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Environmental conservation: A look at the rural scenario

ALTERNATIVE VIEWPOINT

Dhrubajyoti Ghosh

THE nineties have seen important strides being taken to protect the urban environment. Most of the major cities in developing countries have set specific urban environmental agenda and have implemented them in part. But the time has not been as happy for rural residents. This is surprising, because areas of environmental concern are no less critical in the countryside, neither is the population living there less numerous than the cities.

Failure to ask for a rural environmental agenda is fundamentally a failure to grasp the colossal lack of ecological security that is rapidly declining with time in the countryside. It will be too naive to imagine that this inglorious forgetfulness is an accident. It may not be out of place to remember that one major change is increasingly visible globally - most public decisions are becoming business decisions. Any reader having any doubt about this postulate is requested to refer to the profile below enlisting the priorities for those who run the world.

Priorities for those who run the world: A profile of shame

(All expenses in billions of dollars)

Military spending in the world	780
Narcotic drugs in the world	400
Alcoholic drinks in Europe	105
Cigarettes in Europe	50
Business entertainment in Japan	35
Basic health and nutrition	13
Perfumes in Europe and USA	12
Reproductive health for all women	12
Ice cream in Europe	11
Water and Sanitation for all	9
Cosmetics in USA	8
Basic education for all	6

(Based on the 1998 Human Development Report data)

UNDP deserves applause for bringing out so unambiguously the strength and solidarity of business interest vis-a-vis public need.

Interestingly, UNDP, in its latest Human Development Report has given a call for a second green revolution for the world's poorest. A note of caution follows which says that this should not just repeat the first revolution - "it needs to aim at increasing yields and incomes and at preserving and developing the environmental base." We in India may entitle ourselves to assess the merit of such suggestions keeping in mind the horror that the first green revolution has unleashed on our agriculture.

A closer scrutiny of the first green revolution will be a legitimate enquiry to begin with. It is true, temporarily though, that the first green revolution considerably enhanced the grain output of the country. After the initial years of success, farmers were using chemical fertilisers desperately and indiscriminately to keep up productivity. As a result, the land has lost humus content and is set to become vast tracts of wasteland. There are scientific reports on different aspects of pesticides use that bring to light a scary picture. However, their impact on the Indian population has perhaps still not been properly assessed. It is little understood that the effect on population due to overuse of chemical input spreads all over. This is because the carriers are foodgrains and vegetables produced in the villages that reach the consumers in far-off distances.

Indian villages, only 30 years ago, were self-reliant units that hardly needed help from

the world outside to sustain their life and livelihood. Things have changed in many cases beyond redemption. Introduction of seed, fertiliser and pesticides has transformed the countryside to an extent that a 'new ecological order' has set in. The alien interventions from far outside village have transformed a reasonably autonomous system into an externally regulated enterprise. In the new order the traditional knowledge of farmers of their productive ecosystem, has been made ineffective.

Farmers have nearly lost their heritage, their age-old control over conditions of production as well as means of production. The green revolution has single-handedly caused near-complete surrender of the right to self-determination and autonomy of the village folk.

The problem is further aggravated by the fierce promotion of manipulated seeds that are set to deal the most severe blow to our agricultural diversity, rural economy and farmers' freedom. These matters are being negotiated at international regimes like WTO, TRIPs and UPOV. But even in our wildest dreams it is difficult to see the interest of the poorer countries being defended at any level.

If 'revolution' is understood as an event where the people gain power, one will also have to recognise 'counter revolution' as an event where people lose power. If the rise in grain output deserves to be recorded as first green revolution, it will be an act of dishonesty not to define the simultaneous and devastating fall-out on our farmers and agricultural land, the near total loss of self-reliance and a rich agricultural heritage, as the 'first green counter-revolution of India'. Counter-revolution is not any freak of history. The supremely powerful giants of agri-business through their flawless network spread over the villages of India are forcing farmers to enhance use of chemical inputs or to use manipulated seeds in an act of cold-blooded design.

The transition from the limitations of the not-so-good first green revolution to the good second revolution without the defects of the first is not easy. For any such goal to be achieved, it is important to anticipate and assess the barriers. The enemies of the village people, village eco-systems and the country's biological wealth are too powerful to be changed by sporadic efforts of outstanding environmentalists or local organisations. There is enough research that proves beyond doubt the hidden coercion of agri-business interests. There have also been successful experiments to restore ecological balance in the degraded lands. But the work of empowering the ecologically handicapped remains a non-starter in the absence of an adequately capable organisation that can provide leadership to uproot the 'green counter-revolution' inflicting irreparable damages to our land and bio-diversity resource base.

Discussing effects of the first green revolution does not exhaust areas of rural environmental concern. Even after 50 years of independent most villages do not have access to minimum living conditions. An alarming 86 per cent of them has no sanitation and 21 per cent have no safe drinking water. No wonder water borne diseases still plague our villages alarmingly. Yet the budget provision for rural sanitation and safe drinking water is less than 2.4 per cent of the total plan expenditure (Source: Economic Survey, 1998).

