

THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF WORLD CULTURE

Post Box No. 402, 6, B.P. Wadia Road, Basavanagudi,
Bangalore - 560 004. Telephone : 6678581

Transaction No. 99

DEVELOPMENT : SPIRITUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

by

Dr. Kamla Chowdhry

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FOREWORD

Dr. Kamla Chowdhry is a professional of high standing. Graduating in Mathematics from the Calcutta University, she obtained her Master's Degree in Philosophy from Punjab and, later, her Ph.D. in Social Psychology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA. She was a Professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad and a Visiting Professor at the Harvard Business School, USA. She has been a Consultant to various private and public sector organizations. She also worked in the Ford Foundation as Programme Advisor for Public Planning and Management. She has published several papers relating to Forestry, Environment, sustainable development, Ethics and Development. She is currently the Chair Person of the Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development, 1, Copernicus Marg, New Delhi - 110 001.

We are fortunate that she delivered the Davinson Memorial Endowment Lecture under the auspices of The Institute in October 1998, on the subject "Development: Spirituality and Sustainability". Having regard to the enduring importance of the views eloquently projected by her during the course of this lecture, we have thought it fit to issue it as a Transaction of the Institute, so that it can reach a wider circle of interested readers both in India and abroad.

We wish to place on record our deep appreciation of the fine gesture made by MYRADA (a voluntary non-governmental organization working in the field of rural development) in undertaking to meet the publication costs involved.

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DEVELOPMENT: SPIRITUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Dr. KamChowdhry

Ancient cultures had a belief system and a spirituality that meant an intimate relationship with nature and sustainable life style. Listen to Chief Seattle when he in 1854 was asked by Washington to sell the Tribes land. His anguished soul cried :

“How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. How do you own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

Every part of this Earth is scared to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.

The sap that courses through the trees carries the memory of the red man."

"Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons of the Earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does it to himself"

The belief system of many indigenous tribes, and of many religions — Hindus, Jains, Buddhists — hold the Earth as sacred. Consequently the culture and life styles that evolved treated nature as sacred and did not exploit the natural resources for their benefit without concern for their sustainability. But the white man's belief system based on Judeo-Christian religious beliefs were different. They believed that man was created to dominate and control nature. From controlling nature to dominating other people was an extension of the same philosophy. By 1914, 84.4% of the world's terrestrial area had been colonised by the Europeans. With colonization there came a new paradigm of development. Cecil Rhodes, the founder of Rhodesia, expresses this paradigm eloquently ; "We must find new lands from which we can easily obtain raw materials and at the same time exploit the cheap slave labour that is available from the natives of the colonies. The colonies would also provide a dumping ground for the surplus goods produced in our factories"

This paradigm of development has not changed. It emerges in new forms in our pursuit of liberalization and globalisation. As Francois Partant, the French banker-turned-critic of development puts it "the developed nations have discovered for themselves a new mission to help the Third World countries advance along the same road to development which is nothing more than the road on which the West has guided the rest of humanity for several centuries"

A look at what is happening to the developing nations shows the continuity between the colonial period and the new era of Independence and development. The colonial rulers have been replaced by a new brand of native colonialists. Inevitably, the gap between the poor and the rich has widened not only between the industrialized countries and Third World nations but it has also increased within the poor nations as well. Essentially the story is one of continuity; a continuity of exploitation, neglect, dispossession and powerlessness. The ruling elite in India and in many other developing countries (Indonesia, Pakistan, etc) have become increasingly integrated and inter-locked with global elites in their conceptual thinking as well as life styles.

Free trade is made out to involve competition on a level playing field, and of course nothing could be fairer. But when the strong confront the weak on a level playing field the result is a foregone conclusion.

In the lopsided power relations which exist both at the global level as well as within developing countries, the elites are not likely to bring about peace and prosperity to the bulk of their population for they must maintain the lopsided power relations for their benefit.

In the last 50 years since India became independent, our aims has been to catch up with the West, as fast as possible. We have borrowed their science and technology, and their concepts of modernisation and industrialization. We believed that we could borrow Western concepts and development paradigms without paying a price of uprooted ness, of a breakdown of social and cultural institutions, of economic and social violence, and of moral turpitude.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the borrowed paradigm of development has not worked and will not work in a vastly different culture and value system. As Wolfgang Sachs puts it, "the time is ripe to write its obituary".

As early as 1909 Gandhi had already written the obituary of the Western style of development: "India's salvation consists in unlearning what she has learnt during the last 50 years". How much more relevant is Gandhi's advice in relation to our experience of the last 50 years? The nationalist movement had promised "adequate food, clothing, and housing" to our people as our minimum programme of development but we have failed miserably... although we can boast of our "nuclear bomb"!

Independence for the poor has essentially meant a worse form of colonialism - this time by the brown sahibs !

There is a growing realisation that the new paradigm of development must take the social, cultural, and spiritual values of a society into account. Gandhi had repeatedly emphasised the need to link India's spiritual and cultural past with its future growth. Although Gandhi was influenced by Western thought, he never let go of his roots and clung to them tenaciously. Describing Gandhi's magnet-like qualities and his ability to ignite the masses, Nehru wrote.

