Towards a Social Charter for the Environment

Shekhar Singh

Any enlightened and progressive society must develop a broad social consensus on the environment, especially on what needs to be conserved, where, and how. It must also develop the systemic, institutional and individual capacity, and the political and administrative will, to carry forward this agenda. A social consensus on the environment must be based on a realistic appreciation of the state of the environment and a proper understanding of the implications of environmental degradation.

The State of the Environment

The natural environment in India is under severe and increasing threat. It is being destroyed, polluted and overused.

- As against the requirement of a 33% forest cover, only a little over 10% of the land area of India is covered by forests.
- The industrial wood demand on the forests of India is almost three times its annual increment rate.
- The load of livestock on India's forests is currently calculated to be about three times its carrying capacity.
- India's forests are among the least productive in Asia, their average annual productivity of less than 1 cubic metre per hectare being about a fourth of the Asian average.
- Fuel wood extraction from the forests is calculated to be almost thrice the sustainable levels.
- India has among the lowest per capita availability of forests in the world, less than 0.1 hectare per head.
- The annual loss of top soil, by erosion, is estimated to be over 6000 million tons.
- According to estimates, over a third of India's land is affected by soil erosion.
- The area prone to flooding has more than tripled in the last forty years, from 19 million hectares to over 60 million hectares. Ironically, nearly half the districts in India have suffered from both floods and droughts.
- There is rapid degradation and loss of grasslands, deserts, coasts, rivers and marine ecosystems, and related species.

- Riverine and marine fisheries are being severely impacted because of the destruction of spawning areas and high levels of water pollution.
- Recent data suggests that a third of the entire riverine length in the country (about 6000 kms) has moderate to severe pollution.
- According to the Central Pollution Control Board, over 5 million litres of liquid effluents a day flow untreated from polluting industries into the water bodies. Similarly, 17 million litres of untreated liquid effluents flow from urban areas into the water bodies every day.
- According to WHO estimates, over 20% of all communicable diseases in India are due to poor water quality. The proportion is much higher in terms of infant mortality.
- A large proportion of Indian cities have unhealthy levels of air pollution, especially in terms of total suspended particulates (TPS).
- A World Bank study of 36 major cities in India estimates that, annually, there are over 40,000 premature deaths and nearly 2 crore cases of hospital admissions and sickness requiring medical treatment, due to air pollution. The poorer inhabitants of these cities, given their lower standard of living, nutrition, and health, are more susceptible to negative health impacts from air pollution.

Though India is facing an environmental crisis of considerable proportion, its impact on the human society, especially on the poor, is not yet properly appreciated. Perhaps a third of India's population, the poorest third, still depends directly and desperately on nature for their daily requirements of water and energy, and for their livelihoods. For them, the destruction of forests, the drying up of water resources, the depletion of the soils and the over all degradation of the environment is not a disaster waiting to happen but a tragedy that has already occurred.

For many years people have been lulled by the oft-quoted sentiment that "poverty is the greatest polluter". Those responsible for managing the resources of the country have misunderstood this to mean that poverty can be tackled without worrying about the environment and that once poverty is eradicated, the environment would automatically look after itself. It is only now that they are beginning to realise that just as poverty causes environmental degradation, environmental degradation itself is a significant cause of poverty.

Though in recent years there has been an increase in environmental awareness and public action for conservation, this has been effectively neutralised by the rapidly increasing demand for natural resources. The growth in human population, the continued disparities in income and opportunity, and the prevailing trends of globalisation and liberalisation, all conspire to make nature very vulnerable. A large

and growing middle class, aspiring for American and European patterns of consumerism, exacerbates the problem.

India is fortunate in having a strong tradition of conservation, with thousands of sacred sites and frugal habits nurtured for centuries by the people of India. However, though the people of India still desperately need to conserve the environment, they are rapidly running out of time. As a society the Indians are, slowly but surely, committing ecological suicide.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Perhaps one way of assessing the levels of social justice in a society is to determine who uses and controls whose natural resources, for what purpose, and why. The age-old conflicts between societies and nations, for the control of markets have often been preceded by even fiercer conflicts for the control of natural resources. Access to natural resources continues to be a contentious issue among rural communities, and between rural communities and governments.

