

# COALITION FOR ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

## SUSTAINABLE FUTURES India International Centre, New Delhi 1<sup>st</sup> November 2008 Dialogue Report

Meeting began with **Rakesh Bhatt** welcoming the participants and a round of self introduction.

Starting the proceedings of the day, **Marko Ulvila** started by saying that he wanted to find out ways to have a society which is more harmonious, just and less oppressive. He provided a brief overview of the project and the various issues relevant to this discussion. He underlined two important dimensions of the effort towards the search for sustainable cultures. Firstly, it is the relationship with nature which has really gone out of balance. The consumer class, though a minority in the world, was creating havoc with nature by indulging in consumerism. Not just the present, but the future generations would find it hard to have dignified livelihood. This debate could be traced back at least a century ago when Gandhi warned of the dangers of consumerism to which various movements in the North starting from the 1960s and 1970s are now waking up.

Secondly, comes the age old issue of justice which was linked to the process of colonization and formation of hierarchy. Here west has a lot to learn from India which has been at the receiving end of the colonization process. The process of colonization goes hand in hand with the issue of hierarchy visible in the class relations, patriarchy as also between species where certain species place themselves above others and exploit them. The study aimed to find ways to reduce/remove hierarchies and lead to a more equitable society, said Marko.

He informed that this project on 'Sustainable Cultures and Cultures of Sustainability' took off in May 2008 and will conclude in February 2009. The project was essentially dialogue based since a number of important insights don't really find a place in the printed world. A number of dialogues have been held in Europe, East Africa, India and Nepal and this was the last dialogue in the series, said Marko.

**Devdutt** began by sharing his views on ecological *swaraj*. He expressed his disagreement with the way this concept of ecological *swaraj* has been used in the documents of the project. He said that the use of ecology as the primary category in the documents is not justified since it is not a universal metaphor. It seems to mean a very specific thing for the people involved in the project but may have very different connotation and meaning for others. He said that it is unable to accommodate concepts of bio-diversity since it is essentially an anthropomorphic concept and a variation on the paradigm of modernity. The issue becomes more glaring in the case of third-world countries where people don't really think of their 'relation with nature' which presupposes two entities man and nature. This is a typically western understanding. In India man and nature are not seen as

dichotomous but together they are seen to constitute a continuum, the warp and woof of life. Nature was perceived as part of the human being.

He further elaborated that the concept of ecological *swaraj* failed to provide us any understanding of the crisis of capitalism and Marxism. The present day financial crisis in America is the most definitive proof of the fact that modern civilization has arrived at its limits and it has arrived at a saturation point. It has lost its innovative capacities. The starting point for the debate should be the rejection of the modern civilization and understanding of the parallel systems of civilization in the world. He cautioned that if we were conditioned by the structure of modern civilization, we can't formulate the road ahead. He said that the present financial crisis of the world was a proof that the modern society is heading for its final destination.

Devdutt went to elaborate that the real issue was to search for parallel civilization and not alternative civilization. Outright lack of faith in modern civilization was the beginning of this thinking. He also disagreed with any attempt to globalize the issue since it would be self-defeating. He said that the plurality of the world cannot be conceptualized by globalizing the term. The emphasis should be on sharing of the ideas by letting every one formulate it in their own ways. He criticized the effort to take the topic to Asia and Africa and expecting people to just fill in the content as linguistic hegemony. He said that Reality was too big to be confined within a definition. And therefore, this 'ecological' terminology destroyed, by the very formulation, the intentions of those who have promoted it. It smacked of a desire to force people to see certain idioms not in their own way but through the prism offered by some one else. In fact to define it was to destroy it, said Devdutt. He appealed to let it be open and be examined. **Mamta**, an activist among the tribal people of Orissa, talked about the inter-linkages between consumption pattern, world economic order and its impact on nature. She pointed out that there has been a tremendous shift in the consumption pattern all over the world. The needs which are being created are energy intensive and high in the use of metals which requires mining of natural resources. All the modern gadgets like Camera, mobiles, computers, automobiles, Refrigerators etc. used high quantities of metal, especially aluminium. In the automotive industry in the last two decades the use of aluminium has increased from 3 percent to 70 percent. A huge part of the defence based industry uses metals. Aluminium is extracted from Bauxite which was found underneath the thickly covered mountains. It was obvious that mining of bauxite would damage the environment. She pointed out that earlier too the communities did engage in mining but it was local and catered to their local needs. Now it has been replaced. So, it was the new capitalist order or world order that has changed the pattern of consumer behaviour, she said. The companies like Sterlite, Jindal or Mittal etc. were not new but space has been created for them to come and draw raw materials from nature. It was a strategic and well thought out process where there was a very strong amalgamation of market forces, the state, as if the common man did not exist.

