

Our Common Future

Prospects and Possibilities

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The struggle between man and nature is eternal. Several hypotheses on natural "action" and man's "reaction" have been contemplated but man remains subservient to nature's will and paradoxically enough, more so because of his increasing knowledge. Nature's degradation implies man's loss and man can respond intelligently by better management of resources, removal of politico-economic boundaries and bringing about equity in knowledge, consumption and population size. Mankind needs a new charter- social, economic, political and "Our Common Future" gives us just that.

Natural resources, both as a stock and as a flow are limited. As against this man's desires, which sooner than later become demand, are unlimited. Sustainability, therefore, is not feasible with limited natural resources, set against unlimited human needs. The struggle between nature and man, therefore, is inevitable unless appropriate steps are taken to bring greater balance between human needs and natural resources. At present there appears to be a continuous battle between nature's resolve to preserve itself against all odds and will of man for unbridled control over nature to meet its various needs. In power struggle between man and nature though man appears to win, nature will prevail ultimately.

Universe as an Integral Whole

Nature created the world and provided for it as an integral whole. Sustainability of its parts was neither contemplated by nature nor provided for. The wise and knowledgeable man, instead, divided the world into several parts creating multiple political, economic and social boundaries. This not only restrained population groups to limited areas but also made it necessary that multiple micro equilibria obtain each suited to equilibria came into conflict with its own population group. Apart from the fact that sum total of welfare of any set of micro-equilibria will fall short of the possible welfare in a total equilibrium, often these micro with one another sometime leading to turmoil and even war.

Thus, Nature lost, not only on the oneness of its world, but also in keeping its parts in their place and out of mischief.

Southern Hemisphere as a Reserve

Nature made moisture and heat as preconditions for the existence of new life. It, perhaps, had expected that life largely will arise in the southern hemisphere where moisture and heat was in abundance, with northern hemisphere largely remaining frigid and uninhabited. This land mass, nature may have provided, shall remain available to mankind as a kind of reserve. Nature had not provided for any large scale habitation of the North. But its habitation came about fairly fast and in nature's scheme of things, pre-maturely, supported by human intelligence and an industrial revolution. Thus, whereas a conducive climate helped multiply humanity in the south, somewhat unnatural development of a possessive powerful and knowledgeable population in the north prevented it from evenly distributing itself across the globe.

Role of Knowledge Person

Nature in its original calculus did not provide for the knowledgeable man. It created animal and vegetable kingdom which was expected to reinforce and preserve itself and its various elements through a balance of production and reproduction on one hand and mutual consumption/destruction and automatic destruction/degradation on the other. This included the balancing calculus of superior and inferior species, one feeding upon the other. Also the provision by nature of immense capabilities of reproduction so as to ensure survival for its various species under all odds.

Included in the variety of inferior (superior?) species was the four legged animal later known as homosapiens. One day along the history this animal, which was vulnerable to several of the more powerful species of nature found itself being able to balance on two feet instead of four. This left its front feet free to do errands for it which helped it meet its basic needs of food and shelter in much

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less time than before. This also saved it time to develop its mental faculties at a speed much faster than would have been possible under the circumstances of its nomral/natural habitat and life style. And it gradually used those faculties to subjugate nature, at least, in its several micro settings by building shelters, establishing cultivated sources of food and industry etc. This micro subjugation of nature today, collectively, has become large scale interference in its functioning. And nature's response to this large scale human intervention in its functioning is becoming a cause of concern because some perceptions suggest that nature will insist on its own survival and ultimate balance, even if in the process considerable harm is done to the survival of "knowledgeable" man.

Nature Response

Nature now is losing on the collective effects of these three: the knowledgeable man, the overinhabited world and the over divided world. None of these are reversible. All of these can, however, be moderated if sufficient consciousness prevails that human ingenuity is inadequate to meet the nature's nemesis, as nature has proved, time and again, in several natural calamities, the frequency of which, with the passage of time, appears to increase. Mankind has, available to it, limited time before nature, in its raw form, takes over. Guess estimates on time available can vary from a few centuries to a few decades, depending upon how man conducts its affairs through future years. But Mankind is inescapably on a path leading to nothingness, a "shoonya", a zero, a void. It can only delay its journey, if it so wishes and works for it.

