

# Of Environment and Justice

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Though environmental justice as a definite term is of recent origin, (1982) its implications are wider and questions raised by the movement were being debated for the last few decades. Although the academic and civil rights communities were first to identify inequalities in environmental protection in 1970, it was an incident in 1982 that brought racial injustice in selecting the sites for toxic wastes to the fore. Robert Bullard, one of the researchers and organizers of the Environmental justice movement, revealed, which was long being suspected, that most of the toxic sites are located either in the coloured or Hispanic localities. Bullard was also to articulate some of the basic concerns : "It's more of a concept of trying to address power imbalances, lack of political enfranchisement, and to redirect resources so that we can create some healthy, livable and sustainable type of models". The Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held on October 24-27, 1991, in Washington DC drafted and adopted 17 principles of environmental justice. The 1st principle states "Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity of species and the right to be free from ecological destruction." The 17th or the last principle also signals a break from the American dream of an unlimited growth and unrestricted high consumption: "Environmental Justice requires that we, as individuals make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and produce as little waste as possible".

The use of the phrase 'Mother Earth' in the first principle is significant as it situates the movement in the tradition of fertility cult and ecofeminism because as Greta Guard and Lori Gruen observe the present environment crisis as much about unjust over consumption and corresponding over production, as the enslavement of women. A few figures will bring out the extent of injustice - 85% of world's income goes to 23% of world's people. Margarita Arias puts it in stark figures "A person in the North consumes 52 times as much meat, 115 times more paper and 25 times more energy than a Latin American. With only 5% of world's population United States uses one third of world's non-renewable resources, one fourth of plants commodities. The average US citizen uses 300 times the energy that a citizen in the underdeveloped county does. The over consumption of the North is devastating the south. For debt servicing and to acquire new technology, the countries of the South are clearing up their remaining forest land at an alarming rate and turning to monoculture. According to a 1992 figure, forests are vanishing at a rate of 17 million hectares per year. It not only denudes Mother Earth of her cover, but also leads to the extinction of plants and animals that it sheltered. Everyday we lose no less than 140 plant and animal species which is a measure of human culpability. On the other hand, the shift from sustainable agriculture (which agronomists contemptuously call 'subsistence agriculture') to agro business has been achieved through the introduction of terminal seed, pesticides and chemical fertilizer which all benefit multinational corporations but only leads to loss of biodiversity, poison of the food chain, depletion of the ground water as well as its contamination, deterioration of the soil and finally,

high indebtedness of the farmer. In the past few years thousands of debt-ridden farmers found their way out in taking their lives. In this context we should bear in our mind another deprivation - the lack of relevant information. Very often the victims of pollution or environmental degradation are denied access to relevant information. Had the peasants been aware of the adverse consequences of growing hybrid crops and costly fertilizers and pesticides, they would, in all likelihood, prefer to survive as traditional farmers. To provide meat for the tables of the people of the North as also for their pets, many Latin American countries have turned to cattle raising and meat processing. They clear their forests to turn them into ranches which, in turn can only lead to the quick loss of top soil and a blighted semi-arid landscape. It should be noted that 3000 litres of water is needed to produce a kilo of beef. Eating from the top of the food chain involves not only cruelty to animals but huge environmental costs which are borne mainly by the South". As things stand, it is not possible to discuss problems of global warming and climate change without addressing the entrenched injustice in the global economic system. Rudolf Braho emphasized the imperative in the following words: "The ecology crisis is insoluble unless we work at the same time at overcoming the confrontation of military blocks...The ecology crisis is insoluble without a new world order on the North-South axis. And we must realize that our entire standard of living [in the North] is largely based on the exploration and suppression of the rest of humanity...The ecology crisis is insoluble without progress in human emancipation here and now, even while capitalism still exists. It is insoluble without countless individuals managing to rise above their immediate and compensatory interests..." This wasteful order is also related to right based individualism, patriarchy and militarism. Eco-feminists like Gilligan and Vandana Shiva suggest that a right based ethic is more characteristic of men and a responsibility based ethic that of women. So a new vision of sustainability and environmental justice can operate only when there will be a shift from aggressive consumerism to a caring mentality which is perhaps biologically rooted in woman.