She felt that we needed to understand the politics behind this consumerism and the very notion of development. Then only we would understand how a district like Kalahandi, known as the rice bowl of Orissa has turned into a symbol of starvation and death today. If we still want to have balance in nature and if we really

do not want to stop global warming in the coming years, if we wanted to stop the Himalayan glaciers from melting down; we better start re-looking at our lifestyles. We better begin our way of responding to the whole notion of 'development.' The change in the consumption pattern would require us to redefine our lives.

Social activist and a veteran of Narmada resistance movement **Asit** talked about the notion of time in the context of the tribal population of the Narmada valley. He said that after the Babri Masjid demolition, history became a highly debated and controversial subject. He informed that a group of researchers took up the investigation of time by exploring the oral history in Narmada valley. The various notions of time such as the empty homogenous time, dense heterogeneous time and the cyclical time as expressed in the women's movement were analyzed taking into account the tribal and non-tribal areas of Narmada valley. The multi-million dollar Narmada project displaced 4-5 lakh people scattered over 250 villages. This population consisted of three major tribes of the area namely the Bhils, Bhilalas and Barelas. These groups traced their origins and cosmology and built their belief system around a certain cyclical notion of time which was disrupted by the Narmada project. This had serious ethical implications for these groups.

The non-tribal communities consisted of Rajputs who were land-owning class. The backbone of this class was broken by the successful land reform in Gujarat. Then came the phase of green revolution, this Western part made the best of the Green revolution, they had the cash crops and now the Patidars and the Gujjars were the most prosperous castes. However, their prosperity was resented. To understand this, we started collecting the stories of how the Gujjars, Patidars and Yadavs came into that place, said Asit. Survey was conducted by the Anthropological Survey of India. It was revealed that the non-tribal think of themselves as migrants coming from Gujarat or Punjab which has no historical basis. The official British history records that the rulers of the Holkars (rulers of the Indus Valley) brought these Gujjars to till the land as the Rajputs themselves were not willing to engage in physical work. But their oral history has a different tale to tell. They said that in the Maheshwar area, there was a big giant and the King could not fight him. The Gujjars were called in and thanks to the inherent goodness of the Gujjars, (because they are vegetarians, strong and ethical) they were able to develop the giant to till the land. Asit concluded by saying that this mythological understanding of their root provided them the strength to fight the development paradigm.

After the presentation by the main speakers, the floor was thrown open for discussion. **Rakesh Bhatt** desired to know the difference in the struggle being waged in Orissa and other parts of the country. **Devdutt** talked about the technology, especially technology related to transportation and communication and the consumption driven by it. Technology cheapens the goods and easy credit made it affordable for the middle classes changing their consumption pattern. He felt that the middle classes should be questioned for the huge increase in the consumption. **Vagish** expressed his disagreement with the conspiracy approach to analyse this issue. He pointed out that we should also look at our role in falling prey to the seduction of modernism and consumerism. It was no use blaming somebody else for providing the seduction and feeling guilt-free about our own role. He said that it was a kind of 'retro-romanticism' which can't defeat metro-romanticism, as it were.

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**Marko** responded to the question about linguist hegemony and said that no-concept could be free of such problems as even the name *swaraj* was criticized for being Brahminical in its connotation. Talking about over-consumption, he said that till now it was looked at as a matter of individual choice. But he hoped that over-consumption will be looked at not just as irresponsible behaviour but criminal act in people's conscience. It is in fact a structural problem of our culture and societies. Such cultural transformation in the conscience of people is not new. He pointed out that the western elite was earlier indulging in shooting of wild animals in Asia and Africa and proving its exclusivity from the masses. Smoking also falls in this category. However, over a period of time they are no longer associated with social status or exclusivity of the elite but criminal acts only. He criticized the modern commercial media sustained on advertising revenue for promoting socially irresponsible consumerism. He underlined that unless and until we dealt with advertisement and commercial media, there was no hope to change the discourse from over-consumption. He said that we needed a socially relevant, non-profit public media in its place. He expressed hope that the cultural resource of majority of people who are actually leading exemplary lives will be able to change the discourse of over consumption in the right direction.

Responding to the points raised by Devdutt, **Asit** commented that such binary opposition between the Western and Oriental outlook about the relationship of man with nature needed deeper exploration. He said that the Marxist philosophy elaborated on the capitalist division of labour which created alienation of man with nature and with himself. He pointed out that issue of Modernity also needed more in-depth analysis before dumping it as the root cause of all the problems faced today. He reminded that we must not forget that modernity came about after a prolonged struggle against the obscurantist Church and monarchy and was a major progressive step forward. Thus, dumping Modernity altogether can be done only at the cost of missing out the historical role of modernity, he cautioned.

