

Towards a Sustainable Future – Learning from the Relics of Our Past

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ABSTRACT

The unbridled production and consumption patterns have led to severe impact on the environment. The forest fires, the abnormal rainfall, the flash floods, landslides, cloudbursts are the nature's reaction to human's uncontrolled and invasive development spree. On September 25th 2015, the United Nations (UNO) adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - a set of goals to end Poverty, Protect the Planet, Ensure Prosperity for all. Each goal has specific targets that has to be achieved over the next 15 years. The research paper is an attempt to understand the causes of the environmental challenges and its drastic onslaught on the future of all lives on the earth. There are valuable lessons from our ancient practices which can be our saviour. The Research paper discusses some of our rich and useful practices which if adopted, will not only save resources but also make earth a better place for everyone.

KEYWORDS: Earth, sustainable, water management, nature, preservation

INTRODUCTION

India, at present, is the most populated country of the world. Since population and economic development are closely related, overpopulation leads to pressure on the existing resources. Overpopulation leads to indiscriminate and uncontrolled uses of natural resources that leads to severe problems like global warming and environmental degradation. It is, no doubt that technological progress has added speed, comfort, efficiency and improved the way of our life. But at the same time, it has come at a huge cost. The present production and consumption patterns have led to severe impact on the environment. The damage on environment on account of destruction of forests, cutting of mountains in the name of development will have serious inter-generational equities issues. The forest fires, the abnormal rainfall, the flash floods, landslides, cloudbursts are the nature's reaction to human's uncontrolled and invasive development spree. India is an emerging economy and is in pursuit of its developmental goals. At the 26th session of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 26) held at Glasgow on November 2021, India announced its target to achieve net zero by 2070. Presently, the World is passing through

turbulent times. Unlike earlier times, where economies were worried about financial crisis or inflation, the new worries are about uncertainties due to geo-political tensions. The Russia-Ukraine war, the recent Israel-Palestine war are new worries for the whole world. It seems as if Covid -19 and the climate-challenges were not enough, that the world has to grapple with man-made challenges like wars. Developing economy like India, have suffered immensely on account of Covid-19. While, the need to accelerate economic growth is immense, the need to preserve equity is also important. It is, at this juncture that, this paper is an endeavor to explain the common challenges that most countries are facing today and how 'learning from each other' can help us to tackle the challenges. The concept paper wants to emphasize the significance of 'preserving inter-generational equity'. The IMF has warned about slowdown in economic growth for both developed and developing economies. As per the IMF, India is among the few countries that showed a remarkable rebound post pandemics. However, the geo-political risks pose a huge challenges to the world economy and we need to protect people, planet and restore

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peace. Hence, Sustainable development is the only way of preserving life on earth. It is, indeed an apt principle, for achieving human development goals while simultaneously preserving the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and replenish. Sustainable development, can also be defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their needs (Inter-generational equity). The issue of sustainable development, is perhaps, better understood now than ever before. On September 25th 2015, the UNO adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - a set of goals to end Poverty, Protect the Planet, Ensure Prosperity for all. Each goal has specific targets that has to be achieved over the next 15 years. India is a signatory to the SDGs. To quote our Honorable PM Narendra Modi 'India has drawn a roadmap for tackling climate change, and for environment protection by maintaining a balance between present requirements and future vision. Protecting the environment is a matter of faith for us. We have natural resources because our previous generations protected these resources. We should do the same for our future generations' <https://thewire.in/government/india-has-clear-roadmap-for-environment-protection-modi-on-world-environment-day>. The issue of sustainability, is indeed, a major concern across the world. Global warming effects due to carbon dioxide emissions are leading to dangerous consequences. From the Industrial Revolution to Internet Revolution, the world has seen massive changes in the process of trade, commerce and business. The idea is to derive a correlation between 'reckless invasive model of development' and the degradation of environment. The limited natural resources are under tremendous pressure due to rampant spree of production, consumption and also due to inadequate enforcement of environmental laws. Hence, this paper, is an attempt to highlight the need for 'Climate Justice' and how India can along with other countries can offer solutions to this emerging and serious challenge that faces the world.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER:

- To highlight the severity of the problems of environmental degradation in light of the recent natural disasters like unseasonal rains, cloud bursts, floods landslides in Northern India. The paper attempts to relate the recent heavy rainfalls, cloud-burst, landslides in northern India as a testimony to the fact that ecological damage has already taken place.
- To suggest measures to preserve the environment. This paper offers valuable insights from ancient philosophy and practices from India that can be

easily adopted to check the degradation of environment.