Although all the seventeen principles of Environmental justice are clear and unequivocal in suggesting an alternative, some of them claim more emphasis and attention. It requires courage to speak of an alternative at a time when, with the help of the media, the ruling order has almost succeeded in manufacturing a consensus that there is no alternative (TINA) except organizing seminars, planting tree on roadside and perhaps, introducing some cosmetic environmental measures. In the backdrop of massive pollution, displacement and disintegration of traditional communities, the proponents of free market economy have suggested internalizing the environmental cost and more growth as a panacea. They argue that environment is better taken care of in industrially advanced countries than in the backward one. They deliberately conceal how the first world countries pass on their environmental burden on the underdeveloped world. Gro Brundt in his report 'Our Common Future' also known as Brundtland Report gives the most influential expression to this free market vision of managing environmental crisis. In this system the poor can only hope to benefit if the rich grows richer and economic growth registers an upward spiral. Those who are concerned with environmental justice usually agree that the poor in most

countries living in such a state of destitution that they certainly require much higher consumption. But this does not necessarily mean that those who have been over consuming will continue to do so. If the present level of consumption is unsustainable, tripling or quadrupling the consumption can only bring about the environmental catastrophe much earlier. Besides, growth does not always translate into environmental well being or, in other words, increase in the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW). From 1951 to 1990 per capita GNP for the US more than doubled from \$3741 to \$7756 but during this period per capita ISEW increased only by 15% from \$2793 to \$3253. From 1971 to 1990, per capita GNP rose from \$5405 to \$7756, or, 46%, per capita ISEW, on the contrary, fell by 5%. This only brings home the point that, environmental sustainability can be better addressed by other means. The fact remains that the present concept of development based on growth is incompatible with sustainability and as Debal Deb will argue, with democracy itself. The growth of market forces give unlimited power to big corporations as well as such bodies as IMF and World Bank who are beyond democratic governance. This apart, the operation of market forces would only mean further displacement of eco-system people as is presently happening in India. Higher growth rate in China has resulted in massive pollution (60% of the rivers are contaminated), corruption and rural violence. Many of free-market environmentalists even suggest atomic energy as a 'clean energy' without consulting the available statistics, the ever present danger of, if not of a Chernobyl like meltdown but terrorist attack and, most importantly, intergenerational equality. While the present generation will over-utilize energy for their artificial needs and trivial ends, the future generation will have to cope with the problem of radioactivity, gene mutation, deformity and cancer.

In a way environmental justice today is more important than distributive justice because without the former the latter would be empty of content. This is brought out more tellingly by the climate change which is no longer an alarmist speculation but a terrifying reality. The catastrophic change brings to focus built-in injustice in relations between North and South on one hand, and the rich and poor of any society on the other. The greatest emitter of greenhouse gases are the industrialized countries. United States of America contributing the biggest share. Side by side, countries like India, China or Brazil are rapidly increasing their share in GHG emission. In international forums they claim their right to 'develop' and point out to the fact they should not be held responsible for today's crisis as it is all owing to the cumulative effect which can be traced back to at least 100 years. It led to the emergence of the concept of 'common but differentiated responsibility'. So when it is felt incumbent for everyone to act, it is also grudgingly granted that some can indeed act later. It is well known that United States have always shown reluctance to restrict on its carbon emissions on the ground that acceptance of environmental safeguards, which are costly, will make its products uncompetitive in the international market.

A recent report released by Greenpeace India clearly shows the inequality that persists in India (and by token, other developing countries) regarding the use of resources and level of pollution. Though India in recent years has registered a high growth rate, yet the average emissions of per Indian citizen is well below the global average of 5 tonnes, the upper middle classes have nearly touched the level

(4.97 tonnes) perhaps as a sign of progress. The richest in India produce 4.5 times carbon emission than the poorest. This also indicates that pampered middle class people are already using such consumer gadgets as washing machines, kitchen appliances, computers, all depending on fossil fuels and have adopted expensive automobiles and air travel as a part of their life style. Ashish Kothari, an eminent Indian environmentalist uses these data to show how a section of the Middle class is making greatest noise about Forest Rights Act that returns the rights of the tribals to forest resources are themselves guilty of an alarming rate of pollution. They never propose to themselves that they should voluntarily forgo some of the most wasteful habits. It is really a tragedy that the poor who are least responsible for the present situation, will have to pay the highest in form of dislocation, disease and loss of livelihood.

The possibility of an alternative, so clearly set down in the Environmental Justice principles is, however, not an illusion and very much within the reach. It will require to get out of present conditional state - a despairing submission to growth oriented economy and the corresponding power structure. Cuba, has successfully involved the community in economic management. It is so often suppressed that Cuba ranks 4th in the world according to Human Development Index (HDI) while US with a much higher GDP, ranks 7th. Cuba, it might be recalled, has made tremendous strides in organic farming- making a virtue out of necessity. □□□