Nature, in the beginning of things provided for all its creatures and creations, including man, an inner will to survive and secure for itself the best and the maximum in the circumstances in which it finds itself. It provided for each one of them a process of filtration by which it would absorb and retain what is good for it and reject what is not. Nature made no exception to this rule for any of its species.

Man not only is subservient to this natural will, but is compounding this through possession of knowledge, quite disproportionate to the rest of the species. In fact its additional draw upon the resources of nature for its own service is more

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than proportional to even its collective improvement of knowledge. And there is no reason to believe that as its knowledge advances as a collective entity, its draw upon natural resources will decline or become moderate. On the contrary it will continue to multiply at a rate faster than its accumulation of knowledge. And this will bring mankind face to face with nature in the form of a challenge to the survival of either. In this challenge permanence of nature is pre-assured, it is the transient or temporary character of mankind which is writ large. Whether it is ozone layer, or rising of the sea, or heating of the biosphere or all of these and several others is a matter of conjecture.

Time available to mankind, therefore, become a matter of debate and planning. And planning would include use of knowledge in a manner as to make meeting of pre-agreed equitable (?) human needs through more nature friendly processes of production and consumption. This will need to be done through extensive sharing of knowledge and information regarding methods of production and processing, consumption, recycling etc. Will those who know share it with those who do not, if so, on what condition and at what price and who pays for it? These questions need to be answered.

Till then, the world appears to be moving in a vicious circle. Adam Smith taught centuries ago that the good of each adds up to the good of all and so of society. Society following this to its logical rigour discovered much later that pursuing the good of each led only to the good of some at the cost of many others. It also discovered that even this good of some was being achieved at a great cost to the system by way of depletion and pollution of natural resources. And if this good of some extends to all in the manner it is now understood its price by way of degradation of nature may be unbearable and might lead to the breakdown of the system that sustains life on this planet. A well considered intervention is, therefore, much warranted. Part of the intervention could be better management of the numbers together with better management of its life style. Interestingly enough power struggle between man and nature is one area where numbers do not lend strength to the man against nature. They only weaken its case. So does high consumption.

Some Suggestions

Mankind thus, is living on borrowed time. It can substantially extend its life by (i) abolishing political, economic and social boundaries; (ii) bringing about equity in population density; (iii) equity and moderation in consumption (iv) more equitable and positive use of knowledge and (v) better management of numbers and its life style. First two are not feasible; third and fourth are near impossible. Fifth has already received considerable attention with very low response rate. But efforts in this direction are to continue, perhaps largely through the UN system.

One may argue that if nature was to challenge the mankind that if (i) and (ii) do not happen within a specified time limit, world will cease to exist, probably the Governments of the day, howsoever emotional they may be about sovereignty and all that will yield and surrender their sovereignty to the extent necessary to save the world, and themselves with it, from total annihilation. But proposition (iii) that is, bringing about equity in consumption, is beyond the prowess of the rulers of the world. It is against the law and will of the nature itself. A species of nature is not expected to give up what it can acquire and hold. It will, therefore, require an extraordinary effort on the part of man to discipline itself in a manner that contradicts its own nature.

Apart from the inherent difficulty in moderating consumption arising from basic human nature, the additional difficulty is that making such discipline universal. In today's world context where information is universal, but means and resources are not, to depend upon some to moderate their consumption against extravagance of several others is to bring disparities in consumption into a sharper focus with attendant consequences of mutual hatred and human decay. And first victim of this decay is law and order followed by chaos and ultimately, perhaps, war, because nations and socio-political groups today, in their collective psyche, behave no better than Freudian individuals or the original species of nature with all their self seeking characteristics.