- To highlight that the process of economic growth and development needs to be Redefined and Redesigned.
- To emphasize that 'Sustainable Development' is the only way to save Mother Earth.
- To suggests that Governments need to be proactive and enact urgent corrective policy measures to stop further damage. Enactment of sound environmental laws and strict enforcement should be the order of the day.
- To suggests that India has a big responsibility (taken over the G-20 Presidency) and should take this opportunity to achieve the SDGs goals.

Methodology of the study:

The methodology is exploratory, wherein existing knowledge and literature related to the subject was studied. After the review of literature, it came to light that every country has rich ancient knowledge as evident in archeology, texts etc and can offer some interesting ways to tackle the present problems. The future planning for development and growth needs an approach that is nature friendly and is inclusive. Hence, the present study would suggests adoption of practices that are nature friendly and cost-effective too. Rather there should be encouragement to adoption/usage of nature- based products by providing incentives to both consumers and producers.

Review of Literature: Since focus on sustainable development is a recent issue, not much literature is available. Some existing literature, highlight the need for sustainable development but few have discussed the 'urgency' and the methods of the adoption of sustainable practices.

Cliff Ellis (1989) in his work 'History of Cities and City Planning', describes the evolution of cities from the early days to the present days. He mentions that the most important factors that shaped the evolution of towns and cities are religion, politics, military and trade. The industrial revolution brought the role of trade and businesses as an important factor shaping the towns and cities. Shahid, M.(2023) " Were ancient civilizations practicing sustainable architecture". He discusses that ancient civilizations used to live in harmony with nature / practice sustainability. Cities used to occupy limited area and were designed organically in tandem with the geography of the land. He suggests that modern construction should take inspirations to be compatible with goals of sustainability practices. Smith, M.E

(2007) finds that the basic principles and processes of planning urban are similar across cultures but their implementation in designing was different across cultures. Ancient kings built monuments, buildings also to spread ideological messages. He further describes high levels of planning in Mohenjo-daro, Ang-ko-war –vat, Teotihuacan (Mexico), forbidden city in China, He adds that while in the beginning low levels focus on efficiency and practicality led to ‘orthogonal planning pattern of cities’ and later when empires expanded, rulers/kings used political and cosmological factors for planning of cities. Luke. A. Parsons (2023) a Research Scientist at Duke University studies health and well- being impacts of environment and climate changes. He finds that heat losses affects worker’s productivity and hence economic losses to the economy. His research finds that India is at the bulls-eye of climate change and heat impacts on outdoor workers. He points out that Indo-Gangetic plains is the hottest and intense place due to its geographical location and around half of labor lost due to heat happens to be in India. He further highlights that global warming and deforestation are major concerns. He suggests needs for local regulations at the worksites –provision of rest, cool shades, drinking water and prevention of dehydration must be ensured. Choudhury, K. (2022) writes that India is facing environmental challenges like floods, heatwaves, receding ground-water levels. This is having severe economic and social impacts. As large people depend on agriculture, heat waves and floods have led to loss in productivity. She elaborates that India has already embarked on the path to climate action and sustainability measures-protecting the glaciers, banning single use plastics, clean cooking energy, net zero emissions by 2070. Also, India has also launched LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment)- a citizen centric program to tackle climate change by promoting healthy and sustainable lifestyle and adopting circular economy model. She further points out that India has a role to play for emerging markets and other developing countries on how to utilize ‘climate finance’ pledged by the developed countries and also work towards a better world. Majra, J. P. & Gur, A (2009) describe the process of global climate change and its impacts. That over the past decades human actions are greatly contributing to greenhouse gas emissions and hence the climate concerns. Rising temperatures, heat waves, rising sea levels, unseasonal rainfalls are becoming challenges. This will have both direct and indirect effects on humans. India is a large country with high population density and with increasing vulnerability to weather extremes, there is an urgent need for both mitigation and adaptation. This research

paper attempts to fill the research gap by providing solutions both from the past knowledge/ insights from ancient philosophy and practices that can be easily adopted and used along with other policies to check further degradation of environment. Since financial resources will always be a challenge for the developing countries in particular, the research paper wants to highlight that we need to take a holistic approach towards the SDGs. The paper is a sincere attempt at understanding the responsibility of each individual, each nation and all international bodies to form a united force to ‘preserve our Mother Earth’. Finally, the research paper calls for moving from ‘Invasive model of development’ to ‘Inclusive model of development’ to achieve the goals of development.