(To be concluded)

The author is a UN Global 500 laureate and a member of the National Committee on Lakes & Wetlands. He has developed a farmer-centred approach to waste-water utilisation and treatment which is considered a leading option under the Ganga Action Plan

FRIDAY, MAY 28, 1999

Chalk out environmental agenda for villages

This is the concluding part of the article titled: Environmental conservation: A look at the rural scenario

THE task is two-fold. The first is to initiate a rural environmental agenda and second task is to ensure a leadership capable of mobilising the village people to thwart the march of agri-business interest set to plunder and destroy the natural resource base of our country.

Initiating and developing environmental agenda for villages already invaded by synthetic inputs for raising grain crop will require to address, in the first place, the problem of ecological degradation due to excessive use of chemical inputs and manipulated seeds. This is followed by the lack of access to the basic conditions of living, especially for the village women and children (e.g. safe drinking water, toilet or a clean smoke free kitchen). These two areas of concern will each have a proactive and a preventive component.

For ensuring ecological security, the proactive components will include steps to reduce chemical fertilisers and pesticides by using bio-fertilisers and integrated pest management techniques, ensure wise use of water, water bodies and wetlands and enhance crop choice for sustainable diversity including bringing back the local plant varieties into beneficial use. Complementing these proactive steps, another set of preventive steps will require community-level solidarity to deny any transfer of local bio-diversity stock, deny any use of agricultural plot for multinational experiments, prevent use of banned pesticides and overuse of all kinds of chemical inputs in agriculture.

Similarly, for enhancing access to the minimum conditions of living, the proactive part will require initial steps like provisions of toilet for every village woman and a clean kitchen for every rural family, access to safe drinking water for all and improving village health services. On the basis of the above conceptual structure, it will not be difficult to construct local level agenda for the villages. Who can meet this challenge head on, remembering that a community safety net to ensure ecological security cannot be built without the solidarity of the victims of disorder, i.e. the millions of people in the countryside? Such a task depends singularly on the unfailing political commitment coming from the highest levels. The strongest organisation available at the disposal of rural people to herald their cause is the political organisation of which they are a part. None other than a political leadership can suppress the strength and power of agri-business interest rooted so firmly in our country.

The best example in defence of this thesis is the work of land reform that has been carried out in West Bengal. That land reform was necessary was well known. If it were only a challenge of good governance it would have happened earlier. It had to wait for a determined political organisation backed by definite political strategy to step in and execute the programme. Interwoven through these two areas of the rural environmental agenda will be an awareness programme. A properly developed and implemented awareness programme for the villages assumes significance more than ever before to help restore ecological security in the countryside. Environmental awareness programmes in villages, specially in regions with low literacy rates, will however, be of an entirely different mould from existing forms.

To be effective, any awareness programme of this kind will have to be linked up with the life and livelihood of the village people. The conventional 'free standing' environmental awareness programmes, that invariably assume an educated target group with an education system in place and take the time of learning for granted, will be completely ineffective in most Indian villages where a high degree of illiteracy still prevails.

The integration can work best by virtue of establishing a dialectical transformation in which the villagers work to learn and with the lesson obtained, go to work where they learn further, and so on. This is how they can question every step they take and make it surer.

A successful completion of any environment awareness drill should enable the villagers learn about:

- The nature and status of village resources and sustainable ways of managing them, and also about adopting appropriate technology/resource system.

- Major environmental threats

- Assessment of environmental damages

In 1968 addressing the Agricultural Science Congress section of Indian Science Congress at Varanasi, Dr MS Swaminathan stated that "Exploitive agriculture offers great possibilities if carried out in a scientific way, but pose great dangers if carried out with only an immediate profit motive. The emerging exploitive farming community in India should become aware of this. Intensive cultivation of land without conservation of soil fertility and soil structure would lead, ultimately, to springing up of deserts. Irrigation without arrangements for drainage would result in soils getting alkaline or saline. Indiscriminate use of pesticides and herbicides could cause adverse changes in biological balance as well as lead to an increase in incidence of cancer and other diseases, through the toxic residues present in the grains or other edible parts. Unscientific tapping of underground water will lead to the rapid exhaustion of this wonderful capital resource. The rapid replacement of numerous locally adopted varieties with one or two high-yielding strains in large contiguous areas would result in the spread of serious diseases capable of wiping out entire crops. Therefore the initiation of exploitive agriculture without a proper understanding of the various consequences of every one of the changes introduced into traditional agriculture, and without first building up a proper scientific and training base to sustain it, may only lead us, in the long run, into an era of agricultural disaster rather than one of agricultural prosperity."

We do not have lot of time before we reach a point of no return. This is a vital concern for sustainable living. A rural environmental agenda is a critical need. Here we require appropriate political leadership to restore ecological security in the countryside. This is the pathway to bring back hope for the helpless farmers subjugated by the mercantile ecological order spreading all over, where they are forced to negotiate with increasingly hostile conditions of production now being aggressively determined in international regimes like WTO, UPOV or TRIPs.

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