Proposition (iv), that is, knowledge, has also come to be treated as another form of property to be acquired with as much zeal and concern as any other commodity of consumption and production and not to be shared as sages

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may have ordained. Knowledge is power and differentials in knowledge today are becoming an important factor in power equation or lack of it. Equitable distribution of knowledge thus has the same problems as equitable distribution of assets or consumption.

Thus, almost all the causes of degradation of nature have their genesis in basic human nature and the inequity that has arisen because of it. The response has to be greater equity together with moderation. Also in population density. If, in addition, a global social and economic equilibrium can be obtained which transcends national boundaries, we will be closer to saving the mankind and its happiness for a long time to come. Better management of numbers and their life style can further help in this direction, but what new strategies are to be adopted in this direction is a matter for serious thought and action.

Possibilities

The saving grace is that humanity has done well so far to preserve itself and survive. Mankind fairly early in its development process realized that whereas seeking the best for itself was natural to it, it could do so only in a systematic framework. So it gave itself the framework of the State and the Government and the rules and regulations that go with it. But States, overtime, instead of providing an environment of equity and justices for its population, became some kind of collective or giant individuals with immense collective knowledge and power, competing with each other to acquire the best for itself, as nature had ordained for each individual member of its various species, with an appropriate system of retribution built into it. That system of retribution has now to come into play not only for each member of different species of nature but also for these collective entities described as States and Governments. Nature, thus, has to respond, at two levels, the individual and the collective. And nature's response will depend upon the conduct of these entities both at individual and collective level with one major concern that, in the ultimate, nature must prevail.

And if mankind both in its individual and collective forms can respond intelligently to its own needs and those of nature and react positively to owe

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towards equity in density of population, consumption and knowledge, lowering of borders dividing societies socially, economically and politically and better managements of its numbers, at least a beginning would have been made towards its collective survival. And if it moves in the direction of its own sustainability several implications for production, investment and reordering of world economic, social and political order will follow.

The main features of this reordering will be a better life for many who now lead a disadvantaged and deprived life at a marginal cost to those who live beyond nature's means. With the knowledge and capabilities that man has developed it is easy to estimate available nature's means and if mankind can agree to share these means equitably both at a point of time and in an inter-temporal time frame, nature's sustainability would have been ensured. A new social contract is required both intra-State and inter-State, between the people and the Government of each country and between people's of the world and nature such that wisdom already gained by mankind is put to greater use in such manner that human welfare, both short and long term, does not come in conflict with its own survival. But will the leaders of mankind agree to this and know how to implement it?

Another area of immediate concern and with considerable possibilities for well being of the humanity is that of manufacture of and trading in arms. That no arms will cross national frontiers is one step to sustainability. Limiting production programmes can be second major step which will free considerable resources which can not only be utilized to improve general well being but will also reduce threat to human survival which comes from massive arms build up, as at present.

Conclusion

To conclude, in the current state of world development and world thinking the few major solutions to the problem of sustainability as identified here are, on their own, either not feasible or not possible unless very special efforts are made in this regard. Serious thinking, therefore, has to be done to make these feasible and possible. The mankind will have to give itself a new social, economic and political charter, eschews culture of the vulture, and provides for a form of Government which is human, equitable and just across all social, economic and

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political groups of population inhabiting the universe, just like it gave itself the form of a State and the Government in the beginning of the process of intelligent development, so that its survival and development was not threatened by the will of the nature in which the weak were to be devoured by the strong and what else.

This is a tall order. However, much would have been achieved if mankind, at least at the UNCED, declares that these are our goals and proceeds to identify ways and means to achieve these. If such a declaration comes forth substantial, further work of detail will have to be taken up in the direction of the possible, since that is the imperative for human survival. A world commitment to such objectives is almost a precondition to further thinking and work in these areas. Otherwise, mankind is already proceeding towards an abyss with an ever increasing inclination of its gradient and the void closing in. Thereafter, the world will cool down, seas will find their level and ozone layer will be re-formed.

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