

Protection of Environment Through Sustainable Living

The Environmental Crisis

The rapid environmental and ecological degradation on the planet earth is a matter of deep concern for the people who are aware of its consequences. It has already begun to show its devastating effects on human life and other life forms that inhabit this planet. It is a catastrophe that may ultimately wipe out everything including homo sapiens and other species from the face of this beautiful earth. But it is still not too late and the environment and ecology that sustain life on the earth can be protected and strengthened. The situation became so serious that the United Nations was deeply concerned about the environmental crisis and organized a special session on it at Rio De Janeiro in 1992. The deliberations there revealed a horrifying spectacle and for the first time in UN history the significance of protecting the biodiversity was realized by the delegates who hailed from different parts of the world and came to Rio in thousands. The Rio Summit had already made it abundantly clear that the population problem of the world is equally one of over-consumption and accumulation of wastes in the industrial countries. This was affirmed again later and again by the CAIRO conference in 1994.

The Rio conference was the culmination of the efforts made by various leaders who sensed the danger that loomed large way back in the eighties. Writing in the foreword of 'Our Common Future in 1987' Brundtland, the former Prime Minister of Norway, said, " The question of population - of population pressure and human rights - and the links between these related issues and poverty, environment, and development proved to be one of the more difficult concerns with which we had to struggle ". My paper deals mainly with the challenges that humanity faces today in the wake of the speedy and steady destruction of the environment and elucidates how sustainable living alone can not only arrest the declining trend but also pave the way for a happy future. When we talk of the environment, we inevitably think of the linkages and related challenges which include challenges of population, poverty, ecology and economy. It will be useful to reproduce an excerpt from the Report of the Independent Commission of Population and Quality of life (ICPQL) (1996) headed by Maria De Lourdes Pintasilgo (page 38).

"The ecological challenge represents a new stage of human awareness as we embark on defining a new paradigm of the equilibrium between Nature and human beings. We are in the midst of a period properly called an *ecological transition*: from the notion of an always-renewable Nature (and naive confidence in its permanence) to a revolt against over-exploitation of its resources, its purity, and its beauty.

The passage from Nature 'out there' to an environment that is part and parcel of human existence calls for a drastic change in our values and attitudes. The latter are best translated into terms such as sensitivity, respect, reverence, harmony, and careful

nurturing, alongside more technical expression such as protection, conservation, and rehabilitation-the last words invoking fewer emotions. Essential to the new understanding required is a recognition that the human being shares a common destiny with Nature, that our lives depend upon and are even interwoven with Nature's basic ingredients of air, water, land, and trees. The search for harmony and mutual sustenance is meant to guarantee that people remain at the center of all societal processes, including the preservation, renewal, and enrichment of Nature.

More philosophically, our species has witnessed the passage of Nature from a merely linear evolution to a stage in which we have subordinated Nature to our own mastery, and onwards to a cycle in which we affirm a need for Nature's renewal. Policy and practice of conservation and efficiency are the new imperatives for the survival of Nature's capacity to support human life.

The Real Challenge

Protecting the environment of the planet is a real challenge. Despite the growing awareness among the peoples and Governments the situation in developing countries is getting worse day by day. The gradual disappearance of forests and species is closely linked with human greed and poverty. Mahatma Gandhi once remarked that the earth has enough resources to sustain life but not enough for human greed. The whole problem is ethical. Acharya Mahapragya, a leading Jain Saint of India says, *"Nonviolent lifestyle alone can extricate humanity from the environmental crisis. Causing injury to humans as well as to plants, animals and birds is a sin. If every human being realizes it and practises nonviolence in life, it will naturally result in the protection and preservation of the environment. What is needed is to limit our needs and desires. The present trend responsible for this degradation has emanated from human greed and selfishness. If these two human propensities alone are controlled, it will give rise to miraculous results. The programme of nonviolence education and training that we have initiated is, in fact, a project to save environment and ensure sustainability."*

Man is callous and cruel towards nature and his unrestrained lifestyle rooted in sheer pomposity, ugly exhibitionism and in his desire to monopolize all resources of the planet and use them for amassing wealth and make his own life most comfortable precipitated the crisis. This human tendency is responsible for this unprecedented scientific, industrial and technological advancement which may have brought prosperity to a few people but have pushed billions of people to near starvation and abject conditions following the destruction of nature which sustains all life forms. It has also resulted in the wiping out of many species vitally important for human survival. Civilizations evolved in similar technological stages do seek to improve well being, they often bring an illusory sense of power and separation from nature and erode basic values that encoded sustainable practice. Moreover, the oldest styles of human culture are still with us like nomadic pastoralist and peasant farmer who persist alongside the mega cities of modern life. Though great civilizations have repeatedly failed, these simple technologies survive. 'Only when war, famine and environmental collapse strike, do we understand, too late. Our dependence on nature and on peace - the ecological imperative. According to James Lovelock, the celebrated scientist who thinks that planet earth is

gravely ill, regards the planetary life as a whole self-regulating organism, living amid the web of interdependent species and the traces of past lives. We cannot conquer nature without defeating ourselves. Recognition of this truth is fundamental to survival of life on this planet. James Lovelock has named this entity of self-regulating organism Gaia after the ancient Greek Goddess of the Earth. Another eminent scientist of the modern age Frittof Capra says in his recent book - *The Turning Point*:

“We have lost touch with our biological and ecological base more than any other civilization in the past. This separation manifests itself in a striking disparity between the development of intellectual power, scientific knowledge and technological skills, on the one hand, and of wisdom, spirituality and ethics on the other hand.”

