

## **Sustainable Cultures - Cultures of Sustainability**

Dialogues on the Future of Low Ecological Footprint Communities

Date: 4<sup>th</sup> June 2008, from 9 am to 2 pm

Venue: India International Centre, New Delhi

### **draft report (25 June 08)**

Participants: Seventy intellectuals, activists, students, academics, political workers, NGOs, civil society groups etc., attended the dialogue

### **Background note**

The issue of sustainable development can't be discussed without really looking at the ways various cultures relate to their ecology and environment. The modern society with its consumerist values leaves big ecological footprints. The economic, political, technological and social structures engendered by the modern society draws heavily and ruthlessly from our inherited wealth and common resources covered under the broad gamut of environment to fulfil the dreams of a 'good life'. It is inherently unsustainable. However, we still have cultures among the majority of people in developing countries among communities such as peasants, fisher-folk, artisans, indigenous people etc. that have low energy consumption and live in a balance with their environment and surroundings.

This dialogue, as part of the research on sustainable cultures, was organised to explore and document the possibilities of sustainable culture by looking at real life examples in India. Similar dialogues are held in Finland, Tanzania, Kenya and Nepal.

## Proceedings

The meeting started with a round of introduction with the participants. The participants included a number of intellectuals, activists, students, academics, political workers, NGOs, civil society groups etc. Welcoming the participants **Marko Ulvila**, the project director, presented a background of the dialogue. He informed that two dialogues have already been held in Finland with the objective of fostering a better north-south relationship and exploring more sustainable ways of living. He began by saying that as a part of long term engagement with issues related to comprehensive democracy the idea of sustainable culture has been a core concern. The question today, he said, is whether the modern society can sustain itself in view of the various crisis that loom ahead? Besides global warming they include the relative shortage of non-renewable natural resources such as oil, instability of the capitalist world system and epidemic loss of meaning in consumer societies. Juxtaposing the more sustainable cultures constituting a majority of the world population against the minority consumer cultures of 10-20 percent, he wondered if modernisation was the only way of life one could adopt. This dialogue, he said, was expected to be yet another churning of thought on these issues.

**Vijay Pratap**, Convenor, South Asian Dialogue for Environmental Democracy (SADED) and a senior researcher in the project gave a detailed background of the project. He said that he has been engaged in understanding the interaction between society, culture and environment. He said that this project, even though focussed on research, was an exercise in self-learning through the interactive process. In fact, there was a need to de-learn many of the things that we have acquired in the formal educational process so that we become receptive to learning from people. He went on to narrate the story of a well known journalist, editor of a newspaper in Rajasthan who resigned his job to go to live with people. He was surprised to find the deep understanding and wisdom people having no formal education had about issues such as dignity, livelihood, empowerment, environment and their surroundings. These people coined the slogan ‘Samant raj kee roti nahi chahiye, vote raj kee Izzat Chahiye’

i.e. we don't want bread provided by a feudal system; we want our dignity in a democratic system.

He felt that there seemed to be a global consensus about pursuing the American consumerist dream. Citing the example of Nepal where the Maoist communist party had been voted to power, he pointed out that they too were advocating the use of foreign capital and following the capitalist model of India and China. These are the same policies against which socialists have been fighting for long. He pointed out that the resistance to this model of development was also quite widespread and thousands of crores of rupees could not be utilised due to people's resistance. It is important to note that majority of the people still lead a sustainable life but gradually they are also being forced into urban slums and ecologically destructive livelihood. While a life of dignity and creativity is possible to maintain within a number of non-modern life styles, the modern market fundamentalism is destroying such lifestyles. One can see the impact of this forced transition in lifestyles in the form of growing suicide of farmers, Naxalite violence and *Salwa Judum* (an anti-Naxalite militia) etc.

Vijay Pratap underlined that the conditions for preserving the ecologically positive, low consumption life style is the topic of this study which is to be completed by December 2008. The completion of the project is to coincide with the meeting of the Congress of Indian Social Sciency Academy in December 2008.

Social activist and former civil servant **Harsh Mander** began by saying that the dialogue had to be nuanced and layered. He said that three decades back a good society seemed more feasible, rather imminent. Thirty years down the line, the young people are growing up in a very different world. There has been three major 'collapses' of the modern times viz. the collapse of the Berlin wall, Babri Masjid and the twin towers in New York. Collapse of the Berlin wall symbolised the demolition of the idea that a society build around the ideas of equity was possible. Destruction of Babri Masjid was symbolic of the end of possibility of having equal citizenship rights to people of all religions

and faiths. Finally, the attack on twin towers on 9/11 meant that racialism and militarism got a new lease of life in the name of 'global war on terrorism'. It also meant that labelling of communities and arrogance of wealth and privilege were established as parts of natural discourse in the international arena.

