

Sustainable Futures

By Ashok Agrwaal

When we talk about unsustainability, we should be clear that not only is the future unsustainable but the present also. And, therefore, the past was also unsustainable. In fact here lies the difficulty about all the efforts at building an “alternate” world view. We are all intent on salvaging the present (and the past). This is not possible and, will not result in any meaningful outcome. I know it is very difficult to persuade people to give up their present. It sounds/ seems as if one is asking them to disincorporate, dissolve, die. But that is not the case. To give up the present (and the past) in this context means to acknowledge/ recognise that in many significant ways the last few hundred years of human life have moved along a path that is a dead end. It did not lead to “progress”, “growth”, “development” (and many other words), etc.

In fact, the European notion of expansion, growth, etc, along a linear path was wholly misconceived. This does not negate everything that they thought and did during this period. But it is not possible to make a selection from out of the millions of ideas that emerged from their mindset. The rejection has to be wholesale. The rejection is of linearity, which continues to rule the roost as a paradigm of thought and action despite the development of ideas negating it during the 20th century, from within the European mind itself. The fact that linearity continues to rule despite it having been discredited is proof, if any was needed, that the rejection has to be wholesale. Linearity imbues everything; even that which will survive this “wholesale” rejection. However, this need not concern us for the moment.

This linear, non-contextual reality that we are in the grips of must be replaced with a non-linear, context sensitive world view; which is what the non-western people of the world have lived with for thousands of years and, which is now getting destroyed by “development”, “growth” and “progress”. Ideas like the WSF or other struggles against the global order will falter/ fail unless they identify this as the difference between the ‘mainstream’ and the ‘alternate’, and work to accentuate this difference by their thoughts and actions.

The stance of the ‘mainstream’ is logical and, understandable. They must assume that they will have to give up their positions of privilege under the “new” dispensation. Therefore, it makes sense to gamble on the perpetuation of the existing order for a little longer rather than lose everything now. Notwithstanding all the planning for the future (insurance, savings, etc) that the current world order has engendered, it is essentially a culture based on short term thinking. Thus, even the “long term” thinkers among us rarely think of the future beyond the life of our children till their middle age. Therefore, so long as it seems to them that the current world order can be perpetuated for another 50 years or so there is no (or very little) incentive to abandon it.

Countless debates (and actions) on a host of issues, including, global warming, the mid east conflict, ecological degradation, peak oil, all reflect this mindset. Each of them

(debates) ultimately centres around the problem of how to “manage” the perceived crisis. Of course, the overt assumption is that technology *will* come up with a solution in the meanwhile: solar power, wind energy, hydroponic farming, genetic engineering, and so on. However, it is increasingly obvious that this assumption is fallacious. It is also obvious that even assuming that we will be able to carry on for another 100-200 years by adopting these methods, the price that the inhabitants of this earth (I don’t mean humans only) will pay for this perpetuation will be horrendous and, from my point of view, unacceptable.

All civilisational elites (those who benefit from the existing order) have invariably thought like this. In the past, “local” civilisations that did nothing to “save” themselves and, ultimately, “drowned”, did not cause much more than a ripple on the global scale. The process of regeneration was easily picked up by the vast hinterland, giving rise to a new “civilisation” after a suitable interregnum. The problem that we confront, however, is that the current “civilisation” is global. Its global footprint means that its demise will result in a tsunami of catastrophic proportions. In other words, for the first time those who survive the “drowning” will be greatly hampered in salvaging the meaningful aspects of the past from the driftwood that washes to the shores of the future. Be that as it may, it is very unlikely that “life” itself will be destroyed. So, the question is only of continuity. How much of our past – the collective past rather than the European one – do we wish to carry forward into future?

I certainly sound doomsday-ish. So be it. I am not actually so. That which I speak of is true and real. The defects lie in my expression. For that I beg pardon. After all, I am only an egg.