For nature and natural resources to be managed justly, equity between different segments of this generation of human beings, between this generation and future generations of human beings, and between human beings and other species has to be assured.

Intra Generational Equity

The major intra generation equity issue is: who pays the costs and who reaps the benefits of environmental conservation and use. Historically, rich and powerful nations and people have cornered most of the world's natural resources, transferring the costs of their use on the weaker and poorer nations and communities. In recent times, with the growing awareness of the need to conserve environment, there is the additional tendency to make the poorer nations and, among them, the poorer people, especially the rural communities, bear the costs of conservation. This happens when forest and other areas are closed up and local communities' access and use is restricted. It also happens when factories producing goods for urban consumption use up the water and other natural resources of rural communities, and pollute their rivers and atmosphere. In cities, it happens when the poorer populations are pushed into congested and unsanitary areas, with high levels of pollution, while the rich and powerful for whom they work, keep their own environment healthy and clean. This also happens when the resources needed to maintain the wasteful and ostentatious life styles of the rich and powerful are procured by destroying the environment and

further impoverishing those poor local communities who are dependent on them for their subsistence needs.

Therefore, the major intra generational ethical issue is the promotion of equity among nations and among classes of people, by ensuring that the costs and benefits of environmental conservation and use are fairly apportioned.

Inter Generational Equity

The major inter generation issue is that of sustainability. Is it ethical to use up natural resources to meet the demands, sometimes urgent and genuine demands, of the current generation, if this results in the foreclosing of options for future generations?

Where these demands are to meet wasteful and ostentatious life styles, the answer is relatively easy. However, the answer is far more difficult when the demands are from poor people striving to make two ends meet. It is a difficult ethical dilemma to choose between the survival of the present generation of poor and the survival options of future generations.

Fortunately, the dilemma is rarely such. By and large, the poor are not in conflict with future generations but with the rich and powerful of their own generation. If the natural and other economic resources of the world were more equitably distributed, there would be no need for the poor of the world to destroy their own natural surrounds. Similarly, if the resources within nations were more equitably distributed, the issue of the survival of the poor would not haunt humanity.

Inter Species Equity

In recent years, there has been an increasing recognition that animals have a right to survive and live happy and healthy lives, independent of their utility to human beings. Of course, this is not a new sentiment. In India, as in many of the old cultures the world over, the rights of other living creatures were not only recognised but many of them were objects of awe and reverence. Unfortunately, this ethic has gradually been overtaken by utilitarianism, where nothing has a justification unless it has utility, and that too utility for the human race.

Though there is now a reaffirmation of the rights of all living creatures, it is still in the early stages. The movement against cruelty to animals has also begun to gain support. In any case, there is no evidence to believe that this world was created for human beings alone. Therefore, other life forms must be conserved not just because

such conservation is critical to the present and future generations of human beings but because these other life forms also have a right to life.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

The large and rapidly growing India's population is often blamed for many of the present environmental predicaments. Actually, the environment is threatened more by levels of consumption than by the absolute number of people. If one considers consumption units rather than human units, then the one billion plus people in India are much less of a threat to the environment than the much smaller populations of many countries of Europe and North America, who have much higher rates of consumption. Similarly, within India, the 200 million middle class, and especially the four or five million upper and upper middle class among them, consume far more and have a much greater impact on the environment, than the remaining 800 million. Yet these middle and upper classes focus on images of rural women carrying firewood out of forests considering them as a major threat to the environment, while blissfully sitting in conference halls with central air conditioning, a hundred light bulbs, wall to wall carpeting and wood panelling.

It can, therefore, be argued that even if the population of India were halved, we would not solve our environmental problems if the half that disappeared were essentially the frugal poor and the remaining half grew into being the consumerist middle class. Clearly the pattern of consumption that societies adopt is a central environmental issue.

Nevertheless, arguments about consumption patterns and lifestyles often get misunderstood to be arguments against progress, against technology and even as arguments for going back in time. In this polarised debate, the essential issue is the people's view of human needs and wants. Are the acquisition and multiplication of human needs seen as a regressive or progressive human trait, especially when a privileged few keep acquiring and fulfilling new needs, while the large majority of the people are losing the battle to meet even their original and basic ones?