These views of the modern scientists have only substantiated what Lord Mahavira had stated two thousand five hundred years ago "*Parasparopagraho Jivanam*" which means all life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence. According to me it is the greatest ecological statement ever made by any ancient seer. The Jain principle of ahimsa is an ecological ethic. Though equally important are the other four principles of Jainism viz. *non-stealing, truth, aparigrah* (non-possession) and *brahmacharya* (abstinence from sexual lust). They are more or less there to strengthen the principle of ahimsa only.

Ahimsa is the highest point of the development of human civilization and culture. Himsa (violence) is inextricably intertwined with human life but it is not considered a part of its development. More and more people in the world now realize the importance of *ahimsa* for human survival in the wake of the two nuclear holocausts that took the toll of two million lives in the forties of this century and the phenomenal rise of violence in the form of ethnic, religious and political wars and conflicts dotting the length and breadth of the globe today. Humanity seems to be heading fast for a disaster as we see it plunged into chaos and anarchy.

Sustainable Living: The Only Way to Survive

In the foregoing pages I have tried to give an overview of the environmental crisis. I now turn my attention towards the countermeasures to stop this madness. In most presentations at international conferences the people refer to sustainable living but no one tries to explain what it is. The word "*sustainable*" means one should live in such a way that other species and other human beings are able to sustain themselves. Sustainable living, to my mind, consists in limiting our needs and desires so that others can live. If over-consumption continues, it will mean very little will be left for others to sustain themselves. They are doomed to be starved to death. Over-consumption also causes heart disease, blood pressure and diabetes. It is the by-product of an unrestrained life. It is said that 80 % of the resources on this planet are grabbed by the rich countries which are inhabited by less than a billion people. The remaining 5 ½ billion people are experiencing the pangs of a paucity of resources and abject poverty. The Copenhagen Summit on Social Development held in 1995 under the auspices of the United Nations as an initiative to fulfill the recommendations of the Rio Summit on Environment did address the issues relating to social and economic disparities but the heads of

governments representing developed countries rejected a proposal made by NGOs, developing and under-developed countries which requested the affluent countries to part with a small percentage of their wealth to eliminate hunger and poverty. Those who came with a ray of hope for the poor were stunned and shocked at this unethical behaviour of the rich. US which boasts being in the forefront of championing human rights, racial and ethnic equality and above all democracy, was the first to reject the proposal ruthlessly. This attitude on the part of rich smacks of arrogance and lack of foresightedness. The rich countries are blissfully unaware of the ecological and environmental cloud of disaster closing in on humanity as a result of the unsustainable lifestyle of its people. It will not spare rich countries too.

The inhabitants of this planet will have to heed the warning sounded by the celebrated scientists like James Lovelock and saints like Acharya Mahapragya. Both James Lovelock and Acharya Mahapragya are deeply concerned about this invisible world war already unleashed and which has been vividly described by Michael Tobias in his book entitled World War III. To my mind the basic components of Sustainable Living can be summarized.

It makes it imperative for us to control our desires and limit our needs. In the concluding remarks of its report the Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life says, *"Care is the antithesis of competition (a natural bent of the human species, essential to survival), and its reinforcement now will necessitate a dramatic change in mind-set. The transactional concepts of the past, excessive competition and the philosophy of ever more may destroy us. We need, therefore, to explore if and how the reservoirs of caring capacity can sustain us, and lift at the same time at least 1 billion people mired in poverty -- and growing - from the level of eking out their survival and on to the path of sustainable improvement of the quality of life. This will require nothing short than another kind of development than hitherto pursued. Humankind faces challenges of a civilizational change. Its survival and existence in dignity requires a transition to a fundamentally new type of development ecodevelopment - which should govern all forms of human activities and all interactions of people with nature.*

In this quest, a few guiding principles set the ground rules i.e. equity, caring, sharing, sustainability, human security. Equity has a crucial, even overriding role in all efforts aimed at a sustainable improvement in the quality of life. We believe that without equity there can be neither sustainability nor security. Equity denotes a principle of fair and equitable treatment to all, to be respected equally by individuals, institutions, and States. Thus the sustainable lifestyle of human beings alone can save the planet from the imminent threat of destruction.

Components of Sustainable Living:

- (i) Behave as a responsible citizen. Limit your consumption . Emulate the Jain model which enjoins its followers to take a vow not to eat more than five or six edible items in a day and wear limited dresses.
- (ii) Eat less than you want to eat everyday.

- (iii) Take only that much from nature which is necessary. Avoid unnecessary needs
- (iv) Save water, coal, petroleum products, green plants, trees and life forms by modifying your lifestyle.
- (v) Do not kill humans, animals and plants. Avoid unnecessary and avoidable violence.
- (vi) Treat all living beings as equal and behave responsibly towards them. Acharya Tulsi launched a movement in 1949 called Anuvrat Movement. I call it a movement for a sustainable living. Look at the following basic vows he and his successor Acharya Mahapragya had designed for survival and sustainability.
- (vii) Take these small vows to live the good life. They are called *anuvrats* (basic vows) essential and unavoidable for sustainable living.
 1. I will not kill any innocent creature.
 2. I will neither attack anybody nor support aggression and will endeavour to bring about world peace and disarmament.
 3. I will not take part in violent agitations or in any destructive activities.
 4. I will believe in human unity, will not discriminate on the basis of caste, colour, etc., and will not practise untouchability.
 5. I will practise religious toleration.
 6. I will observe rectitude in business and general behaviour.
 7. I will by degrees develop a pure tenor of life and control over senses.
 8. I will not resort to unethical practices in elections.
 9. I will not encourage socially evil customs (dowry, big feasts following death, child marriage, old age marriage etc.).
 10. I will not use intoxicants like alcohol, hemp, heroin, etc.
 11. I will lead a life free from addictions.
 12. I will do my best to avoid contributing to pollution.