

Sustainability and Spirituality: A Vital Connection

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The World Summit of Sustainable Development (WSSD) is being held at Johannesburg ten years after the Rio event. We have had ten years of experience to realise what has gone wrong in our attempts to move towards 'sustainability'. We have had ten years of various negotiations to reduce environmental damage; ten years of addressing poverty issues without much success; ten years of increasingly unsustainable businesses; and ten years of ever more increasing consumption. What have we learnt in these ten years so that in Johannesburg we can focus on relevant issues and move forward in accepting what it takes to harmonize present development with the future of the world. We should not have to take an overdraft on the future of our children and grandchildren to sustain our indulgence in the present.

My list of issues to be addressed in Johannesburg in this connection are:

Sustainable Development: The Need for a Clearer Definition:

Although the term 'sustainable development' was first used in 1981 by Lester Brown of the World Watch Institute, it acquired its fame when used by the Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, and was later brought to the attention of millions during the Rio Conference in 1992. The phrase 'sustainable development' was defined in the Brundtland Commission Report, as "that which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Such a definition, I believe, cannot lead to ACTION. What are the needs of the present generation? Should we look at food, shelter and clothing, or are we talking about maintaining the present consumerist life style? And how do you measure and clarify the needs of future generations? What is the yard-stick to measure this? There is widespread use of the phrase 'sustainable development', especially by the western industrialized nations. The attractiveness of this concept could well be that, insofar as it says little that is precise, it does not breed any sense of guilt about not acting positively to improve the situation, or to move towards a well-defined goal.

Gro Harlem Brundtland in explaining the use of the phrase says in her Report, "as we strived in the World Commission on Environment and Development to agree on concepts that could gather global consensus, we realised it would be difficult to give support for global change

if we had to conclude that countries and regions would have to sustain a significant decline in their standard of living”. Was it because of this fear of lack of consensus that we have such a watered down statement – a statement which is broad enough, vague enough, which would of course led to a consensus – but also to no meaningful action?

Further, most western scholars, environmentalists and international institutions have focused on the technological dimensions of sustainable development – an area in which they have expertise, skills and advantage.

Elizabeth Dowdeswell who was the Executive Director of United Nation’s Environment Program (UNEP) commenting on the sustainability debate said “ultimately sustainable consumption is not a scientific or a technical question, that it really is first and foremost a question of values”. She pointed out that “it is uncomfortable for many of us because that kind of self-examination and re-evaluation of life styles is not an easy thing for any of us to do. I believe that what we are really talking about here, if we get past the definitional question is nothing less than a fundamental paradigm shift. How should we live? How much is enough? What way of life ought we to pursue? Those simple questions are often the most profound for they challenge the security of our accustomed norms”.

The questions that Elizabeth Dowdeswell had raised regarding ‘sustainability’ are also the questions that Gandhi had raised earlier regarding the direction of western civilization. Said Gandhi, “Civilizations in the real sense of the term consists not in the multiplicity of wants, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants”. Gandhi was addressing the question of sustainability, of peace and non-violence. If ‘sustainable development’ is to be achieved, the multiplicity of wants will have to be addressed – and I believe, this is not going to be addressed by the highly industrialized nations of the world as long as they have power to influence and control resources in the South. Talking about western industrialization Gandhi had said "God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. If an entire nation of 300 millions (and now 1 billion) took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts....””India when it begins to exploit other nations – as it must if it becomes industrialized - will be a curse for other nations, a menace to the world”.

The road to ‘sustainable development’ lies in simple living. As the Bible said “What shall it avail a man if he gains the whole world and lose his soul?” In not addressing ‘sustainable development’ in clear-cut terms, have we not lost our soul? Gandhi’s famous quotation ‘there is

enough for everyone's needs, but not enough for everyone's greed' is important and central to the whole question of sustainability. Adopting 'sustainable' life styles is a difficult road for a consumerist society, a society which maintains its power on the basis of large differences between North and South, and between the rich and the poor.

Ultimately, sustainability will need a civilizational change.

At Johannesburg we need a new definition of 'sustainable development', a definition which can be a clearer guide to action than the definition we have so far. At Johannesburg if we wish to find the road to 'sustainability' we must explore the inner world of man as a guide to sustainable development and not exclude it as we have done in the past.

