

# **PROTECTING MOTHER EARTH IS AN URGENT OBLIGATION**

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Science has developed by leaps and bounds. The entire world has become one global village through the network of communication. New inventions have smoothed modern life. Yet, despite these stupendous developments, one is tempted to ask whether we are developing in a sustainable and eco-friendly way.

In this wounded and divided world marked by lop-sided development, where only a minority plunder and enjoy the scarce and scanty resources of the earth, not only the vast majority of the human community but also the entire earth community is being deprived of their rightful existence on this cosmos. Human beings have altered everything in nature to suit their conveniences and luxuries and thus their very survival is now endangered. Can one species plunder and loot the vital but limited resources of the earth?

In today's world, the myth of 'development' is projected as the central value, measured by society's performance as quantified in terms of Gross National Product, Net National Product, material growth of economy, standard of living measured in terms of goods and money, etc. This lays emphasis on the superficial ways of 'having' than the more fundamental levels of 'being'.

## **Whom to blame?**

Humans have brought the billions of years old planet earth to the edge of a suicidal cliff. For the first time in human history, we seem capable of 'ecocide', destroying the entire ecological community altogether. The crisis of the eco-system of our planet reflects the deep crisis of human society, its set of values and ethos. Thus ecological crisis has its roots in man, in his vision of himself, of the whole of creation and their interrelationships, in his value system and priorities, all of which relate to the religio-moral dimensions of the crisis. So our response to the ecological crisis must find a social expression that impinges on structures as well as values in our society.

The need of the hour is to have a sense of belonging to a single planetary community that will transcend, though not necessarily replace, our rational ethic and communal loyalties. This must be based on a new ethic of survival, a culture of cooperation, moving to one destiny. What we need today is an ecosensitive and all embracing system of ethics and values.

## **One universe**

Natural world is a unified system in which everything is connected together, such as in the dependence of plants on carbon dioxide produced by animals and microbes and of animals on the oxygen produced by plants. We are living in an interconnected and interdependent universe. Cooperation and reciprocity are seen as essential properties of nature.

Changes caused by human greed, reckless behaviour, and ruthless consumption patterns do not give nature time to adapt. Any damage caused in any one corner of the world affects the entire universe. Natural disasters know neither national boundaries nor racial, caste, regional, linguistic and class differences. We all belong to one single earth. We all flourish or perish together.

### **The crisis today**

In this 20 billion year old planet earth, early forms of life appeared about 4.5 billion years ago. The first human beings appeared some 20 million years ago; the earliest fossil of *Homo sapiens* is only 70,000 years old.

Ever since humans appeared on the earth, they have been interacting with the environment for fulfilling their subsistence needs. But this interaction reached unsustainable proportions after the industrial revolution, an offshoot of the mechanical world-view, which impoverished the earth and with it, a vast majority of the people.

### **The root of ecological degradation**

Though the words ‘ecology’ (the home to live in) and ‘economics’ (the art of managing this home) have emerged from the same Greek word ‘*oikos*’, in the context of market oriented development, they have been made contradictory. As a result, ecological destruction has become an inevitable and obvious cost of economic development.

Global problems such as climate change, destruction of forests, over-exploitation and annihilation of biodiversity, desertification, ozone depletion, and over-utilization and contamination of water sources are causing irreversible damages to the biosphere and human life. The greed for wealth and lust for material prosperity have reduced our billions-year-old ‘mother earth’ into rubbish rubble.

The mode of development, being followed and blindly enforced is at the heart of today’s ecological crisis. This is intimately linked to science and technology as instruments to dominate over and exploit nature. The lifestyles of people determine the quality of our environment. Our consumer society is obsessed with accumulating wealth to the detriment of the poor and of the earth itself. Today 82.7% of the world’s income goes to the richest 20% of the people (the affluent consumers). By contrast, the poorest 20% get only 1.4% of the world’s income.

Modernization, mechanization, industrialization, capital intensive and labour saving techniques of production, hyper consumption of luxurious items etc. are the hallmarks of the modern concept of development. Commodity production and capital accumulation are the only goals of this type of development. It consistently values self-interest (greed) above social interest and environmental interest. The ethics of autonomy, which centre on the individual, ignore the essential relationality of a human person in community and the integral relationality to nature. Coupled with narrow

anthropocentrism and androcentrism, it supports an ethos of individualism and enthroned man as master of all creation and as superior to women.

