



Editorial Note

Reorienting the Human-Nature Relationship through Reflections on Sustainable Narratives!

The relationship between human life, with its attendant needs, habits, artefacts, aspirations and the like, termed as civilization and nature is a deeply contested issue. This is especially so because the interventionist character of technology (since the modern industrial revolution) has led to an endless chain of crises such as deforestation, land degradation, global warming, loss of bio-diversity, climate change, ozone depletion, waste production..., all of which are impressions of the ever increasing *Homo sapien* footprints. Although the arrival of an Anthropocene Epoch, following geologist Jan Zalasiewicz, remains debatable, there is undoubtedly a pronounced alteration caused by human beings to the natural sphere of the earth, along with its resources, life and climate. Almost 27 years ago, Gadgil and Guha have described how satellite images of the “bird’s eye view” (1995, 1)

of the earth reveal gigantic ecological shifts where natural land mass, foliage and even non-human life have been gradually turning into human made artefacts (1995, 1-3). Thus, "...trees, shrubs and grasses are giving way to plantations and crop fields, roads and buildings; where rivers are being increasingly impounded with waters diverted through underground tunnels to turn giant turbines or merely being disciplined to flow along paths straight and narrow; where old wetlands are being drained and new ones created in the form of waterlogged fields" (Gadgil and Guha 1995, 1). Such a radical transformation has made sustainable existence a challenge, as the escalating environmental crisis indicates. Gadgil and Guha have aptly noted that the "worm's eye view" (1995, 1) can comprehend how seismic ecological shifts are manifested as crises. The latter can be documented by walking through cities and villages to understand how ecological changes are affected by and affect the social world. They observe how such walks through rural and urban India, for example, reveal the lack of availability of natural resources that inhibits livelihoods; thus, without fertile land, farmers face a crisis, the lack of fish affects fishing communities, the urban poor is bereft of decent shelter. Hence, "If the bird's-eye view revealed a picture of considerable ecological change, the worm's-eye view converts that image into one of serious ecological crisis" (Gadgil and Guha 1995, 2). The various dimensions of ecological crisis have displaced the eco-system people to ecological refugees and much of the artefact civilizational culture benefits the omnivores.¹ Given the colossal crisis confronting the human-nature relationship, the goal of sustainable living has been a critical since the 20th century, if not even before that. Yet as Gadgil and Guha noted decades ago, one cannot simply confine oneself to a blame game of holding only individual actors such as the World Bank responsible, as the Narmada Movement did; nor can one limit oneself to exclusively criticizing abstract forces like capitalism in the spirit of ecological

1 This distinction between omnivores, eco-system people and ecological refugees is derived from Gadgil and Guha (1995, 4).

Marxists. Rather, challenges to sustainability arise from an exploitative mixture of elite consumption, free markets and militarism that disregard local communities to advance human foot print on nature (Mahadevan 2013, 81). Such a footprint is the outcome of a conception of the human being as transcending nature, while at the same time being able to exploit its resources with impunity! Consequently, there is a deracination of eco-system people, such as the tribals who live in forests, leading to the formation of ecological refugees. The search for sustainability has to highlight social movements and world views that champion a non-sovereign notion of the human being as living in cooperation and responsibility with other human beings and nature itself.

In this endeavour, one needs to turn to philosophies and world views that reorient and integrate human beings with nature, to restore and reshape their equilibrium. Such a reflective turn- the need of the hour- will help in igniting a consciousness change from overconsuming nature to dwelling in it. There is potential for articulating such balances from a spectrum of philosophical positions from the ancient period to the contemporary that uphold human beings to be a part of nature. They differ from positions that emphasize the transcendence of the human over nature and consequent imbalances. Thus, the Epicureans, Stoics and Buddhists, for instance, cannot be defined as exclusive environmentalists in a deep ecological way. However, they provide unlikely resources for widening the horizons of a sustainable and ecological outlook. From the position of human immanence in nature, they advocate living in accordance with nature, rather than apart from it. Human life does not have value outside of the larger ecologies of life; it is through the acknowledgement of the interdependence of human and other forms of life (and nonlife) that a state of well-being can be attained. For Epicureans and Stoics, human flourishing is of prime significance (Bett 2006; Morel 2006). On the other hand, Buddhists consider the cessation of pain or *duḥkha* to have a normative role (Keown 1996, 44-56;

2006, 9). Yet, neither the attainment of pleasantness (Epicureans), happiness (Stoics) nor the cessation of suffering (Buddhists) is possible by transcending nature and establishing the sovereignty of the human being. Rather, flourishing or cessation of suffering requires learning how the human being is a part of nature, while finding its place in natural rhythms. Hence, these schools of thought give predominance to studying and understanding nature as a normative endeavour. Consequently, they can redirect the equilibrium of the human-nature relationship from the dominant anthropocentric orientation. Epicureans, Stoics and Buddhists do not, however, have homogeneous conceptions of nature. The Epicureans root determinate physical nature in an infinity of atoms and void; as one of the many infinite determinations in the cycle of production and destruction without ultimate meaning (Morel 2006). The Buddhists uphold the cycle of dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*) where everything is interconnected with everything else and nothing is absolute; worldly events are in a constant process of birth and destruction impacting each other without any absolute point of departure (Anālayo, 2020). Although, the Stoics, did uphold a notion of an ultimate end happiness (unlike the Epicureans or Buddhists), they saw it as both an adaptation to the larger cosmic need, while at the same time unique to the inherent constitution and functions of each being. Following Heraclites, the Stoics believed that the universe had a divine rational pattern that has to be adhered to (Bett 2006). However, for Epicureans, Buddhists and Stoics an engagement with nature requires both, the mediation of comprehending the scientific foundations of nature (to be rid of fears and superstitions), and its affective impact on human beings. Such knowledge for them brings about a consciousness change to impact the emotive dimension of human beings. The Epicurean pleasant life, the Buddhist life without suffering and the Stoic happy life all require tuning in to nature and being impacted by it, in the process of understanding it.