Economists and Ecologists:

The economists as also our politicians look at the unprecedented growth of the global economy and of international trade and investment as signs of progress and see a promising future with more of the same. The ecologists on the other hand look at this same growth and see climate change and the destruction of the Earth's resources. The ecologists view the market with less reverence because they see a market that will not and does not tell the whole truth.

Lester Brown points out that "as we begin the 21st century our economy is slowly destroying its support systems, consuming its endowment of natural capital. Demands of an expanding globalised economy as now structured are surpassing the sustainable yield of ecosystems". A third of the world, cropland is losing top soil endangering food security; 50% of grazing lands have become deserts; the world's forests have shrunk by 50% and are further shrinking fast. Two thirds of the ocean's fisheries are over-fished; and overpumping of underground is leading to serious water shortages.

Modern business has played a major role in the Earth's destruction. Listen to what Paul Hawken has to say "Quite simply our business practices are destroying life on Earth. Given corporate practices not one wildlife reserve, wilderness, or indigenous culture will survive the global market economy. We know that every living natural system on the planet is disintegrating before our eyes. The land, water, air and sea have been transformed from life giving systems into repositories of waste. There is no polite way of saying that business has ravaged the earth".

The adoption of the western economic model means a certain death of the eco-systems and of the Earth itself. It is essential that we transform our destructive economy, and transform our way of life so that simplicity and sustainability can be achieved, so that the Earth is saved from man's greed and his murderous ways.

The Rio meeting, 10 years ago, was an attempt in this direction. 140 heads came and agreed to Agenda 21, but nobody followed it. President Bush, the senior Bush, said 'we will not jeopardize our way of life' – but, they seem more than willing to jeopardize the life of the Earth itself!

So because of our greed and our use of violence we have raped the soil and denigrated the eco-systems and caused irreparable damage to the Earth – and its soul. In the process we have lost touch with our inner self, with the sacredness of the Earth, and the pilgrimages to the Ganges and the sacred mountains that nourished our spirituality and sustained us. It is time we brought our *Vedic* sayings and our spirituality to center stage – and remember that everything we do to the Earth, we do it to ourselves as well! If we tear her apart, we do so to ourselves as well; with violence to the Earth, we have become violent to each other as well.

In the pursuit of science and technology we require supreme wisdom and supreme ethics and spirituality. The lengthened reach of our actions in space and time has put man's responsibility and ethics into center stage.

Steering Business Towards Sustainability:

Business has played a major role in environmental destruction. In reviewing ecological disasters Paul Hawken has the following to say :

“Quite simply our business practices are destroying life on earth. Given current corporate practices not one wildlife reserve, wilderness, or indigenous culture will survive the global market economy. We know that every living natural system on the planet is disintegrating before our eyes. The land, water, air and sea have been functionally transformed from life giving systems into repositories for waste. There is no polite way of saying that business is ravaging the world.”

Corporations seem to behave as if nature is a free store house of unlimited resources to be used, consumed, and wasted. Rivers have been turned around, mountains have been razed, and forests annihilated!

And listen to Victor Lebow writing in the New York Journal of Retailing “our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption a way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction in consumption... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced and discarded, at an ever growing rate”. With such a philosophy, we should forget sustainable development, future generations and even a peaceful world.

To steer business towards sustainability, we need to create sustainable forms of business, embedded in sustainable communities. A Buddhist way of life would call for Buddhist economics, just as modern consumerist way of life has brought forth unsustainable economics and unsustainable life styles.

Sustainable communities is what Schumacher was suggesting in ‘Small is Beautiful’. And sustainable communities was what Gandhi was trying to achieve through his spinning wheel and village development plans.

If we want to influence businesses towards sustainability we need to focus on the consumer and influence him to change his way of life from the ‘having’ mode to a ‘being’ mode.

The Missing Voice in Rio:

In Rio we had good ideas, good vision, good dreams but were not successful in igniting ACTION.

In Rio the international community which participated and took decisions consisted of heads of State and Government, national delegates and leaders of NGOs, scientists, environmentalists, women’s groups etc. The agenda for action that emerged included proposals of reducing consumption, combating poverty, protecting the atmosphere, oceans and bio-diversity etc. But as mentioned earlier, the promises made for ACTION did not take place.