**Rajesh** expressed his disagreement with the stance that an appeal for reducing consumption at the individual level would really make a change. He was of the view that an intervention at the political level which could influence the economic incentive structure at the macro level would really be the most effective way to democratize consumption and even control consumption.

Talking about the struggle in Orissa, **Mamta** said that this state really offers hope to the people who are engaged in struggle. She said that the state has been trying to offer seduction to people by offering compensation for land acquisition and displacement. Earlier the govt. was offering Rs. 150 as compensation but now it was Rs.50000. But people are rejecting it since they feel that no amount of money could really substitute land as it provides livelihood to people over a number of generations. She pointed out that Balco had to move out of its proposed area despite spending crores due to the resistance of the people. She also agreed that we should infiltrate politics if we really wanted to make a change. On the question of globalisation of the protest, she felt it was imperative since the enemy was also spread over a global arena.

**Devdutt** explained that worldview and philosophy were two different things and they should not be confused. He said that in fact capitalism and Marxism were cousins, howsoever quarrelsome and antagonistic to each other they may be. Both of these shared the same dualistic worldview. The encounter of tradition and modernity was not taking place on equal terms. Modernity is indulging in rape and seduction through the use of its power and consumerism. **Rakesh Bhatt**, talked about the issue of need and greed citing the Koran. He pointed out that the Islamic scripture talks about the physical and spiritual needs and requires people to look at their spiritual needs and not just the physical needs.

The session came to an end with lunch.

The post lunch session was devoted to a slide show and presentation by the noted Gandhian and activist **Anupam Mishra**. He pointed out that in India even today a large part of society was outside the purview of both the market and the government. This section of society has sustained itself over the millennia on the basis of the collective wisdom it has acquired. However, this section was ignored. Talking about the traditional techniques of water conservation in the desert areas of Rajasthan, he said that society was the biggest and the most powerful institution. It was certainly much bigger and stronger than the state or the market and hence could preserve these great techniques over thousands of years. Many of these areas had a rainfall of hardly 3-6 inches per year. These areas did not have any modern amenities like railways, roads etc. but 95 percent of these villages were self-sufficient in terms of drinking water. This had been done by constructing Kund/Tanka all over the desert area. Some of these *Tankas* could store the meager rainwater and collect one lac litres of water in them.

Pointing out the inadequacy and short-sightedness of govt. planning, Anupam Mishra said that the Sutlej-Yamuna link canal was built to bring water to the desert areas of Rajasthan but it caused salinity. It happened because govt. was not aware that many of these areas had gypsum beneath their surface and excess water was bound to cause salinity. Similarly, govt. dug up bore-wells. Most of these failed-either they did not yield any water or only saline water. The situation was such that areas covered by the canal suffer greater degree of drought than the ones which are not connected by the canal. The cattle of Rajasthan earlier depended on the fodder brought from Punjab but now the farmers in the Punjab prefer to burn their fodder than to transport it to Rajasthan.

Elaborating the indigenous wisdom of water conservation, Anupam Mishra talked about ponds of Rajasthan. These ponds are 3-tier structures which filtered out silt and let the pure water be deposited in one place. Each year the village clears out the silt to keep the pond fit for collecting water in the next season. He gave the example of Jaisalmer which had a flourishing trade with overseas for more than 2000 years. In Jaisalmer each house has got a system of collecting rainwater on the roof. The *Gadh-shishar* pond is more than 800 years old. This pond was built by the labour of all-including the king of the place. In fact the majestic main entry to this huge pond was made by a courtesan (Ganika) lady who had a very low social

status. Another pond named *Amarsagar* (literally the 'immortal sea') is a 7-storied step-well all made by the courtesan ladies. To measure the level of water also, they have made indigenous devices-statues of animals etc. which works as the marker of water level. On the banks of the ponds, wells are dug to preserve water. There also existed a system of erecting pillars indicating a water catchments area. These pillars can still be seen in the midst of busy bazaars of Jaipur and carry some religious value for the people.

He elaborated upon the marvelous technology of the construction of wells which are more than 300 ft. deep. Each stone is carved to fit in a groove by interlocking with each other so that the structure of the well does not collapse. It has ensured their life for hundreds of years. Some of these wells are more than 500 years old. He showed the photograph of a well which looks like a bus-stand today. This gave the audience about the scale of these wells. The traditional knowledge was refined to such an extent that they could really spot a place in the desert where one would get potable water. Just a few yards away, you would get only saline water, informed Anupam Mishra. The desert society had made provision not just for humans but also for animals. In one of the desert areas fodder grass is found for animals to eat at one place but the drinking water is found at a distance. This has ensured the availability of both fodder and water for centuries to the animals.