CAUSES OF EXPLOITATION AND DEPLETION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

1. OVERPOPULATION

India is the most populated country of the world. There is a need to check the rate of population growth rate to achieve the goals of sustainable development. Population and economic development are closely related. Overpopulation leads to pressure on the existing resources. The four factors of production-land, labour, capital and enterprise contribute towards the production of goods and services. However, overpopulation leads to indiscriminate and uncontrolled uses of natural resources that leads to severe problems like global warming and environmental degradation. Thus, overpopulation leads to pressure on the limited resources and is a cause of environmental problems.

AIR- The most important resource given by the Mother Nature and which is indispensable for our existence is under threat. The uncontrolled industrialization and mechanization has led to a severe effect on the quality of air. There are instances of stubble burning, vehicles pollution, smoke from industries etc, which need to brought under severe control and regulation,

LAND- One of the biggest reason for pressure on land is over population. Recently, India took over China as the country with the largest population. It is a matter of concern. Since the area of land is limited, there is high density of population. The lack of opportunities in villages/agriculture leads to migration of population to the urban areas. The slums and jhuggies become centers of such poor people. To add to the woes, such areas lack basic amenities of life and are prone to diseases. Thus, rising population and lack of proper basic amenities leads to social inequalities.

WATER- The most important things for sustaining our life are air and water. We can live a few days

without food but not without water. In the process of economic development and mad rush to industrialize, we have forgotten to take care of our resources. The adoption of 'Green Revolution' in the 1960s may have led Punjab and Haryana to be the granaries of India but there has been depleting of ground water on account of indiscriminate and uncontrolled use of water. We need to devise methods which conserve resources not deplete them. Global warming has led to melting of glaciers, which are the sources of water for many rivers. There is an urgent need to devise alternative models of development which adopts sustainable practices.

2. DEFORESTATION

Forests are the arteries of our existence. The role of forests is immense, not only for the resources it supplies but also the influence it has on climate. The rapid pace of industrialization and urbanization – building of 'concrete jungles' has led to rapid felling of forests. This needs to be checked. Deforestation affects rainfall and hence affects life through its impact on agriculture and flora and fauna. Deforestation has long term impact on the locals/Tribal and their source of livelihood. Sustainable development emphasizes on preservation of forests, flora, fauna and the people, who depend on it.

3. WATER SHORTAGE

Water is a scarce and precious commodity. There is a need to regard water as a scarce commodity more so when we make reckless use of it. As a resource, Water supply is taken for granted. But not anymore. In cities and towns, Municipal bodies collect water tax. Recently, in India, there is a talk of setting up of a 'Commission for water' at the national level.

4. OVERFISHING

One of the issues taken up by environmentalists is the case of overfishing. Since, water comprises three-fourth of the earth, it is imperative that we need to preserve the marine life.

There is a need to check overfishing also because this has led to fall in fish stocks which is not a good sign. Around the globe, most fishing is through trawling. Trawling is one of the most destructive form of fishing because it has vast amount of by catch and hence destroys marine ecology. International body 'GREENPEACE' has focused on the need for 'sustainable fishing'.

5. AGGRESSIVE PROMOTION OF TOURISM AND RAMPANT COMMERCIALIZATION OF LAND:

One of the biggest revenue earnings is through promotion of tourism. In the modern times, there is

emergence of various forms of tourism- Recreational, Environmental, Historical, ethnic, cultural, adventure, medical religion etc. Around the globe, both government and private sector boost to tourism is rampant. It is one of the main reasons for rapid growth of hotels, inns and other stay options in and around the tourist places. There are cases of violations of environmental laws and construction of hotels on the river banks. Mountains are dug out, trees are felled to make way for commercial reasons. There is utter disregard for the law of nature and preservation of sustainability issues. The recent flooding of Kulu-Manali (Himachal Pradesh) is a testimony to the invasive model of progress adopted.

6. GLOBAL WARMING, CLIMATE CHANGE

The rapid process of Industrialization as a path towards enhancing productivity and growth has led to misuse, overuse of the resources. The consequences of this has been rise in carbon emissions and global warming. The global warming is a huge price which mankind has to pay. The melting glaciers, rise in sea levels, unseasonal rainfall, droughts, pandemics are signs of such a disturbance which are unfolding.

7. CONSTRUCTION OF POWER PLANTS, TUNNELS, DAMS ON FRAGILE ZONES

The construction of Hydro-electric Power plants, Dams to fulfill the rising Energy demands have implications on the environment. After the Kedarnath tragedy in 2013, a Supreme Court Bench under Justice Radhakrishnan was set up to find out the impact of construction of Hydro- electric projects on the environment. The Bench expressed deep concern and put a restriction on construction of Hydroelectric Project in Uttarakhand. The recent Joshimath ground slipping, cracks on houses, highways are believed to be the effect of the Tapovan- Vishnugad Hydro-electric power project. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/question-from-the-homeless-in-hills-three-times-since-the-2013-kedarnath-flood-the-judiciary-could-have-helped-prevent-the-joshimath-calamity-but-didnt/>

Environmental practices from our ancient literature that can be adopted for ensuring a sustainable future.

