

Of Traditional Knowledge —And Practice

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The crass foolhardiness of the quest for the mind boggling technological attainment, has goaded man into the river of no return. Aggravated assault on nature commencing with the nineteenth century industrial revolution, assumed frightening self destructive proportions during the twentieth century. This is being further aided and abetted by the world wars, globalisation and consumerism!

In consequence, the natural life support system (water, soil and air) including renewable and non-renewable resources, is being wantonly used, degraded and destroyed. The powerful men have lost their kinship with nature; and has instead assumed the role of an emperor for its colonial exploitation. Frederic Engels in 'Dialectics of Nature', had stated that despite excited human victories, Nature does have the last laugh of its ultimate supremacy. This has proven to be axiomatic! Human beings have become extra terrestrial aliens on their own earth ! The very survival of human society is at stake, with its the identity crisis – vis-à-vis nature. Such a sordid situation needs to be probed and a possible solution out of this impasse unravelled.

During the transformation from 'Ape to Man', human beings emerged as the epitome of the entire evolutionary process by virtue of the law of 'survival of the fittest' among other forms of life. During early human history—the 'hunter-gatherer' and 'cave man' stages—natural facilities were utilised merely for shelter and sustenance. By dint of the special tools of brain and brawn in his armoury human society emerged from small, defensive groups into ever enlarging disparate and compartmentalised communities. Even so, they attained peaks of civilised progress as revealed in the records of human history. Nature literally served as the cradle of this evolutionary process. The testimony of Mayan, Harappan and numerous other civilisations confirms this! The terminal malignancy of recalcitrant human activities of the last two centuries is epitomised in Global Warming and Climate Change—besides ozone layer depletion, corruption of the food chain, and destruction of bio-diversity and other life sustaining natural cycles. As a matter of fact, man must alter his attitude towards nature from confrontation to empathy. This alone can ensure human survival. In fact, peace and happiness are antipodal to the inherent consumerism in the high energy consumptive lifestyles of the affluent classes. The much talked about Copenhagen Summit of 15,000 representatives including Heads of States from 192 nations failed to bring some ray of sanity in this madness.

Strange but true that the rural poor have more of peace and satisfaction, even at a subsistence level of survival! For them, 'being' is more vital than 'having'. This can be linked to Mahatma Gandhi's dictum that 'nature provides enough for man's need but not for his greed'. The corollary of sustainability has to be adopted as the unavoidable keynote of development. This is easier said than done, since it shall entail major social and economic changes—both at the national and international levels.

December 2004 may be recorded as the turning point in the collective human thought process related to the role of nature. It saw the initiation of a phase of virulent major natural disasters—earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanism, floods, and hurricanes, spread far and wide over Asia, Europe and the Americas. More significantly, these have unambiguously demonstrated the quixotic helplessness of human technology in confronting the undiluted fury of natural forces! Even so, there seems to be no palpable reduction in human vainglory!

In order to stem the tide of self destruction, it is essential to draw upon the archives of traditional knowledge ubiquitously available in rural communities, especially in the problematical regions of Asia, Africa and South America where USA, the advanced affluent countries of Europe have been terminally over-exploiting natural resources for the benefit of the global market forces.

Realising the critical overall situation, the United Nations launched the four-year work programme for Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MS) in 2001. This involved nineteen International Organisations, besides 'at large' members drawn from India and many countries. One of the avowed purposes is for "...identifying and evaluating policy and management options for sustaining ecosystem services and harmonizing them with human needs...'

It recommends, inter alia, local community participation with their traditional practices in the development process.

However for activation, decentralisation and participatory community involvement is simply imperative. Possibly, if as effectively implemented in some of the Indian States, the Panchayat Raj institutions may be the enabling agency for this. Enough damage has been done by expert technocrats bearing the seal of Government departments and institutions to ruin the life support system! Without an iota of knowledge or familiarity with the unique local micro system, they tried to sermonise the villagers. It is time for them to be withdrawn. Obviously, it is local communities with their formidable arsenal of traditional knowledge and 'on site' experience that sustainability of natural resources may be ensured. The following statement enlists some of the major spheres in which traditional knowledge alone can stem the tide of decay and destruction :

- Sustainable farm practices based on terrain features.
- Organic farming and bio-pesticide use.
- Propagation of medicines based on local plants, etc.
- Preservation of Biodiversity.
- Reduced and regulated use of water for irrigation.
- Adapting the concept of 'small is beautiful' as the development paradigm.
- Watershed based development to benefit local communities.
- Emphasise on small, renewable energy sources to cater to local communities.
- Utilise experienced community elders with traditional wisdom and intimate local knowledge in land use planning.

Some illustrative Action Points to push this agenda and sensitise the marshalling of further initiatives, particularly on the part of honest and down to earth voluntary organisations :

- Gradual switchover to a more organic (non-toxic) regime of farming, and use of bio-pesticides, etc.

- Reintroduce sensible farm practices like crop rotation, leguminous inter-cropping, contour cropping, etc.
- Discard water and chemical loving exotic hybrids and high yielding cultivars.
- Reduce water application and enhance watershed based local water harvesting through vegetation, wells, pits etc.
- Introduce community initiatives for collectivisation of inputs, water management and group farming.
- Introduce cropping diversity based on the soil, topographical and geological characteristics of various natural regions – so well known to local communities.
- Exert community pressure on the administration to reduce subsidies for undesirable inputs and provide incentives during the switchover period to sustainable, low input farming.

The entire process may be initiated with participatory, micro-level resource mapping (Land Literacy) package to instil confidence in them to (a) articulate their traditional knowledge and practices; (b) enable them to use their own lexicon of terms to identify and actually map their local natural resources; (c) allow them to draw up a plan for tackling degradation and initiating sustainable development.

Apart from Rajendra Singh's iconic 'Johads' in Alwar, there are, fortunately, numerous success stories of such local community initiatives based on traditional knowledge in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Haryana, Arunachal and many other locations scattered over the country. What is needed is to see attitudinal change in the miniscule affluent class, some politicians, and transnational corporate sector responsible for carving and fostering policy decisions. There is a silver lining! Time and again, the Indian rural electorate have demonstrated uncanny political acumen in reversing harmful trends through effective democratic means. Endowed with a significant share of global manpower and natural resources, India may thus pave the way for human survival by invoking traditional knowledge! □□□