Harsh Mander pointed out that the history of our times would be marked by the exile of the dispossessed from the collective consciousness. It is evident in the content of the various art forms such as cinema etc. Modern popular cinema seems to have forgotten that poor people also exist in this world. We can see two standards obtaining in the society today-one for the minority 120 million and another for the majority of 650 million. In such a situation, he said, voices like that of Rajni Bakshi are precious because they show us the way gently, yet firmly. Through these voices we relearn the idea of justice, equality, egalitarian compassion and sustainability. It is assumed that only the market can help us develop and the role of the govt is to facilitate the functioning of the market. This has drastically altered the political culture of governance in our country. The moot question is not how much we produce but how is it being produced and for whom. We need to question the paradigm of economic growth. However, there are no single answers and people like Rajni Bakshi have got to play an important role here Harsh Mander concluded.

**Rajni Bakshi** initiated the dialogue by recalling her experience during the 1998 Satyagraha against Enron at Dabhol. The slogan of 'Jal, Zameen, Jungle Logon ke Hath' was good. However, it would be much easier for a big corporate like Enron to buy out the entire village than to negotiate it through the govt. The fall of Berlin wall did signify that neither market nor socialism was the answer. She informed that during her 20 year long association with the 'alternative economic summit', held concurrently with the G-8 summit, she discovered the existence of the 'post-autistic' economic revolt. The students at the famous Sorbonne university had put a leaflet on the internet decrying the economics being taught at the university as a small model of the discipline of

economics. They demanded a more comprehensive economics to be taught which included the economics of Gandhi, Schumacher etc. Gradually, now Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard etc. have included this in their curriculum. Stephen Marglin of Harvard led the movement questioning the hegemony of the mainstream economics. Subsequently, alternative economics which included ideas of Gandhi and Schumacher has been included in the courses offered at Harvard. From the peg of 'autistic theory', we now see the emergence of 'new economics' as an offshoot of the Gandhi-Schumacher tradition. Manfred Max Neef, who pioneered the approach to economics based on the dictum 'economics as if people matter', insisted that we should not emphasise 'wealth' but 'well-th'. During the keynote address in a conference at Sweden he talked about the rupture between 'economy' and 'ecology'. His point was greatly appreciated. What it suggests is that the market elite is not just a monolith but consists of a variety of strands.

She said that the consumer class in the world was about 1.7 billion, while the segment left out constituted about 4.3 billion. It's a disturbing phenomenon. We need to think about the inclusive arrangement. However, it is not possible to include the 4.3 billion people in this model as it is not sustainable. Former Chief Economist of the World Bank, Nicholas Stern was commissioned by the British govt. to study the environmental impact of development. His study is a watershed. In his report published in 2006 he has pointed out that the party can not go on for long and secondly, if we don't take remedial steps immediately the irreversibility would increase to such an extent that we would not be able to do much. He advocated spending one percent of the global GDP for tackling issues related to climate change. However, he still favours a 'low-carbon growth'. He said that the mantra for the industry today is the triple tagline of 'People, planet and profit'. Gandhi had seen this long back in 1946 when he decried the few countries for their high consumption level which can't be sustained if all the countries tried attaining that level of consumption. In response to the worsening ecological crisis, the west is coming up with innovations like hybrid fuel which require much lower level of fuel.

She also talked about the new trend in the west called SRI or 'socially responsible investing'. It has emerged as important criteria for investment for the people in the west in the last twenty years. In fact, close to 1/7<sup>th</sup> of all investment in the west passes through this moral /ecological filter. Today, almost 3.7 trillion dollar in the global stock market is invested through this SRI filter in countries like India too it has existed in different forms. For example, the Jains would never invest in abattoir related projects, Tatas don't invest in armament. These investments called the 'sin-stock investment' also include tobacco, wine etc. It is known that in the 1970s and 80s, the opposition to apartheid in South Africa were faith-based. Investors of South African companies started pressurising them to oppose apartheid and racism. When they did not succeed, shareholders asked these companies to withdraw from that country. In fact, this was one of the reasons that contributed to the collapse of apartheid in South Africa. However, there are problems. While it is easy to identify industries which employ child labour etc, it is not so easy to identify the method of production that causes environmental destruction and many similar socially unwelcome effects.

Talking about the basic kernel of capitalist system i.e. self interest and competition, she said that even these concepts are undergoing change. In this context she cited the example of open source software and Linux. People favouring Linux believe in 'copyleft' and not 'copyright'. They claim that they don't believe in locking their creativity but allowing people the 'freedom to cooperate', in the words of Richard Stallman. Starting from Finland, the originator of the Linux operating system Linus Torvald says that open source is about freedom. The success of Linux can be gauged from the fact that today more than 70 percent of the servers in the world are running on Linux or open source software. The world of internet and *World Wide Web* could become possible only because its inventor Tim Burner Lee decided not to patent the code for HTTP.

