

Fundamental Issues of Environmental Crisis and Sustainability of Choices

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Abstract

As we cross the middle of the second decade of 21st century, the debate on the magnitude of environmental crisis becomes redundant as its footprint are visible everywhere: increasing burden of global population crossing eight billion mark in 2017; irreversible depletion as well as pollution of all fundamental natural resources-water, air land and forests; and all pervasive global climate crisis, threatening the very existence of human civilization which created it. As the human population keeps on enlarging, there is a lot of pressure on the utilization of natural resources. This often causes over-exploitation of the natural resources, and contributes to environmental erosion. According to a study by the UNEP Global Environment Outlook, excessive human consumption of the naturally occurring non-renewable resources can outstrip available resources in the near future and remarkably destroys the environment during extraction and utilization. Even pollution of just one natural resource water may create havoc to human life. Human health is heavily impacted by environmental degradation. Reduction in water quality is responsible for more than two million deaths and billions of illness annually across the globe. The serious impacts of environmental degradation are well documented now. There is no need to repeat it here. The only point of debate is how to tame this crisis as we have exhausted all means to escape from it. The debate to address the global environmental crisis involves some fundamental issues.

I. Introduction

First, the human beings are placed at the core of crisis, but its impacts are to be suffered by all living creatures. This is the worst form of injustice shaped and inflicted by human being. Perhaps, humans are the only living creatures, who control, confront and manipulate the Nature for their never ending lust and needs. All other living creatures adjust with nature and live in harmony with it. Also, among human beings, it is the rich and mighty who has more manipulate tools to reap the exploits of nature, but it is the poor and marginalized who suffers the most, when nature take revenge. It suggests that nothing less than change in the behaviour of human beings can tame the environmental crisis. Whosoever might be responsible for environmental degradation, it produces and intensifies poverty. Most vulnerability situations brought about by water short-ages, climate change, and poor crop yields in developing countries are tied to environmental degradation. Hence, the lack of access to adequate basic needs such as water and food directly induce poverty.

Second, the change in the views about human nature has led to the change in human development. Before the onset of renaissance in 13th century, both in the West and Orient, humans were viewed as dependent on God and nature for realizing their physical and spiritual needs. Accordingly, the balanced development and physical and spiritual self of man was the yardstick of human development. Indian philosophers articulated the vision of human development in the four-fold goals of life- Dharma, Artha, kam and Moksha. Even in the mainstream of Indian philosophy, the spiritual enlightenment was the final goal of life and also the ultimate standard of human development. The viability of spiritual development lies in the fact that all human beings may strive for it without coming in confrontation with either nature or with each other as spiritual resources are in abundance and self-replicating.

However, the above balance view of human nature and development was fundamentally revised by the ideas of renaissance first in Europe and later in other parts of the world as a part of global modernization process. Renaissance views man as a rational being, endowed with intelligence and logical reasoning, who is capable of overcoming any hurdle posed by nature and other creature on his progress and development. It needs to be mentioned here that Greek philosopher Aristotle also considered man as a 'rational Being', but his rationality meant 'wisdom' rather than intelligence as was case in Renaissance. Thus wisdom of Greek society became the technical competence of post-renaissance European Society. The man was not dependent on external agency like God or Nature. Now, man was a stand-alone entity, separated from nature, society or God and ready to conquer the world around him. The satisfaction of his physical needs with the ever ending search of technical tools became the final goal of his life. The scientific discoveries enthralled the man as it enabled him to control, confront and manipulate nature with more speed and larger scale. All domination political philosophies of the time individualism, capitalism, liberalism, utilitarianism etc and all leading philosophers like Locke, Mill, Hegel,

Rousseau, Bentham etc not only endorsed but also facilitated the universalization of the above view of human nature and development. Even the Karl Marx, abhorred the exploitation and inequalities inherent in the capitalist society of Europe, but failed to alter the view of human nature and development as defined by Renaissance project.

The above view of man and development was articulated in the form of Modernization and development theories and reached the shores of traditional societies of Asia, Africa and Latin America through the civilization mission of colonial powers of Europe. This is how traditional societies like India and others have to buy the modernizing project of consumerist and materialistic development. These societies were convinced that this is the only path of progress and development to be followed by all people, societies and nations. This is what Rudyard Kipling called the 'the Whiteman's Burden', traditional societies have to upload and carry forward. Mahatma Gandhi revolted against this materialistic vision of society, but his voice fell in deaf years as India espoused the cause of western modernization after independence. Gandhi's emphasis on moral and spiritual development bears the fruits of fundamental strains of Indian history and culture. In his book *Hind Swaraj* (1909: 44-45) Gandhi claims that many ancient civilizations of the world have perished in the course of history, but Indian civilization has survived only because of its emphasis on duty (dharma) and self-discipline, which are foundations of balanced moral and material progress of mankind.

