

# OF ENVIRONMENT AND MAN

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When I was a kid, my favorite pastime was to take a walk along the Khoai River in the afternoon. I used to watch the busy river traffic – numerous country boats of all size and shape, some with colorful sails, ply through the swiftly flowing river. In the winter, the dry river banks would be covered with turtles, laid on their back, which were a delicacy to the local Hindu community. Later, when one of my school teachers taught me how to fish, it soon turned out to be a very exciting and rewarding hobby. For a bit of patience, the river would always reward me with its bounty.

Of course, I had my share of fun time doing other adventurous things that most kids used to do at that time – flying kites, playing football and ha-do-do, and stealing seasonal fruits and flowers off the neighbors' properties.

After some three decades later, I still recollect these happy memories. Sometimes I wish I could go back to that worry free time of pure joy, wonder and adventure. At least, I wish I could share these with my own children. Then, I get forced to the sad but inevitable realization – the world has changed a lot since my childhood days, even the sleepy little town where I grew up.

Now, the river that flows around the town is all but a shadow of what it used to be – diverted and trained by high embankments. A few diehard anglers still try their luck in the river but it has little to offer. Gone are the turtles, sail boats, ponds, gardens and the vast open playing fields. Instead, what I get to see are houses and more houses, shopping centers, roads leading to every nook and corner, and the impossible traffic.

No more do I hear the robins singing early morning songs as I take a walk down the allies and the backstreets – most of the large, shady trees are gone, so are the birds. Instead, I get exasperated by the pungent smell of garbage piled up at almost every street corner. Deafening horn almost knocks me down even in the early hours when the city is just about to wake up. As the morning slowly succumbs to the noon, the scorching sun rises high in the sky and angrily looks down upon this crippled township through the veil of smog, probably wondering about the self-destructing plight of its population.

This scene makes me anxious – what have we done to our habitat? Can we turn back the tide of damage and destruction of the environment? These thoughts probably strike the minds of many and make them feel helpless, confused, even desperate. I make an attempt here to share my views on these concerns, particularly

with today's youth. They are the ones who will write tomorrow's history.

First of all, we know that the root cause of many of the environmental problems is the rapid population growth all over the world, more so in the developing countries. Each new person added to the population means new demands for food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, education, entertainment and so on. How do we meet these demands? By taking resources or raw materials from nature and converting those to goods and services that satisfy human needs. While doing this, we inevitably cause damage to the natural environment. For example, to grow more food to feed the hungry population – we take away land from nature – which leads to clearing more forests or filling up more wetlands. Thus, we continue to create an ever increasing mark on the natural environment – our ecological footprint gets bigger and uglier.

But the story does not end here. We use technology to transform inputs into outputs and no technology is hundred percent efficient – there is always some waste or residuals. Moreover, once the useful life is over, all goods that we produce turn into “throw away” waste materials. Where do we dispose these? The more we demand, the more we produce, the more we pollute and the more waste we end up with.

Then what is the solution? We cannot commit mass suicide of course – life must go on. But the direction it is presently heading is nothing but slow poisoning and death. Our air is polluted, so are our water and land. We have no place to hide or escape – we have to think clearly and seriously. Our own future is at stake, so is the future of our offspring. We have to learn how to manage things better – both the resources we use and our demands for those resources.

The first idea – managing the resources – is linked with the concept of sustainability. We want development to take place in such a way that the resulting lifestyle or standard of living can be sustained and enjoyed for a long period to come. This has to happen without much external help, in fact globally speaking, there is no source of external help at all. We, as humans, have inherited this planet from our ancestors and will hand it over to our offspring. Between these two generations, we are simply the stewards of this planet called earth, of which we should take good care, and which we must not plunder and spoil.

We begin by taking a thorough account of what we have – both renewable and non-renewable resources. The former we have to manage so that its supply in the

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future is not threatened. The latter, technically, cannot be sustained for ever – we have to use it wisely till we find a suitable substitute. We may have to discover or invent a new alternative should the need be, until then we have to be frugal. We have to preserve and protect resources, particularly, biological resources, when there is a threat of irreversible damage. Otherwise, we conserve our precious resource base – put it to use to meet human needs but do not deplete or degrade it beyond its natural rejuvenation capacity.

We live in a techno-centric society. It is not conceivable going back to the pre-historic times when ancient men lived in harmony with nature and created little impact on the environment. Technology is a two-edged sword: if used wisely, it is a boon; if used without any thought about the consequences, it is a curse. Take for example, the case of nuclear power. It is like the genie from the Arabian nights – if out of control it may wipe out human civilization from the face of earth; on the other hand, if the dream of “cold fusion” is materialized, nuclear power can help solve the energy crisis for ever. It is up to us to determine how best to take advantage of the technological progress – the possibilities are limitless. If misused, it can bring about our ruins; if used prudently it can help us save the world.

How do we bring about these changes? Often we complain that we do not have the right system in place – this is a serious and real concern. Our institutions are old and slow to keep pace with the rapidly changing world. Our administration lacks the knowledge and the initiative to understand the environmental consequences of development activities – often which are undertaken in a fragmented manner. They need to see and appreciate the population-development-environment linkage and adopt a holistic view while making long term plans. Note that I use the term “development,” as oppose to “growth.” I propose to seek pleasure and happiness through enhancing the quality and nature of consumption, rather than increasing the amount of consumption.

The issue of increasing environmental awareness is very important. We have to take initiatives to inform and educate the public – we have to tell them what the environment is, what it does for us, and how we alter it or damage it. We also have to incorporate environmental education in the formal education programs from the very beginning. Developed nations are introducing “green education” even at the pre-school levels to ensure that the future citizens grow up with the right attitude and values towards the environment. We should learn from their experiences. The role of informal education is no less important – it is good that the media has become more sensitive to environmental issues lately. Through innovative programs such as song, play, targeted advertisement, documentary and movie, it is possible to inform and motivate people, especially those who live in rural and remote areas.

However, educating people and changing their behavior is not a trivial job by any means. Today we live in a global society which is connected through the satellite, Internet and mobile phone. Mobility of people from country to country has also increased tremendously. In this new world era, it is difficult to remain closed to the influence of the outside world – particularly of the dominant economies and culture of the west. The western civilization is driven by materialism – an average individual in the west consumes many times more mineral and energy resources compared to an individual in a developing country. The former also creates more waste and contributes to more pollution. This is certainly not a desirable model of lifestyle. Unfortunately, this is exactly what an average citizen of a developing country strives for. A few can actually achieve it – but for the vast number of poor, this target is impossible due to the resource constraints they face. In the long run, the present day spend thrift merriment is simply unsustainable. We have to realize that happiness comes from inner peace – which is what we should be looking for. Time and again, great minds have asserted that the secret of happiness lies in consuming less and giving more. We have to make some restraints and be more responsible – towards us, towards the future generations, and towards the life on earth at large.

Only a fundamental change in our mindset can bring us back on the path of a better and happier future.