Anupam Mishra talked about the system of 'Khadin' or socially owned piece of land for the cultivation of food-grain. The land is not in the name of any individual but the produce is divided among all the families. If one leaves the village his share is temporarily suspended which is restarted once the person came back to the village. There is no division in the name of caste or class in this system.

The slide show included a number of unique and important photographs related to the traditional wisdom of sustainable living.

**Dr. Gopal Krishna** and **Dr. Sudheerendra Sharma** have been active during the recent flood in Kosi which has wreaked havoc in the plains of Bihar at an unprecedented scale. Dr. Gopal said that several narratives existed in the area to explain the problem and the crisis. Unfortunately, all of these narratives are partial and don't provide the holistic picture. The socio-economic realities are ignored and the structural-engineering solution is peddled as panacea for all the ills. In fact, he stressed, the people of this area were victims of the solution being offered to them. There have been big demonstrations that the breach at Kushaha which caused the havoc this year should not be plugged but the administration did not listen to them and brushed aside people's concerns. The real issue was to understand whether it was a crisis of flood or drainage. Unless the diagnosis was correct, solution was bound to be faulty. The common minimum programme of the UPA govt. had clearly said that the main issue was drainage. He criticized the plan of building the so called 'multi-purpose' high dam which had the single point aim of generating power and not for controlling floods. He said that sometimes, the solution lay in not doing certain things and not just doing some thing.

**Sudhirendra Sharma** started by narrating the experience of the team which had visited Bihar during the current flood crisis. He informed that the area still faced crisis even though water level had receded and it would continue to be so till at least March-April 2009. He informed that the people of this area now want the river to flow in the new course that it has adopted after breaching the *Kusaha* dam. It was all the more surprising considering the fact that when the embankment was first built people of the area had done *shramdan* (labour-donation) to build it. He said that the critical issue was how to get people's voices and concerns into the mainstream discussions and alternatives. Kosi was important as it would become a model for what would be done with respect to other rivers in Bihar. He pointed out the close relationship between flood management and migration of workers to cities like Mumbai which recently saw anti-migrant violence. He drew attention to the political economy of dam which benefited the politicians, engineers and the bureaucrats alike. This crisis has provided an opportunity to listen to the voice of the people and ensure their participation in working out a solution. He appealed to stop the proposed embankment of all the rivers in Bihar as it is going to be equally disastrous as the recent Kosi incident. He pointed out that many a times people live better with flood than building dams which cause devastation on a much bigger scale. Before the modern dams were built people of that area had a better standard of life and the migration was also quite low which was borne out from the reports of flood-commissions etc. People of this area knew how to live with floods which was absent in the modern generation. He urged upon the policy makers and political leadership to take into account people's opinion, technical and ecological opinion before deciding on any future course of action for Kosi.

**Vagish Jha** struck a note of caution and said that the topography of the area has changed quite a lot in the last few decades as a number of dams have been built on other rivers too and the natural drainage system has been altered. With the construction of barrage at Farakka, the flow of Ganga has been altered. Now Kosi is unable to drain itself into Ganga the way it used to do, say fifty years back. All the rivers of north Bihar are connected to Ganga and thus the issue needs to take into account this point also. He quoted a popular saying said the oral folk lore of this area had a popular saying '*aayal balaan te balaam dalan, de balaan te tatal dalan*', which meant that 'if there is a flood in Balaan, then I will construct my out-house nicely. And if there is no flood in Balaan, then my outhouse will crumble'. Today the bed of river has been raised so much by silting that without dredging it was going to cause salinity in the nearby areas. Raising the embankment for ever was no solution either. Any solution of this problem should take into account the changed topography and morphology of this area, said Vagish.

**Gopal** agreed that the topography of the area has changed a lot and there was a need to restore natural flooding in this area. In fact engineers can be contacted to suggest ways to achieve this. Unfortunately, these projects were more of political projects and less of engineering ones. It was informed that for the first time in its history the river Ganga has left its embankment in Benaras and it runs a real risk of drying up in the foreseeable future. In an internal report the ministry of water resources of govt. of India had accepted that till now there had never been a

unified and integrated study of the entire 2510 km of Ganga basin. He underlined the interlinked nature of issues related to rivers and emphasized that mere technocentric interventions would only aggravate the situation.

The meeting ended with a vote of thanks by Marko.

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Report written by Vagish K. Jha