Missing from the debate and discussion were the voices of the saints and spiritual leaders whose analysis of problems and their solutions follow a different path. Many of the spiritual

leaders of the world have a following of millions and if ACTION towards sustainability is to be achieved it is important to get their involvement and their way of dealing with life styles and the problem of sustainability.

It is important to understand that 'religion' is different from 'spirituality'. 'Spirituality' means dealing with our inner selves, of putting our inner house in order. Spirituality is the praxis of the heart, it strengthens our inner being to pursue Truth fearlessly.

We will not be able to bring pollution or population, or poverty or consumption under control unless we learn to control our inner self – and this means the practice of spirituality.

If we can rediscover the importance of the 'inner self' and of 'spirituality' in Johannesburg, we will rediscover truth and compassion, we can then move meaningfully towards a more equal world, a less violent world, an environmentally safer world. In other words, with the integration of 'spirituality', of the inner voice of truth, with courage and fearlessness we can start moving on the road to sustainability – without it we will flounder and fail as we have in the past.

The politicians, and the government officials, and the negotiators who help take decisions in such forums because of conflicting pressures from the North and South make compromises in order to be 'practical', whereas, the spiritual leaders are uncompromising about the pursuit of Truth. They adhere to the Truth whatever the consequences. The politician's way, however well meant, is based on compromises, and one compromise leads to another, and each compromise leads you further away from the Truth – and from sustainable action.

Agenda 21, the Kyoto Protocol and other such negotiations have not worked because we have not been able to pursue Truth and action fearlessly.

To walk on the road towards 'sustainability' requires fearlessness, a pursuit of Truth, whatever may be the consequences. The politicians and officials are concerned about the consequences, whereas, the spiritual leaders help you pursue 'truth' whatever the consequences.

At Johannesburg Summit we hope that our quest to build a more sustainable future is built not only on scientific knowledge but spiritual knowledge as well. For this we will need to hear the voice of the saints and the spiritual leaders of the world, loudly and clearly.

Reducing Poverty: Spirituality a Vital Connection:

“If the World Summit in Johannesburg is to lead to effective strategies for sustainable development we will have to reinvigorate the fight against abject and dehumanizing poverty”, says Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General.

The World Bank, development agencies, and national governments have been trying to reduce poverty in the world, but without much success. In fact since Rio the rich have become richer and the poor poorer – and natural resources which had earlier sustained the poor have been vanishing, leaving the poor poorer and more helpless.

We had hoped and still believe that ‘science and technology’ will help solve the problems of hunger and poverty. Nehru said, “it is science alone that can solve the problems of hunger and poverty, of sanitation and illiteracy.... The future belongs to science and to those who make friends with science.”

We did make friends with science, but we ignored listening to the poor and their inner spiritual concerns. It is clear from the kind of India that has emerged from our ‘scientific’ approach to the solution of poverty, that we have lost our soul, that we have become a nation of mimics, and that we have lost our sustainable way of life.

As early as 1916 Gandhi gave a lecture on economics, and raised the question “Is economic progress real progress? I take it, he said, that by economic progress we mean material advancement without limit – and by real progress we mean moral progress....” Continuing his lecture he makes the point, “I venture to think the scriptures of the world are far safer and sounder treatises on the laws of economics than many of the modern text books. And he added “I believe that Jesus was the greatest economist of his time.” And Gandhi tells his audience that persons who have exercised great influence and moulded the lives of millions were people like Jesus, who deliberately embraced poverty, as also people like Buddha, Mohammed, Vivekanand, Mother Theresa and such others.

Poverty is not the problem, wealth is the problem in sustainable development.

Slowly, but increasingly, we are recognising that reducing poverty will encompass both the material and spiritual aspects of life; that personal transformation goes hand in hand with social change and that values of communities must be woven in the fabric of development.

There are spiritual institutions in India and in other parts of the world where with a philosophy of service and salvation, institutions have been able to achieve remarkable results in removing poverty and in building sustainable communities.