In the modern context, Jyotiba Phule, as Gadgil and Guha note, who belonged to the eco-system people (1995, 188), has critiqued the organized institutionalisation of forests that led to exploitation of forest land and the takeover of peasant lands, which in turn led to the alienation of ecosystem people from sustainable living (Phule 1883). He has also critiqued the colonial government for its exploitative approach to forests. To quote Phule, "...the cunning European employees of our honourable government have spent all their foreign and multi-faceted intelligence to establish a massive Forest Department; including all mountains and hills and valleys. This culminates in the inclusion of unused lands and the town pastures as well. Now our poor and handicapped farmers' sheep and goats have no place to feed even on air in the forests. Now if they want to fill their bellies they have to work in the factories as weavers, iron-smiths or carpenters or as casual labourers;(Phule 1883)." Similarly, M.K. Gandhi's philosophy has analogous prospects for ecological consciousness change, although -unlike Phule- he has not written directly on environmentalism. Gandhi has inspired many environmental movements in India (Gadgil and Guha 1995. ; Lal 2019) and deep ecologists like Arne Naess. As "a thinker with a profoundly ecological sensibility" (Lal 2019), Gandhi critiqued conspicuous consumption and its human centric model of progress. He propagated simple cooperative living based on the principle of sarvodaya where individual well-being is closely related to collective due to the interdependence between all living beings. Thus, Gandhi proclaims "I DO not believe...that an individual may gain spiritually and those who surround him suffer... I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that life. Therefore, I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and, if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent" (Gandhi 1924, 408). This makes the transcendentalism of stepping outside the domain of nature to control it violent. As Lal notes, Gandhi upheld that nature should be allowed to flow its way, curbing it was precisely why crises of floods and famines occurred. For Gandhi, "The earth is not merely there to be

mined, logged and hollowed out” (Lal 2019). The *van panchayats* of Kumaon, in what is now Uttarakhand, were formed in 1931, as a result of peasant resistance movement against exploitative control over forests by the British government in 1921 (Gadgil and Guha 1995, 169). The British had to relent their predatory approach to the forests – but only to an extent– and allow local communities to enter sustainable forest management. However over a period of time the amendments to Indian Forest Act in 1976, 2001, 2005 and 2012 (which governed the formation of *van panchayats*) diluted the *van panchayats*. They have become bureaucratized, while also being deprived of funding and power (Azad, 2021). Learning from Phule and Gandhi, the rising forest fires in Uttarakhand could be doused by following the wisdom of the villagers of Uttarakhand, the ecosystem people.

Phule’s and Gandhi’s critique of Western colonialism is also relevant in the context of the double-standards underlying the global North’s perspective on sustainability. Thus for example, Norway deflects attention from its Arctic drilling that weakens its ecosystem and its dependency on fossil fuels, while at the same time advocating the preservation of rain forests in Brazil (Magassy 2021). From a Gandhian point of view, there is an absence of morality in such a model of progress that only accelerates bodily needs, while serving the interests of neo-colonial forces (Gandhi 2010, 32).

One could avert the plight of ecological refugees by learning from the eco-system people such as Phule and philosophies and world-views that resonate with the Buddhists, Epicureans, Stoics and Gandhi, among others, in myriad ways. However, one has to appropriate them critically and contextually. As Gadgil and Guha note, there is “... a strain of constructive social activism and critical enquiry that runs deep in Indian culture” (1995, 188). Such kinds of activism and critique have influenced environmental movements in India that have highlighted the crisis of sustainability. Learning

from the eco-system people, ecological movements in India bring out interconnecting bonds that characterise life on earth; environmentalists and eco-system people show how these bonds are severed when human beings convert everything to artefacts. This can be characterised extending Guha's and Martinez Alier's "environmentalism of the poor" (1997, 18) as the sustainability of the poor. Such a sustainability has the harmony between human beings and resources as integral to sustainable living. It is from this perspective that Gadgil's Western Ghats Ecology Report mentions the "participation of local communities, a process that has been termed *adaptive co-management*" (Gadgil 2021, 15) as a way of developing sustainably and ecologically. Rather than think of sustainability as a regulatory order of the law, one needs to adopt a deeper grassroots notion of sustainability, as emerging from world views, eco-system people and interdependent lives.

In this spirit, the authors in the first part of this issue conceptualise narratives of sustainability in the contexts of its history and culture (M.H. Qureshi), mental health (Dave Sookhoo), law (Virendra Kumar), education from the geographic and architectural perspectives (Samruddhi Patwardhan and, Pravin Kokane) and oceans (Nitin Agarwala). The second part of this journal issue explores concrete case studies of sustainability with Tiakala Ao's and Narayan Sharma's engagement with sustainable agriculture in Nagaland; Srikumar Chattopadhyay's account of Kerala's route to sustainability; Anuradha Majumdar and Shantanu Majumdar's essay on the beacon of hope of green spots in Mumbai; Maharashtra, Nabila Khan's and Lata Dyaram's piece on sustainability in the Indian context; Tanushree Sharma's Tithi Bhatnagar's and Drishti Kalra's analysis of sustainability in the architectural domain and Namita Nimbalkar's and Medha Tapiawala's delineation of sustainable beliefs of the Warlis and Kolis in Palghar and Thane, Maharashtra. The book reviews by Bhagyashree Patil and Amit Ranjan take forward the theme of this issue in creative ways. We mourn the loss of India's influential

environmentalist Sundarlal Bahuguna, as we think through his legacies in different ways with the obituaries by Pratiba Naitthani and Aparna Phadke.

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