### **Consumerism is a planetary sin**

Greed, actively promoted through globalization, has resulted in consumerism by which luxuries are converted into basic needs, without which life is made to look incomplete and inadequate. The quality and dignity of life are believed to be enhanced by the things we possess. Resources meant to fulfill the basic needs of all the organisms are thus diverted to satisfy the created luxuries of a few. The accumulation of such goods is the end product of consumerism. Advertisements market these luxuries. Globalization is the vehicle through which consumerism is promoted throughout the world. Consumerism is a sin against nature and the planet earth.

The global economy with its craze for lavish and extravagant living is inflicting irreversible/irreparable damages on the environment. Growth and development are being achieved by increasing pollution and waste. The damages caused to the environment by global trade are not usually given serious consideration. The uncontrolled consumption of natural resources has dried up the finite resources of the planet. The drive for mass production leads to the overuse of natural resources and thus endangers the ecological balance. It also affects public expenditure, which by and large results in less protection of the environment. Our health and survival depend upon the environment – the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat. But the global trade has no regard for a sustainable economy: it pollutes the air and water and poisons the food.

### **What are the alternatives?**

Given the global environmental context, we have to act with utmost urgency to save the earth from imminent collapse. So, option for the mother earth is not a choice to be made among many other choices but an urgent obligation in order to save and protect the entire universe from this looming danger. We shall sail or sink together in the spaceship earth. Therefore, it is now or never.

### **Ecological action**

Each one of us needs to become conscious of all the ramifications and implications of the environmental crisis. Only awareness can lead to preventive, protective and productive actions. We need to become aware of our organic connectedness to nature and its eco-systems. No one can lead a healthy life in a sick planet.

Humans are only a tiny fraction of this one interconnected, interrelated and interdependent cosmic reality. To be is to be related and connected. To be human is to be interhuman and be related to every being in the cosmos. Nature is a web of relations. Denial of relationality is a denial of being. It is respect for the integrity of nature which rebounds to the well being of humans.

Any human choice, decision, economic activity, technological discovery has to respect the fundamental inter-relatedness and integrity of the entire cosmic whole. Human beings should always act and behave with the consciousness of being part of this interconnected and interrelated cosmic reality.

Consciousness can effect conversion. Deep and sincere awareness about the ecological crisis, its causes and consequences will lead to a genuine conversion. Conversion will result in a change of heart and lifestyle which accepts the ecological limits and respects Mother Earth with all its biotic and abiotic components. Conversion will lead to the conviction that immediate action can only restore the health and wealth of our planet. Conviction has to be manifested in concrete and affirmative actions.

### **A programme of action**

Response to ecological crisis is eminently an ethical task. The unjust division of human society and rupture of eco-wholeness point to the degradation (chaos) of the universe (cosmos), the home (oikos) common to humans and all other living beings. We confront a dual crisis today: degradation of the natural environment and the impoverishment of a vast majority of the voiceless people. The response can only be the restoration of earth community by securing the well-being of humankind on a thriving earth. Ecological integrity and social equity are thus two sides of the same coin.

Eco-justice refers to constructive human responses that concentrate on the link between ecological health and economic justice. Development can only be truly sustainable, when equity is made its leading edge. Sound ecological development must at least meet the challenges of basic needs, sustainability, equity and other technological challenges of increasing the resource use efficiency and the productivity of nature and man-made processes. Our action programme should be undertaken at the following three levels.

#### **Individual level**

All have to promote a simple lifestyle based on the principle of sustainability. We know that unscrupulous exploitation of the natural resources and the environment degrades the quality of life. Hence, we need to cultivate a responsible and sustainable relationship with the environment. We have to get rid of the utilitarian and instrumental worldview.

Overcoming consumeristic culture, reducing the consumption of natural resources, reusing, refilling, recycling, avoiding pollution and conserving nature are some of the ways in which we can contribute to environmental protection.

#### **Institutional level**

Creating and maintaining eco-friendly campuses, mobilizing students towards conservative actions, research and advocacy on alternate and eco-friendly and clean technologies and networking among all institutions for collective and combined actions are some of the ways to actively involve in environmental protection.

### **Societal level**

This involves the building up of people's ecological movements to fight for social equity and environmental safety. Only ecological movements can be transboundary, transnational, transracial, translingual, transcultural for we all live and have only one earth. Through ecological movements, the oppressed and the marginalized people can mobilize themselves and fight for a better world and tomorrow.

We would like to conclude with the words of Maurice F. Strong, former Secretary General of UNCED. "The threat of nuclear war is like that of a heart attack or stroke; up to the very moment it happens, it is still possible to avoid it, while the threat to earth's eco systems and our environmental security are like cancer, spreading quietly and pervasively through the body of our society, which by the time the effects become acute, will be too late to cure".

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