in the following summits in 2002 and 2012. The Agenda 21 emphasises on decentralization of wealth, empowerment of local self-governance, equity, justice and cooperation.

As discussed above, it is clear that sustainable development should be considered on the basis of its environmental, social and economic dimensions. The environmental issues threatening sustainable developments are also discussed accordingly.

Environmental Functions:

The interaction between man and environment is based on twofold functions of it. First, it provides resources for basic livelihood. Human societies are directly and indirectly dependent on natural resources. All the needs of human beings both necessary and unnecessary are satisfied on the basis of natural resources from atmosphere, lithosphere, hydrosphere, etc. Over the period man started using processed goods to satisfy the need and hence technology became important component of human-environment interaction. The technology and culture are closely associated with each other and they guide human needs. Thus, the components of relationship between human beings and nature are 1. Human needs, 2. Resources

provided by nature and 3. Tools in the hands of man. All the three components are changing with respect to time and place. Therefore resource-man relationship is dynamic. Due to technological development power of man to exploit natural resources has been increased to the extent so that there is a fear that stock of natural resources would not be available for next generations. That is why it becomes necessary to adopt sustainability based on ethical value i.e. **intergeneration equity**.

The second function of the environment is to act as sink which can swallow the waste created by human activities. The nature has its own way to absorb the waste and transform the same into useful material. However, the ecological processes are complex in nature and slow not keeping pace with the rate of generation of waste. The waste is also complex and dynamic in nature. It differs from place to place and time to time. Decay, decomposition and degradation of waste are done by complex natural processes with the help of '**decomposers' herd**' in the nature. However, over burden of waste in air, water, soils, land, oceans, etc. has overtaken the capacity of nature to act as sink. This is the main cause of tilting equilibrium of nature.

Thus, the environmental issues have been closely associated with these two functions which are being eroded by our activities like mining, industry, transportation, use of chemicals in agriculture, etc. Most importantly, all such activities are motivated and constantly promoted due to so called modern culture of **abundance and high consumerism**. This kind of culture is so dominant that we are unable to provide basic livelihood resources like food, shelter, healthcare, peace, safe drinking water, energy, education, etc. to all at present and in future as well.

Global Environmental Issues:

It is already mentioned that rate of waste generation is high in developed part of the world. Those who have higher per capita consumption, about 200 to 400 times more than that of poor countries, pollute more than that of poor countries. The scientists have estimated that few countries like Japan, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand (JUSCAN) and other developed countries contribute more than 75% pollution of the world. However, health and environmental problems are observed in under developed and developing countries due to trans boundary movement of pollution and waste. More importantly, emission of gases like Water Vapour (H₂O), Carbon dioxide (CO₂), Methane (CH₄), Nitrous oxide (N₂O), Ozone (O₃), Carbon monoxide (CO), Hydro-fluoro-carbons (HCFC), Per-fluoro-carbons (PFCs), Sulphur hexafluoride (SF₆), Sulphur-dioxide (SO₂), etc. affect the atmospheric equilibrium

which has been gained in geological past. Thus, emission of such gases is responsible for global impact. Therefore following three global issues of environment have been identified. They are viz. **Climate Change, Ozone holes and Biodiversity depletion.** These issues are interdependent and hence we have to address these issues in integrated manner.

Effluence of Affluence:

The significant fact is that culprits of these issues have been identified as the rich countries and rich people in the poor countries while impact is evident all over the planet. The sufferers are mainly poor section of society. Carbon emission, toxic waste, river water pollution, etc. are nothing but effluence of rich people. Most importantly, the world economic system, including India, is dominated by affluence. The world polity is dominated by big corporates. The success of any economy is pulsed by GDP growth rate. Such technique of appraisal of growth cannot appraise sustainable development in true sense. Such techniques should be modified to take into account loss due to pollution and loss of natural capital. The bankers seldom look into the matter of environmental degradation. This is evident from several examples of financing the projects like Sardar Sarovar by World Bank and Indian financial institutions. This is real threat to sustainability. It is not necessary to provide the figures regarding number of vehicles at present and 10 years back. There is sharp increase in the number and in turn vehicular pollution since globalisation and so called liberalisation. This is mainly due to change in banking policy to finance liberally to purchase vehicles. This means that purchasing power of people is artificially increased to add to the issues of sustainability.

We can pose critical questions like “**progress for what and for whom?** Can progress is able to cater the needs of people at bottom of pyramid? Keeping these questions in mind policies and practices of development should be examined and future strategies designed. Addressing the issues of bottom of the pyramid is the need of the hour especially in Indian context. About 65% families have monthly income up to Rs.10,000/- and 85% have up to Rs. 20,000/-. This means that only 15% of the families in the poor country are rich enough to use vehicles, luxury items and cosmetics creating global issues of environment. For maintaining luxurious livelihood of few rich people, the livelihood of population below poverty line is destroyed. This is predators’ economy. Such kind of capitalism is the real threat to environment and in turn sustainable development.

Water pollution at metros denies access to safe drinking water for rural poor. Furthermore, agricultural land is polluted. Soil and water degradation is nothing but loss of natural capital owned by the farmers. This is to say that urban comforts are killing the base of farming sector. Coca cola case, Narmada Sarovar, and several such projects exhibit the evidence how resources are being grabbed by corporate sector by destroying livelihood of poor communities.

COVID-19 Effect:

Several ecologists have opined that outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic is the evidence of environmental disaster. The sufferings and deaths of workers' during their reverse migration clearly show that the progress has nothing to do with them. They are expelled out from industrially developed areas to back home.

The first and foremost task in disaster management is to give life saving support to those who are affected most. This was not done by the authorities and was next to impossible for any social organisations during lockdown period to do it. Many NGOs also have to give lay off to their employees as CSR funds are being diverted to 'PM Care Fund'. The interesting part is that in this emergency, the government found leisure to sanctions to coal mining project on 98.59 hect land in Elephant Reserve forest in Asam, felling 2.7 lakh trees for Hydro-Electricity Project in Arunachal Pradesh, proposal of Temporary Use of 778 hect of Rajaji National Park for Kumbh Mela, etc. It is clear from the policies of the democratically elected government that they are more committed to upliftment of corporates than the people.

Political Economies:

It is the study of economic activities and their association with law, custom and government along with distribution of wealth. In simple language acceptance for globalisation is the part of political economies in the world. Whether to write off farmers' loan or rich defaulters' loan, is the choice of government according to its policies. The prevailing political economy chose latter. How can the farmers already in debt, be able to catch opportunity of sowing in coming monsoon? Such policies are against the environment and in turn sustainable development. It is necessary that political economies should adopt inclusive approach of development, which can address the issues of bottom of pyramid.

It is clear from the examples like Mendha Lekha and Hivare Bazar that local people can achieve sustainability for utilization of improve forest and water resources. They follow the principles of social equity and maintain democratic values. On the

contrary Kyoto Conference has given the target to Annex A countries i.e. industrially developed countries to reduce their carbon emission by 5.6% of 1990 till 2002. No industrially developed country has completed the target. Even they are unable to meet the target till present. Therefore famous 16 year old girl Greta Thunberg has stated in her lecture at World Economic Forum, “Our house is on fire....I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.”

My question to all is whether we should follow ideas of Greta, Devaji Tofa and Mohanbhai from Mendha Lekha, Popatrao Pawar and his team from Hivare Bazar or to copy western model of development, which has been failed to mitigate environmental issues. It is clear from the above discussion that we must follow Gandhian model of development, which can reduce environmental risks and achieve sustainable development in true sense of the term.

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