"He set about to restore the spiritual unity of the people and to break the barrier between the small westernised group at the top and to discover the living elements in the old roots and to build upon them, and to waken the masses out of their slumber and static condition and make them dynamic".

In everything that Gandhi did he introduced the spirit of religion in it. In the spinning he advocated, he said "I see God in every thread I draw on the spinning wheel"... If one has to establish communion with God through some means, why not through the spinning wheel... And, "I believe the yarn we spin is capable of mending the broken warp and woof of our life". Gandhi had great ability in using the simplest things as symbolic of a holistic and integrated vision.

In terms of development, which to Gandhi meant abolition of poverty and inequity, the '*charkha*' played a significant role. To solve the problem of economic distress, Gandhi suggested that "the spinning wheel is to replace the spirit of exploitation by the spirit of service"... "Khadi to me is the symbol of the unity of India's humanity, of its economic freedom, of equality and is therefore the livery of India's freedom".

Gandhi's approach to political, social or economic problems was never merely an intellectual approach; it was holistic with an emphasis on ethical and moral concerns. He set himself to remind the masses of India's ancient and forgotten memories and gave to the people glimpses of their collective soul.

The planners and the educated elite thought of themselves as modern and talked in terms of progress, industrialization and the latest technologies, but they also cut themselves adrift from the old ways of thinking and religion, and were therefore unable to understand or communicate with the masses.

Gandhi was a politician saint. As a politician and a saint he recognized the people's deep reservoir of spirituality under their chronic illiteracy and poverty. He understood the masses and the masses felt understood by him. They could place their complete confidence in this 'little man' because he shared their spirituality and could communicate with their inner being.

Bergson, the philosopher, had said "we think with only a small part of our past, but it is with our entire past including the original bent of our soul that we desire, will and act. Gandhi's understanding of the masses was with his (and India's) entire past including the original bent of his soul.

Any knowledge system that does not build on the collective wisdom of the past is bound to fail.

How could development have worked with such limitations, without an understanding of the people's past, and their spiritual concerns; without a sensitivity to their inner being? As Korah Matheu points out any development that is based on delegitimising, denigrating and demolishing a people's knowledge base can never be welcome. We can never build on the ashes of people's accumulated experience and wisdom nor trample on their self-respect. The route one chooses determines the kind of society we end up with.

Veer Bhadra Mishra is a *mahant* of the Sankat Mochan Temple, one of the principle temples of Varanasi, but he is also a professor of hydraulic engineering of Benares University, an unusual combination. As a devout Hindu, Mishra views the Ganges as a goddess, a river which because of its divine origin purifies all those faithful who immerse themselves in it. But Mishra also knows that raw sewage is dumped in it as well as dead bodies and municipal and industrial waste and he wants to help in cleaning the holy *Ganga*. He has established the Sankat Mochan Foundation dedicated to cleaning the Ganges, and to find a solution to Varanasi's water pollution problems.

The Ganges Action Plan of the Central Government has already spent around \$ 150 million building Western style high- technology waste-water plants along the Ganges, but these have not worked for the Ganges is used by the people in a different way, in a holy way. Mishra's Sankat Mochan Foundation has worked out solutions that seem to be more socially and culturally acceptable to the people. The Foundation has succeeded in winning the support of the people. The mahant is convinced that science and religion have to mesh if the Ganges is to be saved.

The Western approach, he says, will not work here. You need to use a different language, a different metaphor with people who have a living relationship with the Ganges. Mishra adds "Life is like a stream. One bank is the Vedas, and the other bank is the contemporary world, which includes science and technology. If both banks are not firm, the water will scatter. If both banks are firm, the river will run its course".

The World Bank President, Mr. Wolfensohn too seems to be calling for the same kind of intermeshing of spiritual and economic concerns. After visiting several developing countries he said "These visits have been extraordinarily meaningful for me. They have brought home to me that the World Bank's central mission is to weld economic assistance with spiritual, ethical and moral development. At the World Bank we are trying to find ways

to measure ourselves not by dollar value but by the impact and effectiveness of our programmes in terms that relate to the development of a society". In February, 1998, President Wolfensohn and the Archbishop of Canterbury organized a meeting, World Faiths and Development Dialogue, where leaders of nine different faiths assembled together to discuss spirituality and economic development. The repercussions of the meeting hopefully will be that the economic world will begin to take spiritual concerns more seriously and vice versa. In a closing statement at the Conference, Mr. Wolfensohn said, "What is clear is that there is a unity between us. A unity of the concern for physical livelihood but also spiritual and cultural continuity". Echoes of Gandhi's voice emerging from the World Bank !

Slowly but increasingly the development economists and development agencies are recognizing that development is a process that encompasses both the spiritual and the material aspects of life; that personal transformation goes hand in hand with social change, that values of communities must be woven in the fabric of development, especially in the Third World countries where poverty eradication is an important goal.

The more we study the major problems of our time, the more we come to realize that they cannot be understood in isolation. The spiritual, cultural, social and economic problems are interdependent and interconnected. The new development paradigm must therefore be holistic and consistent with the spiritual traditions of the people.

Ultimately sustainability is based on deep spiritual and religious experience. When development is consistent with spiritual traditions we can talk about a paradigm shift: from the perspective of our relationships to one another, to future generations, and to the web of life of which we are a strand.