Basic biological needs are reasonably well defined and include food, clothing, and shelter required for a healthy life. Though basic socio- psychological needs are less well defined and could differ from society to society, they ordinarily have a cultural and historical basis. Acquired physical needs are usually irrelevant to a healthy life and often militate against it, especially when manifested in unhealthy food choices, lack of physical exercise, or an artificial and unhealthy living and work environment, among others. Similarly, acquired socio-psychological needs are essentially irrelevant to the psychological well being or the social functioning of an individual. They are

often acquired or promoted with some other agenda, for example to promote commercial interests. In some cases it can also be an attempt to mimic, or seek the acceptance of, individuals or social groups that are perceived to be superior.

Of course, this does not mean that all that exists in one's own society is necessarily good and all that exists in other societies is necessarily bad. In fact, the need to maintain and promote social and cultural diversity must be balanced against the need to socially evolve. Therefore, positive values and practices must be appropriately adopted, wherever they are found. The problem is in determining what are positive values and practices. There is also the problem of mindlessly copying things that others do, without even being aware of the adverse impacts these might have on oneself and one's society. This happens even when these adverse impacts are obvious in the host societies.

It must also be accepted that individual freedom of choice is a universal value and, though not an unlimited right, it is nevertheless an important right in a democracy. Consequently, an enlightened society will not seek to impose patterns of living and consumption, but will create conditions and circumstances conducive to making rational choices while exercising the right to choose.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT MODEL

The currently prevailing development model, and the economic system inherent to it, have encouraged and supported this increase in consumerism and the resultant waste of natural resources. The current mechanisms of subsidies and price fixation make environmental degradation economically very attractive. Nowhere is the real economic price, or the ecological cost, of degrading the environment reflected in economic calculations.

As current prices make waste cheaper then conservation, there is little incentive to recycle water, paper or other products, or to conserve energy. Nor is there an incentive to use environmentally friendly materials and processes, or to develop such technology. The price of wood, however high, does not reflect even a fraction of the cost of regenerating forests, preventing and mitigating soil erosion, or of the damage caused by floods or droughts, which are aggravated by deforestation. The country's fiscal policies encourage the people to adopt totally inappropriate technologies, materials, processes, lifestyles and development models.

Technologies for destroying nature, and consuming natural resources, are being adopted every day. New processes are being rapidly developed to utilise natural produce, and existing markets are being expanded. However, the effort and

technology for protecting and regenerating nature lags far behind. Much of this ecological irrationality is inherent in an inequitable social system, where only a privileged few can enjoy the benefits of destroying nature, while most others face only the consequences.

The current model of development measures success in terms of consumption indicators. Therefore, increase in per capita consumption of energy or paper, or in per family ownership of cars and houses, are all indicators of development. But these are just the sort of indicators that signal impending environmental disasters. The expansion of the credit system and the drastic lowering of interest rates mean that more and more people can be persuaded to buy more and more things. As consumerism catches on, more and more natural resources are required, and more and more pollutants are emitted.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND DECENTRALISATION

Many urban people are insensitive to nature, and see it only as a resource for their use and consumption. Urban educational and professional institutions reinforce such insensitivity, but also produce and house a large majority of our planners and decision makers. It is these individuals, in control of the government and articulating its social and economic policies, who have so far made decisions about the use of natural resources. It is assumed that the common person is not sufficiently concerned and informed about nature and natural processes, to make responsible decisions. The common person, especially the villager or tribal, is therefore consistently ignored in the decision making process for even those natural resources on which he or she is directly dependent.

But the resultant centralised decisions have forced the villagers and tribals into impossible situations where, in order to survive, they have to surreptitiously degrade "government" forests and lands, thereby alienating themselves from nature, from the governmental machinery and, often, from each other.

Such alienation is inevitable where an individual or community has been isolated from the environment, by acts of the government or other institutions enforcing exclusive control and right to manage. It is aggravated when individuals and communities are denied other ways of earning their livelihood, and forced to destroy their own environment. The alienation is complete when industrial and urban demands are allowed to destroy the environment which local communities, in the name of conservation, were not even allowed to use sustainably.

It has taken over fifty years of experience to learn that the natural environment cannot be protected by Government alone, often because it has to be protected from governmental activities themselves. Besides, environmental reality in India is too varied to lend itself to generalised policies, or to centralised fiats, however well meaning. But, despite this, governmental and other formal institutional structures, including those at local levels, are still without the will and ability to evolve a consensus of opinion, with the people, on the use and protection of natural resources.