The post-modernist ideology also criticized this monolithic project of modernization and development, but failed to evolve any alternative vision of development and progress. Post-modernists argue that particular ways of understanding the world (usually employing a logical positivist framework) and of defining 'environmental problems' are deployed- the terms themselves, such as over-grazing and environmental degradation, carry with them a particular cultural and professional charge, which has only recently been interrogated and deconstructed (Blaikie: 1999). In nutshell, this universal and materialistic view of man and development, originated during renaissance holds the centre stage in modern world and is the main culprit of contemporary environmental crisis as destruction and pollution of environment is inherent in its life cycle itself. The gap between development and destruction is fast narrowing down amidst the prevailing environmental crisis.

Third, the nature of environment and its crisis both is that its various elements are not only interlinked but also in its reach and spread it is all pervasive. In the ultimate analysis, no person or no nation in one part of the globe remains unaffected by environment crisis in another part of the world. The ongoing environmental crisis is the result of collective sin human society and needs collective efforts of people, communities and nations to overcome this crisis. However, the problem is that collective efforts to protect environment faces the challenge of what is known in political theory as 'collective good' problem. There are people and groups, who will enjoy the fruits of protected environment without making any contribution in its protection. Under the theories of international politics, the environment problem is a Collective Good Problem, which is also known as 'collective actions,' 'free riding,' 'burden sharing,' 'prisoners dilemma,' 'mixed interest game' or 'tragedy of the commons'. It is the problem of how to provide something that benefits all members of a group regardless of what each member contributes to it. International norms obligate the countries to take measures to protect environment, but they are convinced that even if they failed to protect the environment, others will do it and all will be benefitted by the fruit of protected environment (Goldstien: 2007). Such nations and individuals are known as free-riders. Once a good is provided by other nations, free-rider nations will either not contribute to producing that good or will contribute less than other nations. This makes collective action more difficult, as states may think if another state is handling the problem, they don't have to work toward it, and will still benefit from the efforts of the working states. This makes giving free-riding nations a reason to participate in collective action difficult, as they can enjoy the benefits while not working toward it. This is particular in global warming and the environment. If a group of states agree to cut their carbon emissions, other states may not have any incentive to join in the agreement (Kurack: 2010).

The poor response of major nations to the climate change crisis may be explained with the help of collective goods problem. The solution of climate change crisis requires the cooperation of the all people communities and nations. But the rich and poor countries are fighting over the issue as to which countries are more responsible for creating this problem. The poor and developing nations accuse the developed nations of exploiting natural resources in the process of their fast development in last many centuries. Hence these countries call for more resources from developed countries for addressing climate change problem. The developing countries also argue that they should be freed from any burden of protecting environment till they also reach to the level of development of rich countries. Yet there are certain fence sitter nations which may not like to contribute to climate change protection, yet they will get the benefits of such protection. In fact the goods which are collective are the responsibility of none. This is the major factor affecting the behavior of nations to protect the environment.

The three issues elaborated above need to be kept in mind while considering the alternative mechanisms to address the crisis of environment. These issues are fundamental to any process of environment protection and alternative paradigm of development.

Revisiting Sustainable Development with Gandhian World-view

The global community has made persistent organized efforts since 1970s to arrest the process of environmental degradation. The first international conference on Human Environment was convened by the UN in 1972 at Stockholm (Sweden), which highlighted the negative impacts of ongoing process of development on environment and natural resources. Ever since then, the international community has intensified its efforts for the protection of environment. The member nations of the UN, including India, also gradually developed administrative and legal mechanisms to harmonize development process with the idea of protection of environment. It was under these efforts that the United Nations appointed World Commission on Environment and Development in 1983, popularly known as Brundtland Commission because it was headed by Gro Harlem Brundtland, the then Prime Minister of Norway (UNGA:1987).

The term 'Sustainable Development' was coined for the first time in the Report of the Commission titled, 'Our Common Future', which was submitted in 1987. It defines Sustainable development as a kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The two key concepts of sustainable development are: the concept of 'needs' in particular the essential needs of the world's poorest people, to which they should be given overriding priority; and the idea of 'limitations' which is imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet both present and future needs (Borow: 2014).

The strength of the idea of the prevailing notion of sustainable development lies in the fact that it closely integrates the development process with the concerns of the environment. However, its chief inadequacy lies in the facts that it failed to alter the goals and objectives of development. Even under the notion of sustainable development, the goal of the development remains the same—more material progress for the physical wellbeing of the people. So long as the material progress remains the goal of human development merely limiting few wants will not solve the environmental crisis. After all the natural resources are limited and material progress has unlimited nature.

