The Imperative for Social Change

a contribution to the *environmental* debate

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What is sustainability?

A review of the literature suggests that there is no consensus on either the definition of Sustainable Development or the problems to be addressed to bring about sustainability. Hence, the range of possible activities, which will contribute to "sustainability", is equally varied and conflicting. However, what is suggested by various commentators indicates that all possibilities are encompassed by the three perspectives on the relationship between human beings and nature suggested by the three "founding fathers of sociology", and by the consequent (and differential) emphasis given to the population, consumption, technological, and political factors that impact on the environment.

What is a 'Green' Agenda?

There may, therefore, be differing 'green' agendas. A typical one, though, would adopt a Rights-based approach, particularly emphasising Community Rights over all resources. Such an approach could also encompass full-cost accounting to allot a value to nature that would, in turn, ensure rational use of resources as well as the fair exchange of properly valued goods. Intertwined within this would be a concept of what is 'organic' and, therefore, within the 'carrying capacity' of natural systems. Since all these are conceived within a global perspective, the Rights would have to be established, mediated, and maintained through a system of international Conventions, Commissions, and Institutions.

Pragmatism within the 'State'

Green agendas, therefore, tend to adopt a pragmatic approach in terms of what is possible within the ambit of the modern nation-State and the international relations between States. Thus, efforts to build stable economies and stable currencies, legislate protectionist measures for trade, negotiate debt burdens, and pursue environmental issues with business, are all prescriptions that the State would have to follow. However, these run aground on the shoals of the State's own pragmatism as governments renege from commitments and pursue priorities set by market mechanisms and powerful interest groups.

Pragmatism of the 'People'

Equally, green agendas also have to legitimise the idea of 'sustainability' by referring to micro-level initiatives. This further leads to arguing for establishing the democratic rights of communities over common resources on the grounds that they, particularly women, are the 'natural' stewards of nature. A theoretical relationship is established between equity and ecology, between pollution and poverty. Nevertheless such theories can hardly ignore the reality that there are social conflicts within communities, that women

are generally at the bottom of the rungs of power, and that the rich and the poor are not confined to different geographical locations.

Class, Community, and Governance

Hence, notions of 'class' disrupt the homogeneous fabric of the 'community'. There is a class of high-end consumers in both the North and the South whose ecological footprint decimates the survival options of the productive poor – who are also present in both North and South. Poverty is recognised as being related to a lack of (political) power and this power cannot be 'given' merely by settling 'rights'. These power relations between classes permeate all institutions of governance, national as well as international. Accountability is, therefore, subject to political negotiation. And the manoeuvrability of the ruling classes lies in their ability to frequently and rapidly subsume the conflicts between classes within those of caste, gender, race, and (increasingly) religion.

Development and Ideology

There is, clearly, a schism between State and People in class society. So development ideologies attempt to address this schism in different ways. Capitalism promotes the idea of growth as development, wherein the key element lies in maximising surplus and allowing it to 'trickle down' from top to bottom. Schools of Socialism, which emerged in response to capitalism's depredations, theorise about how the surplus may be redistributed by establishing equal rights and alternative forms of participatory and democratic governance. Environmental theories, on the other hand, question the idea of the surplus itself. As subsidies (to the rich) are challenged and full-cost accounting recommended, it becomes increasingly doubtful whether socially accountable production will produce any profits (or surplus) at all.

Imperatives for Change

The foundations are thus laid for a dramatic change in paradigms of 'developmental' thinking. If social progress cannot be based on the idea of large profits which can be reinvested into a better 'quality of life', then in which direction will society move? Some elements may be thrown up for discussion at this stage. For instance, in economics it can no longer be the 'profit-maximising' enterprise that will prevail. It may have to be that form of production that makes the 'least losses'. Similarly, technology cannot be conceived as that which is the most 'successful', but will have to be designed around the principle of 'failure'. And social organisation may have to revert to the concept of the 'armed people', although with a different visualisation of the 'arms' to be borne.

These imperatives of change are not born out of abstract thought alone, they are ingrained into the social fabric around us as it strains to cope with enormous conflicts and upheavals. The 'clash of civilisations' that the US President refers to is not between (militaristic) Christianity and Islam but between ideas of how to mediate the conflicts between and within human society and nature, how life must be lived. Such a clash cannot be resolved within the parameters of Agenda 21. It requires a larger vision, a nobler mind, and a kinder heart.