They instruct, order, consult, even evoke participation, but are not able to sit with the people and agree on an optimal solution or strategy, based on the understanding, knowledge and experience of all the participants. Efforts are made to "convince" people, to "educate" them, but rarely to listen to them. It is this lack of a national dialogue and consensus that has reinforced patterns of centralised control on the environment and the consequent alienation. It has, in many parts of the country, transformed the traditional social process into a war of attrition which benefits no one, least of all nature. It is justifiable to expect the people of India to conserve their environment, but it has to be ensured that they have a real option to do so.

PRIORITY ACTIONS

The overall objectives relating to the environment must include:

1) the equitable and continued access, for the people of India, to the natural resources vital for their survival,
2) the protection of human health and of the environment from pollutants and other adverse consequences of human activities and enterprises, and
3) the repair and regeneration of degraded ecosystems to restore their ability to provide environmental, social, and economic services.

Within the government, much of the institutional framework required for the conservation of the environment is already in position. There are numerous policy statements and laws, and a central ministry of environment and forests, supported by counterparts in all the States. However, despite this, there is a growing crisis. This is primarily because of the poor application and enforcement of the existing policies and laws, an inability to constructively resolve conflicts of interests within government sectors and levels, a corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy, secretive and non-participatory functioning, an adversarial attitude towards the community and an unclear vision of sustainable development. Therefore, remedial measures could well focus on four priority areas:

- ensuring greater integration of environmental concerns into development planning,
- ensuring greater transparency and answerability of the government,
- ensuring greater participation of the people in decision making and
- ensuring greater ability to resolve conflicts between and within stakeholders.

Some of the specific priority tasks, towards these ends, are listed below.

- **Evolving a consensus on a national strategy for environmental conservation and sustainable development**. Considering the overpowering imperatives within the Indian society, it becomes difficult to hold up the pursuance of economic goals, albeit short-term, on purely environmental grounds. It is important, therefore, to develop and adopt alternate methods of achieving the important economic goals through the use of processes, technologies, and materials which are environmentally sustainable. In fact, it has now become crucial to adopt a model of development which is just and sustainable. But to do this, the thinking and approach of many people has to be changed. This can only be done gradually, by making it progressively difficult to adopt non-sustainable processes, technologies, and even life-styles, and progressively making it attractive to adopt sustainable ones. To this end, a major effort is required to formulate a strategy, which is socially just and environmentally sustainable. This must be evolved as a consensus strategy, with support from all major political parties and other stakeholders, as it can only succeed if adopted by all sectors of the society.

- **Developing and adopting an appropriate system of natural resources budgeting and accounting.** The Government of India and each State Government should prepare and present an annual natural resources budget to the people of India. Such a budget should be based on a realistic assessment of the state of the resources, assessed at village and district levels. These budgets should specify the state of each of these resources, especially their quantity and quality, the change in their state over the year, the measures taken to conserve and regenerate them and, where appropriate, the proposed allocations, in physical terms. The allocations of these resources, for example of water or of land, should be based on a national water and land use plan which appropriately allocates resources for control by different levels of the society, from the village to the nation, and for diverse uses. For example, it would allocate, for human use, the surplus waters of rivers and lakes, beyond what is required for maintaining their ecological balance. Similarly, it would allocate surplus forest resources, or land.

The proportion allocated for different types of use, after holding back what is required for ecological sustainability, would reflect the settled priorities of the social group in control of those resources. These social groups would, therefore, determine what can be allocated sustainably, being the agreed "surplus", for local use and how much for diversion to urban areas, to industry, or for development projects. The "revenue" of such a budget would consist of "income" through, for example, the planting or regenerating of forests, the enhancement of water availability through catchments area treatment or conservation, or the availability of clean air and water through progressive control and prevention of pollution. The financial budget of the Government, and the plans of Central Ministries and State Governments, needs to be finalised within the parameters of the natural resources budget. Perhaps the Planning Commission, largely irrelevant in its present form, can be redesigned to be a commission for sustainable development, with a chunk of resources to catalyse environmentally sustainable paths to economic growth.

