

THE SPIRITUAL AND ETHICAL ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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We live in a period of human history when development has been at an exceptional and exponential pace, outstripping our adjustment to and comprehension of a rapidly changing landscape, climate, quality and quantity of natural resources and the impact upon our selves. The fabric of society, the relationship of the individual to fellow human beings and to the natural world is fragmenting, stripping and changing continuously. Today we are being challenged by dramatic data and facts that indicate that human society is also blindly walking into a period of depleted natural resources, environmental pollution, unhealthy food production and conflicts for control and access to necessities such as water. Yet, there are other statistical and expert reports that dismiss these as hysterical propaganda. In this atmosphere of rapid change and conflicting expert reports, human society needs to stop for a minute and take stock. It needs to deal with this from a set of basic principles in which spiritual aspects must form some of the key foundations.

Never has society faced such an overwhelming number of contradictory and threatening issues on a global scale. Indeed climate change is not an issue that affects a small region. Issues such as the predicted conflicts over water in the future, for example, are matters for great concern.

The atheistic foundation of science has enabled human beings to develop, exploit and explore opportunities and possibilities without any discernable limits. However, there is a clear lack of a spiritual and ethical dimension in all this. If human society is to deal with and confront the challenges facing it, then it is important for it to recover the spiritual relationship of human life to the natural world and to develop an ethical perspective in this relentless development.

Traditionally religions and spiritual philosophies have played a key role in defining the relationship between human beings and nature. However, this has not only been marginalized by State and other institutional structures of the world, but in some spheres, it has been completely neglected. Ethical and spiritual values are struggling to find a definition in today's developments. It is not being suggested that there was a better world before or during the pre-modern era, or that the world was more spiritual. Rather, the assertion being made is that never has there been a period in known human history when spiritual and ethical values have a greater role to play in ensuring the survival of a co-dependent and peaceful society.

It is not for science to define the relationship of human beings with nature and development. Science is a non-conscientious and atheistic set of knowledge whose limits are only defined by the scope of its theories at any given time. The State too cannot really be relied on to define a cohesive set of principles to guide human life through this rapid change. The State is a function of power in the hands of economic and political forces that define its ethics by their own set of values and ambitions. Neither can international institutions hope to make a realistic imprint upon human conscious on the relationship

between human beings and nature. They are the collective institutions of States and amenable to economic and political forces as much as States are.

Therefore, religious and spiritual philosophies have to assert and define their role in the development of human society now. This has to be more than a passive role that merely seeks to send a message. The role of religious and spiritual philosophies need to influence the way people think about development and form the ethical systems that evaluate the impact of development.

Irrespective of what religious and spiritual philosophies have asserted before, the new reality of a rapidly developing world needs a reinterpretation if necessary. It needs to be emphasised that no religion actively seeks to destroy the intricate relationship between human life and the natural world. Whether it is one of using nature or one of revering nature, religions emphasise the co-dependency of human beings and the ecosystem of the world. There is a concept of respect within all religion for the resources that exist and makes us survive as healthy human beings able to reach our potentials.

However, it needs to be said society has developed some extreme and unhealthy attitudes, which need examination and urgent change. Human society has an approach to nature which can almost be conceived as confrontational. It is as if there is no respect for nature and the ecosystem. This relentless development fails to incorporate any fundamental understanding of the intrinsic dependency of human life upon an ecologically sound environment.

For instance, polluted atmosphere leads to an increase in the number of children with lung disease such as asthma. This leads to perpetual dependency upon drugs, constant visits and stays in hospital and considerable drain of energy within family dynamics. Surely, the increasing number of affected children in itself is a reason to demand a safer atmosphere and clean air. Yet, the State and other institutional systems fail to ensure this because other forces, particularly commercial, overpower the will of public bodies.

Polluted water is another commodity that is undermining the health of people. One out of every five human beings lacks access to safe drinking water. It is estimated that in some regions of the world, up to 40% of disease is related to water pollution. A study by the World Bank on air and water pollution in India states that water degradation is responsible for the highest toll on health across the country, costing US\$ 5.7 billion (Rs 19,950 crore) a year. Surely, it does not make any economic sense to be constantly spending vastly on health support and producing an ill population. Yet, public institutions again suffer from inertia due to various reasons.

One asks, why do human beings destroy that upon which they are dependent? Why are the earth and its resources treated with such disdain and abuse? It is almost as if human development is indifferent to nature or in confrontation with it as suggested earlier.

This attitude needs to be changed by religious institutions. In many traditional religions such as those of the African tradition: the original Naga religion etc, have a deep

reverence for nature. Yet, even these have sometimes given way to the prerogatives of development. It is as if human society is dictated by development rather than human society dictating the limits and forms of development. There is an inevitable question in all this, does human life live for development or is development for human beings. Perhaps the Sikhs, particularly in the west, have faced this question more forcefully. Commercial pressures often forced Sikhs to cut their beards and hair and remove the distinctive turban. However, the resistance to conformity has made the Sikhs challenge these pressures and forced change in the commercial institutions in many countries. Human beings do not exist for institutions; rather institutions exist for human beings.

Thus while human beings aggressively exploit nature in the name of development, it needs to reflect that development has in fact become the new nightmare that dictates behaviour, lifestyle and attitudes. In this aggressive exploitation, human beings often appear to be at war with nature rather than in harmony with it.

This is the most important aspect of life today that needs to be re-examined by human society and in which religious and spiritual philosophies can play a significant role. We need to start respecting and revering nature. Our relationship needs to be one of a deep friendship and appreciation for the natural world rather than one of indifference and confrontation. Repeated enough times in sermons around the world, religions may have a greater impact in reversing the current trend of a commercially led attitude to the natural world. It is Inevitable the ethics of society would change in relation to development, if there is an informed and ingrained respect for the natural world.

Another aspect of this relentless development that needs to be considered is the impact upon civil society. Human relations are increasingly being defined by economic interactions and perceptions. Relations based on spiritual and other similar values are breaking down fast. It is what and how much one owns that defines the individual's value within human society. Whereas this pervaded some strata of human society throughout history, it has now invaded almost all strata of human society, thus dislodging and weakening the traditional and natural forms of human relationships.

Human society is not evolved to be comfortable with this basis of interaction between human beings. Inevitably this is the result of a relentless development that has forced upon the human being, a life cluttered with work, worry about economics and dependent upon the products of development.

It is not being suggested that this needs to be reversed. Infact what is needed today is the acceptance of the obvious, that development is often a one-way track, but in this unidirectional route, there is a need to evolve ethics and conscience that can sustain the psychological and social aspects of human life. Perhaps development plans need to take into consideration the impact upon ethical and spiritual well being of human beings as much as the advance in economic and other material factors. This might influence the need by human society to view fundamental necessities such as clean air and water as revered factors rather than resources to fight wars for.

It is upon a gathering like this on which lie the responsibilities of introducing the ethical and spiritual dimensions within development at a much greater level than is present currently.

The pressing need of the time is for religions and spiritual philosophies to orientate human beings to revere nature, have ethically based development strategies and impart upon humans that development exists for the benefit of human beings and not the other way around. Perhaps with a greater role for religions in civic society and its attitude towards development, we may not need to find out whether the doomsday theories are justified or mere hysteria. Let us hope we can make that commitment here and impress it upon the world Summit as well as take it beyond that into the world itself.

The fact is that no other institution has a greater audience and impact than the total collective of religions and spiritual preachers. There are more religious platforms and preachers to deliver and influence the world and its development than any other area of human society. Why not promote it to stop that which we all fear, a period of unhealthy and scarce resources and wars to control them.

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