Ancient Indian literature contains a vast reservoir of knowledge on sustainable living practices. The research paper discusses tenets from ancient philosophy to carve a better future. Our Philosophy, Religion, Vedas and Upanishads are believed to contain knowledge on holistic and balanced life, preserving ecological balance.

1. THE COSMOS IS ONE AND INTER-CONNECTED: -'Tat Tvam Asi'-derived from Sanskrit word, meaning 'we are a spark of the

Divine'. Harmonious living and sustainability constitute an essential aspect of this philosophy. That humans along with other living beings are a part of the eco-system and hence the need to protect nature. It also believed in the inter-connection of the 5-elements /Panchh Tatwa with the Cosmos. As per the Vedas, the five elements of space, air, fire, water and earth connect the human lives with a Brahmand/cosmic structure. The interdependence exists in relation to the supreme reality or Brahman. Our ancestors based their livings in close proximity with nature .They were nature abiding and sought blessings from the five elements of nature: Prithvi (Earth), Jal (Water), Vayu (Air), Agni (Fire) and Aakash (Ether). The Vedic laws prescribed practices that help preserve and sustain nature. The human sensory organs are directly linked to these elements, thereby laying the foundation of man-environment relationship. Thus, environment is what exists within and outside the human body-like an inseparable entity and in this philosophy lies the seeds of sustainable development.

2. **WORSHIP OF MOTHER NATURE:** Ancient India literature boast of practices that were meant to protect the environment. Earth was considered to be the manifestation of goddess who provides nourishment, and therefore prayed to by human kind and treated with utmost respect. Tribals/Adivasis and indigenous communities like the Bishnois, Bhils, Kandh, Santhals, Gonds Oram and Swadhyaya have ceremonies and practices that shows their care and respect for environment They believe that it is their responsibility to preserve the nature. In the state of Odisha, a three day festival named Rajjo' is celebrated by the unmarried girls in honor of Mother Earth. The Chipko movement started by Sunderlal Bahuguna wherein, the community women hugged trees to protect them from being cut by vested interests are all proofs of the reverence towards Mother Earth and the need to protect it. He also led the stir against the construction of Tehri Dam. The Narmada Bachao Andolan by Medha Patkar was an effort to stop construction of dam over Narmada to protect displacement, save flora and faunas.
3. **BELIEF IN THE CYCLE OF RE-BIRTH AND KARMA** - the belief in re-birth and karma leads to practice good deeds and attain moksha. The thought that we are an insignificant part of the cosmic structure leads us to lead a harmonious existence with other lives on earth. Our attitude towards environment builds up or negates our

karmic bank balance, decisive for next birth. Man undeniably shares a deep bond with nature at all planes- spiritual physical and intellectual, which calls for balance. The basic tenet of sustainability – ‘live and let live’ is the essence of our ancient philosophies and literature.

4. **FOUR STAGES OF LIFE AS PER HINDU PHILOSOPHY** – Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprashtha, Sanyasa – while all the four stages are based on dharma/duties, the Vanaprashtha and Sanyaasa stage are about renouncement and practice of simple living . Simple living and practice of restraint can lead to conservation and respect for the environment.
5. **AN IMPORTANT TENET IN HINDUISM IS PURUSHARTHA**, which means ‘object of human pursuit.’ It refers to the four main goals in life- Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. While Artha means prosperity and wealth, Kama means pleasure and Dharma refers to virtue, righteousness, moral duty, and responsibility. The above three are called ‘Trivarga’ or three categories. Liberation/Moksha from all the above goals is considered the ultimate goal.
6. **THE EIGHT –FOLD PATH OF BUDDHISM-** Apart from the Upanishads and Vedas, Jain and Buddhist traditions /doctrines were based on the principles of ecological harmony and sustainability. The idea was to blend spiritual and physical practices as moral responsibilities. The Buddhist philosophy is based on the Eight fold paths – Right Understanding, Right thought, Right speech, Right action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right concentration.
7. **PRACTICE OF AHIMSA /NON-VIOLENCE** - Non-violence is the way of good life and prevents us from bad Karma. Ancient philosophies, Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas show us the path to sustainable living. Ancient literature and philosophy believed that all living beings deserve respect, compassion and care. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of our nation believed in Ahimsa /non-violence and used it as a weapon to fight for our independence.
8. **SOCIAL COHESION AND COOPERATIVES:** Ancient Indians attached high importance on community values and relationships. They believed in the common good and strong social cohesion and cooperation that helped ensure sustained prosperity and stability. Each

individual worked for the common good. This practice of social harmony can enhance the atmosphere for compassion and sustainable living.