- **Insisting on a 'class benefit' analysis of commercial, industrial and development projects and activities**. Currently, most commercial, industrial or development projects in India are required, by law, to be subjected to an environmental impact assessment and to seek environmental clearance from the appropriate government authority. Where forestland is involved, forest clearance is also required. In addition, development projects funded through public funds also have to have a favourable cost benefit assessment. However, in all this there is no requirement to assess the social impact of the project and it is assumed that if, over all, the financial and economic benefits are adequately more than the corresponding costs, the project must be socially beneficial. However, such an approach does not take into consideration the distributional aspects of the project, and the stratified nature of the Indian society. For example, one can have a project whose economic benefits are three times the economic costs, but if most or all of the costs are being paid by the poor and most or all of the benefits are going to the rich, it cannot be considered to be a socially beneficial project. Unfortunately, though lip service is paid to equity issues at the macro level, they are very rarely addressed at the project level. Therefore, it is imperative that each project be subjected to a 'class benefit' analysis, to determine who pays the costs and who reaps the benefits.

- **Making the environmental impact assessment (EIA) system transparent, participatory and effective.** Despite the legal requirement for EIAs and environmental clearances, numerous environmentally destructive projects are being taken up. This is primarily because of the inability of the system to ensure credible EIAs and to immunise itself from political and administrative pressures.

There is also an inability to enforce the prescribed environmental safeguards. What is required is an EIA system that is transparent at every stage and that makes it legally mandatory to share all the data and to have an informed public hearing at the design, assessment and clearance stages. Environmental clearances, when given, should only be valid for a period of three years and should be renewed every three years only after a public hearing and only if it can be established that the prescribed environmental safeguards were fulfilled.

- **The provision of alternate sources of biomass and incomes should become legally mandatory when traditional access to natural resources are curtailed or discontinued.** The conversion of areas into reserved forests, national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, and of other types of protected areas usually means a reduction or loss of access, for human communities traditionally dependent on the natural resources therein. In order to prevent the resultant deprivations, especially in terms of access to biomass and livelihoods, it should be made legally mandatory on the Government to provide them access to alternative and matching resources, where necessary by enhancing productivity through enhanced investments and management.

- **Displacement of human populations should be minimised and only done voluntarily.** Displacement of human populations should be envisaged only as a last resort in the "rarest of rare" cases. Wherever ecological considerations make it inevitable, the effort should be to ensure that people move out voluntarily because of the rehabilitation being provided, and not because of coercion. Ideally, forest dwellers should, at best, be moved to the periphery of the forest where they can maintain their links with their forest heritage and also avail of health and educational facilities, and electricity, roads and communications.

- **Conservation and regeneration of the environment needs to be linked to a universal right to work.** It is an important social objective to be able to assure to every Indian the right to a minimum of 180 days of basic (unskilled) employment. Providing employment to people in soil and water conservation work, and in regenerating wastelands and degraded forests, is not only perhaps the most economic of the options but would also have significant environmental and economic benefits. Therefore, the regeneration of degraded ecosystems should be taken up on a priority basis as a means for providing local level employment and for enhancing availability of water and locally needed biomass.

- **Setting up systems that allow intensive public monitoring of the environment and of governmental efforts to protect and regenerate it.** Though there is now a national freedom of information act and freedom or right to information acts in

11

various States as well, the systems by which transparency is to be operationalised in the environment sector are not yet in position. A lot of the critical information on the environment needs to be *suo moto* publicised. This includes information about levels of air and water pollution, levels of hazards in the environment, in food stuff and in the home or office, the sources of these pollutants of hazards, their impact on people's health, the steps that the government is taking in preventing pollution and hazards and the measures that the public can take to protect themselves. Similarly, the huge amounts of money being spent on planting trees must also be publicly monitored and details of the plantations, the survival rates, the cost, along with remote sensing images of the area before and after plantation should be regularly made public. A list of the information that, on a priority basis, needs to be made public and the system by which this can best be done, needs to be developed.

- **Giving incentive to the public to monitor pollution.** Once information about the effluents from various industries and municipal facilities is in the public domain, a system needs to be developed whereby members of the public with the necessary skills can collect samples and have them tested in designated laboratories. Where industries or other facilities are found violating the prescribed pollution norms, a proportion of the fine levied on them can be paid to the concerned members of the public, as an incentive.