Moreover, the invincibility of human logic and scientific approach continue to guide contemporary global efforts to address the crisis of environment. The crisis is treated as something amenable to the ongoing approaches and mechanisms. The human element involved in the generation as well as resolution of this crisis is undetermined in the contemporary approaches. It is here that Gandhi's world view offers a fresh insight and a viable alternative to the crisis of environment. Human element occupies central point of this insight.

Like economic challenges, modern world is faced with environmental challenges leading to various disasters, food and energy crises and even social tensions and conflicts. Climate change is the most immediate and visible incarnation of this challenge. In the prevailing development paradigm, the toolbox approaches to limit the carbon emission will generate new problems. So far, man has tried to solve its developmental and other problems with the help of scientific tools and sophisticated logical models and approached. But environmental crisis defies these solutions and exposes the limits of technical competence of man. It also demonstrates the fact that there are some complex human problems that need human solution. This is the basic reason of the helplessness of human communities.

It is not simply that human beings have exploited resources more. The fundamental problem is that the harmony between man and nature has been broken. Gandhi was aware of this harmony, as Radhakrishnan (2011) remarks, 'Gandhi further warned against a series of social and political turmoil, ecological devastation and other human misery that might arise unless modern civilization takes care of nature and man tries to live in harmony with nature and tries to reduce his wants. Unlimited consumeristic tendencies and callous indifference to values will not help humanity to progress towards peace. Gandhi was of the view that the earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need but not for every man's greed. He warned that modern industrialism would strip the world bare like locusts. No logic can convince that given the reckless exploitation of natural resources to satisfy ever expanding human needs, how we are going to avert pending environmental disaster? We have no options than to come back to Gandhian principles. After all, what is sustainable development? It is nothing but the blending of development with the Gandhian moral obligation towards nature and future generations. Without this moral obligation, born by people, society and government all, the idea of sustainable development cannot succeed. Even the ongoing efforts for the protection of common resources or 'Commons' cannot succeed with legal measures and even financial incentives. They can succeed only if the spirit of moral obligation is strengthened among all the stakeholders.

The Gandhian worldview seeks sustainability by balance at three levels: balance among different elements of human soul; balance between man and other human beings; and finally balance between man and nature. It is this balance deficit that is the defining characteristics of post-renaissance modern man and the model of development erected around such man in the West. In this model of development, man is self concerned rather than public spirited; displays rationality without wisdom; seeks control rather than balance and adjustment; and pursues material growth rather than holistic development. Clearly this view of human being

and development is not sustainable. It breeds conflict, competition, destruction, inequality and scarcity. On the other hand, Gandhi's entire life is experiment sustainability in all aspects of life. In Plato's ideal state, there was no place for doctors, because he advocated a life style in which nobody would fall ill. Gandhi also subscribed to this line of thinking. He propounded a kind of life, culture and society which will never lead to environmental problems (Jha: Retrieved 2017).

Throughout the globe there are people and associations adopting Gandhian principles to get environmental justice. Some of the notable examples are: Dr A.T. Ariyaratne, the founder of Sri Lanka's Sarvodaya Movement; Sulak Sivraksa of the Thailand Spirit in Education Movement; John Francis of US; Mary Evelyn Tucker, the cofounder of the Forum on Religion and Ecology; Billy Parish, founder of Climate Campaign etc. Diana Calthorpe Rose (Down-loaded in June 2017), while analyzing the relevance of Gandhian principles to face contemporary environmental crisis find that the power of Satyagrah is what the world needs to solve the crisis of global warming. She (Rose, 2011: 4) further remarks: 'The climate movement has much to learn from Gandhi: the supreme efficacy of his tactics, the deep personal rectitude demanded of the true Satyagrahi, the real world strategic value of loving one's opponent. but more than that, we might learn to reframe the problem in a solvable way if we can expand the boundaries of our consciousness as Gandhi did.'

What Gandhi did was nothing new but rekindling of the robust environment ethics contained in Indian philosophy, religion, culture and civilization. The essence of harmony between man and mother nature is contained in a hymn from Prithvi Sukta in praise of Mother Earth: 'People are born from you and function with you. You support the people and the animals. The trees and plants firmly stand on you. The sea, the rivers and other water reservoirs are found on you. The forest animals roam on you. The birds of various kinds fly over you. The hills and mountains with verdant forests stand on you. The rice and barley grow on you' (Sridhar: 2007). This hymn is based on the realization that earth mother belongs not only to man but its benefits are to be shared by all living and non-living beings. This is the most holistic postulation of environment ethics. This environment ethics has to be the part of not only the human behavior but also of the new development paradigm, if human civilization is to survive in coming decades and centuries.

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