Commenting on the question of sustainability, she narrated the speech of Adam Werbach made at San Francisco in 2004. In his speech famous as 'The

death of environmentalism', he said that the American environmental movement had lost the opportunity because it never managed to connect with the needs and aspirations of the common people. Common people feel as if the environmental movement is out to turn them into ascetics renouncing the comforts of daily life. They have been presented with extremes which people don't want to entertain as they perceive it to be undoable. Last year after the hurricane Katrina hit American cities, he was called by the CEO of Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is one of the biggest corporations in the US. Its scale can be gauged by the fact that close to 1 million people are employed by it. The CEO said that he perceived the Katrina as very symbolic, an early warning perhaps, since it was affecting his profit. Werbach agreed to run a 'personal sustainability project' for the employees of the Wal-Mart. He teaches them how to lead sustainable lives, even while they work for Wal-Mart which is a strong source of unsustainable life style. In his workshops he asks the participants to identify what aspects of their lives are unsustainable. They learn, go back and train ten more. Now, it represents a real dilemma. Eco-fundamentalists are after his life. It is true that in an ideal world, the Wal-Mart should not exist. But unfortunately the world is not ideal. No body knows when it will come. So, he decides to work in the 'belly of the beast' and take a chance. It has undoubtedly, put his reputation and entire life's work at risk, but this chance has to be taken.

Dee Hock, the inventor of Visa card is another example, pointed out Rajni. He too believes in a combination of competition and cooperation. He gave the concept of '*chaordic* organisation' a combination of chaos and orderliness, self organising, dynamic and creative. He says that the presently the world is in the midst of a 400 year old system that represents the disconnect between ecology and economy. She concluded by saying the new age will require a combination of chaos and order, competition and cooperation.

After the presentation of Rajni Bakshi, the floor was thrown open for discussion. **Asit** commented that the concepts of 'global commons' and

‘economic alternative’ were conflicting. The nature of market has changed over time. He pointed that whether one invested in ‘sin stocks’ or SRI, the essential nature of capitalism does not change. Unless we went beyond the idea of ‘homo-economicus’, we can’t ensure wellbeing and dignity of human beings. **Rajni Bakshi** said that it is true that exploitation and inequity indeed covered a canvas much larger than simply economic. She was only pointing out the fallacy of mainstream economics which concerned itself with ‘wealth’ and not ‘wellbeing’. The fallacy lay in separating economy from the social, moral and ecological. Now there are people who are trying to bridge this rupture through mechanisms such as the social development index. In fact, it goes even further by taking into account explicitly the environmental costs into the calculation of GDP. In the US, people are questioning the calculation of GDP by pointing out that the sale of anti-depressants like the drug Prozac would add billions of dollars to GDP but actually it should be counted on the negative side. While capitalism may not mean the same thing to everybody, the fight was to put society above economy, said Rajni Bakshi.

**J.P.Dabral**, working on Himalayas and rural development shared his experience of the mountains. He said that the earlier generations built terraces on mountain for agriculture. It has proved to be long lasting. There is no denying the need of infrastructural facilities like electricity, road etc. in the mountains, but it should not be done at the cost of nature and surroundings. This is being openly flouted. A company constructing road in the hills was simply rolling down the rubble and killing vegetation down below. It was challenged in the Supreme Court and the practice had to stop. Similarly, the Tehri Dam Transmission line was leading to the cutting down of 90000 trees, but after opposition from people, the plan was revised and only 15000 trees were cut. He pointed out that the turpentine oil collection was leading to the weakening of the natural fire-insulation in the trees which protected them from forest fires in the pine forests. The timber mafia is behind this making pine trees extremely vulnerable.



**Gautam Vohra**, a social activist, pointed out that the middle classes were under tremendous pressure as can be seen in such disparate developments as IPCC, Nicholas Stern, rise of Mayawati and the agitation of the Gujjars in India today.

**D. P. Sharma**, academic and social worker, underlined the need for resurrecting the ethical and moral dimension in social and economic life. Without it, nothing was going to work. He said that those who earn more should be taxed more and then only a sustainable culture can be built.

**Devdutt** questioned the meaningfulness of the stories narrated by Rajni Bakshi. The issue was whether these models were replicable or not. Merely being inspirational was not enough. He said that the role of technology, which in his view was the villain of the piece, in this process needs deeper probing. He wondered if there could be a development which is inherently sustainable and does not require constant corrective measures to remain sustainable. He also did not agree with the nomenclature of the discussion- 'culture of sustainability'. The concept of sustainability itself needs to be examined and we need to find out the process through which it operates.