Pandurang Shastri, the leader of Swadhyaya movement in India, whose work has improved the lives of millions of poor people in India describes his work ““We *Swadhyayees* try to bridge the gap between the haves and have-nots, but we are not socialists. We are engaged in removing the dirt and rust which has settled on our culture. Yet we are not reformers. We do try to emancipate women from their oppressed conditions but we are not women liberators. We are basically devotees, i.e. *bhaktas*.”

There are many such movements in India (and hopefully in other countries as well) where the source of change and the methods used are largely spiritual in nature.

Slowly but surely development agencies too are recognising that development is a process that encompasses both the spiritual and the material aspects of life; that personal transformation goes hand in hand with social change. And there is a growing awareness that the borrowed western model of development and social change has not worked because cultural and spiritual values of communities have not been woven in the fabric of development. Therefore the new development paradigm and strategies for elimination of poverty must be holistic and consistent with the deeper spiritual traditions of the people. If we have such a development paradigm we will be able to remove poverty – without it we will flounder and fail as we have done in the last 50 years.

In Johannesburg for poverty reduction we will need a paradigm that is consistent with the culture and spiritual traditions of the people. Indeed we need a new and enlarged definition of poverty itself. The West tends to define poverty merely in material terms; the poor are the “have-nots”. Latent in this mindset is the pull to acquisitiveness and consumerism; for a person’s worth is measured by what he has or consumes, not by who he is. This brings about a neglect or devaluation of spiritual resources and upsets the equilibrium between the physical and spiritual dimensions of human personality and culture. Consumerism that assumes ritualistic overtones is

a product of this existential imbalance. Such an imbalance underlies the model of development that today imperils the sustainability of our world; and as long as this spiritual reality is not addressed in practical terms we are unlikely to make any appreciable progress towards solving the poverty problem.

The key to a breakthrough to poverty eradication lies along the path of spirituality, of service and salvation.

It is a matter of concern as to why our spiritual leaders and our religious organisations are not in the forefront of safe-guarding the Earth. Development has depleted the vitality of the Earth, and it is important that spiritual communities focus their attention and their spiritual energies on saving the Earth, its soils and forests, its rivers and oceans, its air and birds and butterflies. Restoring and healing the Earth will also help in restoring inner peace, and in helping rediscover truth and beauty, and compassion.

If we can rediscover 'spirituality', we will also rediscover truth and compassion, we can then move more meaningfully towards a more equal world, a less violent world, an environmentally safer world. In other words, with an emphasis on spirituality, on listening to the inner voice of truth, we can start moving on the road to sustainability – without it we will flounder and fail as we have in the past.

The Challenge at Johannesburg:

For an age that places so much of its hopes on science and technology, and whose preoccupations are primarily wealth and weaponry, it is astonishing how much of our history of successful development, of reduction of poverty and hunger, of saving the environment, is being done by spiritual leaders and spiritual movements. For too long we have been at the mercy of those selling dreams of progress without a whisper of where it is taking us. It is the spirituality of people we must tap if we wish real change and real transformation to take place.

If we continue on our present civilizational mode of what Gandhi referred to as 'toys of civilization' and its consequences of a divided and a violent world, we may agree with Sir Radhakrishnan that such a civilization is not worth saving.

We are at the cross roads of history. It is becoming increasingly clear that if humanity is to survive we will have to reexamine our concepts of progress and development, and our addiction to having more and more.

The life and teachings of saints and spiritual leaders like Gandhi, Vivekananda, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and many such others are essentially the awakening of a moral force in people, in awakening the conscience of mankind, in the awakening of one's spirituality and in the pursuit of one's duty and *dharmā*.

Johannesburg has shown the world a new spirit of 'reconciliation'. Rio+10 too needs a new vision of reconciliation – reconciliation between economic wellbeing and ecological wellbeing; reconciliation between the needs of the South and the life styles of the North; reconciliation between the inner and outer strivings of man; reconciliation of 'being' and 'having'; and reconciliation of inner peace with non-violence.

The challenge of Johannesburg is 'can we move towards a 'reconciliation' between the economic and the spiritual aspect of man, and can we rediscover the sense of the sacred in our relationship with the Earth; and can we rediscover the power of compassion? For without spirituality and without compassion and without fearlessness we cannot solve the problems of poverty, violence, inequality, peace, and of sustainability in the world.

It is because we are violent inside that our concern for the poor and our environment and our concern for future generations are dying around us!

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