9. **ANCIENT AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES** were highly close to the nature- Ancient India was based on agriculture and animal husbandry. The farmers undertook crop-rotation, used natural manure like cow-dung. The ancient civilization like Mohenjo-daro, Harappa boasted of sound water management system. The Baolis, dikes and tanks are proofs of efficient water management styles.
10. **ANCIENT ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNS:** The houses in Indus valley civilization were made of mud bricks, Woods, straw. The houses had large windows and doors for proper ventilation and for use of sunlight. The knowledge of water management is evident from the existence of ancient structures like Baolis, Johads, and tanks. We need to revive the ancient practices of water conservation-rain water harvesting and ground water recharging.
11. **LESSONS ON GOOD LIVING-Yoga, Khadi, Ayurveda, Unnani** are some of the practices, which are not only unique contributions from India but also are useful for attaining the SDGs goals. Khadi and Charkha formed the symbol of our freedom movement. India has immensely promoted the Khadi by setting up the Khadi and Village Industries Commission. As per the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME), the production of Khadi fabrics requires lesser water than the other fabrics. The Government encourages the use of solar power through subsidies and promotes Khadi Industries. Hence, promotion of Khadi Industries is a way to sustainable development, as it helps save energy, save water and also generate jobs. The popularity of Yoga is beyond doubt. Yoga is India's best gift towards SDGs. Yoga teaches us to practice good living by controlling our breath, minds and bodies. The declaration of International Yoga Day (June 21st) by the UNO is a great achievement for India. The Setting up of the Ministry of AYUSH, by the Government of India in 2014, to develop research, education and propagation of traditional medicine is a remarkable effort in the direction of sustainable health practices.
12. **PLANT BASED SUBSTITUTES - FROM KULHADS TO BANANA/SAL LEAVES PLATES** –Post- globalization era has seen the pre-dominance in the use of plastics. Plastics

invaded the market as it is cheap and light weight. Since plastic is a non-bio-degradable item, the SDGs goals call for a ban on plastic. India has a lot to offer in this direction. India has not only a rich literature espousing the usages of these plant-based products but can boast of its rich heritage and practices for the world to emulate. Our ancestors' use of Neem sticks as tooth brushes, the use of Reetha/soap nuts are evidences of lifestyles that were eco-friendly. Donnas/Pattals are plates and bowls made from Sal or Banyan/banana leaves stitched together with wooden sticks which were widely used in festivals, wedding ceremonies, and feasts all over India till the cheap plastic substitutes arrived. Though it is still widely used in tribal areas, it is getting a revival in other areas too. Since Kulhads (pottery) and leaf plates are biodegradable, it generates no waste at all. Also, use of such products create employment opportunities and add to the betterment of local people.

Conclusion:

The paper concludes that it is imperative that Governments/policy makers at all levels need to be responsible and enact urgent corrective policy measures to prevent further environmental damage. India has taken over the G-20 Presidency and should take this opportunity to espouse the 'lessons from Indian Philosophy' to preserve its own environment and at the same time learn and rehabilitate Mother Earth. Develop we must, but by adopting a harmonious use of the available resources. Our future depends on our present practices/patterns of living and we cannot afford to destroy the future of our children. Ancient philosophy and literature around the world has strong evidences of mankind's close relation to the environment. Ancient scriptures and Literature from India and the world, also shows the prevalence of sustainable and nature -friendly practices.

Hence, we can derive useful lessons from the past, to build a better and sustainable future. There is a need for harmonious living with nature. In comparison to our ancestors, we are better placed as technology and knowledge is at our command. Hence, we need to act fast to check the imbalances created by our invasive mode of living. The ancient scriptures are proofs that ancestors had wisdom and were respectful to nature and other living beings and ensured sustainable living practices. We should therefore 'arise, awake and stop not till the SDGs goal is reached'. There is no Planet B, so it is our duty to mend our ways and preserve our Mother Earth. The 28th Conference of Parties (COP)

will be held in December 2023 in Dubai. Developing countries have much expectations that developed countries will deliver their promises under the UN Framework Convention (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement (<https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement>). India has a big responsibility to take care of its huge population and also ensure that environmental policies are implemented well. The fruits of development should not be at the cost of environment.

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