**Jaya**, working among children, said that culture was a process through which a family, society and community defined themselves. We should examine if a community is a low-carbon community by default or it has decided to be like this. Social and natural catastrophes have existed for long and there was 'global warming' inside the human heart. We need to analyse and understand that also, said Jaya.

Eminent scholar **J.P.S. Uberoi** said that in the dialogue on sustainable development the concept of society needs to be understood. The entire society is being undermined by the market. He sarcastically pointed out to one definitions of 'civil society' that is whatever else that existed in a telephone directory other than government or business. Society is nothing more than the sum total of individual maximisation of self interest. He said that there was a need to have more discussion of 'truth' and not of 'reality'. He also urged a

deeper analysis of the question of technology in the process of sustainable development. He pointed out that Rajni Bakshi did not talk about the role of the 'Military-Industrial' complex. We must also examine whether commerce and industry are at loggerheads. He underlined the close and deep integration of industry and military. The real expenditure on military is much more than what is given in the budget because the data is fudged by including the pension to ex-servicemen under the civilian head. He drew attention to the prevalence of 'obsolescence' in areas like IT, nano-technology etc. which was a source of great wastage of resources and thus impacting the sustainability. He also underlined the need to document the Indian system of science and technology.

Medical practitioner and activist in the health sector **Dr. Vidya Surwade** talked about the experience of sustainable development in Jalgaon in South West Maharashtra. The hills were developed and afforested using the drip irrigation before tourists started coming to this place, informed Dr. Vidya. She said that greater awareness needed to be created especially among school children about their eating habits and packaging in non-bio degradable plastic etc. All schools should contain lessons on ecological sensitivity, saving energy in their syllabus.

**Jitendra Kumar Sharma** said that management of money by the community was an important aspect of a sustainable culture.

**Razia Abbasi**, working for child-right, questioned as to how all of it would come in the actual learning process at schools and colleges? Even though environmental studies was now a part of the school syllabus, the situation was pathetic. These school books don't have any why question, no impact question. The process of the transfer of knowledge is based either on profit or a decision by someone in the government about what is to be learnt by the students and that is included in the syllabus.

**Bijulal** from the Indian Social Institute, pointed out the systematic exclusion of vast sections of society for thousands of years. The struggle of

7500 dalit families in Kerala is continuing for a long time. It was wrong to have denied the question of caste in south Asia. It was a crisis of legitimisation as people were feeling distanced from the state and their right to life has been seriously violated. It has its roots in the economic and social relations obtaining in society. Criticising the model of self-rule in the form of Panchayati Raj Institutions, Bijulal said that the Gram Sabhas had been co-opted in the system into accepting the same ruinous policies which the state has been practicing. The question is how to get people their right to resources. He informed that in Kerala, while the Tatas have been provided a huge amount of land, the landless people supposedly benefiting from land reform are yet to get ownership of the land allocated to them by the govt. This was the irony of a supposedly communist state, commented Bijulal.

**Avinash** from CSDS said that the traditional knowledge was not static and constant. It has changed-adapting and evolving over time. Unfortunately, now it has become culturally irrelevant and no longer considered part of knowledge. It is neither economically rewarding nor politically effective. The need was to create an order of knowledge from which we all could benefit and take advantage.

**Pramod Chawla** from an NGO working on governance issues took a dig on the shift in Indian economic policy from 'self-reliance' to 'Reliance'. He said that India was no longer a welfare socialist economy but a predator-led capitalist economy. In fact, the Naxals have forced the govt. to take development to people. He stressed that there was an urgent need to have social auditing to save society from being further corrupted.

**Madhuresh** wondered about the number of people who really wanted to practice a sustainable life style. We need to become sensitive and introspective. One's life should be the message he gives, just as Gandhi had said.

Responding to various comments and questions raised during the discussion, **Rajni Bakshi** said that the dominant view certainly looked at

technology as something which can be used to evolve a sustainable development. But the question is whether we treat earth as our home or a large market place. The question about management of money by the community was important. There are more than 2500 examples of 'community currency' in the Anglo-Saxon world. These are efforts at establishing the supremacy of community over market. She agreed that the ownership of resources by people was an important question. One of the ways to assert political right was to assert economic rights of people over these resources. In the US the idea of 'sky-trust' is actually an effort to stop companies from selling our commons in the name of carbon trading etc. We also have the example of 'Alaska permanent fund' where every person in Alaska gets a cheque annually for the exploitation of oil which is found on their land. The struggle for rights should be combined with the fight for empowerment of communities. We have the option of choosing a 'glorious death' or find the idea or terminology to force the existing power structures to give space and make meaningful dialogues possible for a better tomorrow.

Report by: Vagish K Jha

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