

# Problematizing Sustainable Development with the Philosophies of Self-realization

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Sustainable development is the new *mantra* circulated by the states and economic organisations to remedy the environmental crisis. This ideal is employed more for promoting the sustainability of humans' physical development through less destructive industries rather than proposing a holistic perspective of life and of other species. Finding the technology that will sustain for longer is certainly a need of the hour. However, it also gives legitimacy to continuing the industrial manipulation of nature. This essay aims to offer a critical account of the notion of sustainable development from a deeper ecological perspective. From a deeper ecological perspective, sustainable development comes from a shallow ecological view.

Why is the ideal of sustainable development considered shallow? It is shallow due to its treating environment and other entities as things meant for human needs. Even if those needs are related to the survival of the human species, such a perception does not provide any knowledge about the possibility of a more joyful life, whose source lies in human relations with nature and other entities of the world. The virtue of preserving nature according to the sustainability ideal lies more in its result for human survival, as seen in the drive to minimise carbon dioxide emission as it would be a threat to the respiratory system. It shall not be merely for arresting climatic changes that we oppose deforestation. Instead, we know it is a great source of our aesthetic, spiritual and ethical growth. Calculative thinking is not enough to save the earth from destruction. Unless the environment

and its entities are seen as an integral part of the human experience, the ideology of sustainable development cannot be seen as providing an in-depth vision of the ecosphere. More than having a life of pleasure and security, happiness and fulfilment in the human's life rests on each individual's self-realisation. Self-realisation will be the outcome of developing the innate potential of each individual and finding their expression in our actual concrete life. According to Arne Naess, the pioneer of deep ecology thinking, human self-realisation largely depends on realising man's oneness with the rest of nature (Naess 2001, 85–86)

We have to differentiate joy in existence from pleasure. Joy can result only when human beings pursue the goals that each one wants. This is what existentialists call authentic living. There are no preexisting formulae to find it. It varies from person to person. For some, it is in composing music; for some others, it is in engaging in social service; for some, it is in bird watching; for some, it is in love relationship with the other; for some, it is in living in the wilderness; for some, it is in experiencing work of art; for some, it is in dancing and so on. Each person's quality of life is depends on the degree to which such primary personal objectives are fulfilled. If each member seeks goodness, the quality of society at large will improve. In the terminology of Kant, the world then will become a 'kingdom of ends' and an enlightened one. The quality of life of a community at large will be improved if each member's quality of life is fulfilled.

Contrary to it, the ideology of sustainable development rests on the perception of the human being as a pleasure-seeking animal. Two characteristic feature of this ideology of sustainable development is 1) It looks at both organic and inorganic entities of the earth as means to enhance human luxury 2) it thinks that the consumption of goods is the source of human happiness. Both of these are very shallow attitudes to nature and human life. Can we have a different measurement of human happiness other than the one based on standard of living? Currently, standard of living is the indicator of human progress and happiness. Human beings are said to be happy if they have more facilities such as transportation, shopping malls, entertainment, refrigerators, washing machines, computers, and so on.

In contrast, deep ecology's position rests on the belief that there are other more profound levels of experience of joy from alternative forms of living. Such experience levels are often not familiar to contemporary human beings due to their lack of wisdom about various forms of existence taught by philosophical discourses. Such realms of experience cannot be achieved from the contemporary lifestyle promoted by the industrial civilisation. The present form of education does not help to find it.

Arne Naess states that we must distinguish the quality of life from the standard of living (Naess 2001, 25–26). Though modern humanity has increased the standard of living by having communication networks, medical facilities, transportation and luxury objects, it cannot be seen as an indicator of the quality of life. What people find meaningful is not always the cosy pleasure of consumerist goods but something beyond. Pleasure consists of the lowest level of satisfaction in life with objects of sensual gratification. Food, drinks, sex and comforts are a few examples of objects that provide pleasure. As a result, modern development's thrust is on producing more luxury objects that increase pleasure. However, wisdom teaches that pleasure is to be considered as a lower level of experience due to its momentariness and lower intensity. Happiness and joy are different from pleasure and have to be considered higher in terms of durability and intensity. For instance, the pleasures derived from tasting ice cream and sexual intercourse quickly fade from the mind immediately after one comes out of such an experience. Whereas the happiness derived from friendship, love relations, and aesthetic experiences create a more lasting impact on our personality. Happiness lasts for days and months, while pleasures disappear in a few minutes. When a person can move to higher levels of experience such as happiness and joy, many pleasurable objects will be looked at as inessential for life. While pleasure depends on the consumption of commodities, happiness results from realising a person's talents and capacities (Arne Naess 2001, 82–86). To increase quality of life, humans have to seek things other than luxury objects that satisfy mere peripheral pleasures.

Ecosphere has a great deal to do with producing quality. For the self-realisation of mankind, they have to live in the presence of entire beings, in intrinsic connection with them. Our self-fulfilment lies in finding oneself. One cannot find oneself in

isolation but only in connection with all beings around us. Arne Naess introduces a new concept called the 'ecological self' (Naess, 2008, p. 82). It is formed through the development of deep identification of individuals with the other life forms in nature.

Also, the self-realisation of people rests on their intense engagement in activities that are most dear to each person's sensibilities. There are no general rules for everybody. It is up to each individual to try to find out what he sincerely and eagerly wants. However, technology promotes only a hedonistic lifestyle that rests on pleasure by consuming new objects which are thrown away after use.

From the perspective of deep ecologists, large-scale commodity production rests more on human greed than need. Humans are trained to live at the maximum gratification of their pleasures. Possessing luxury objects such as cars, air-conditioners, washing machines, and dishwashers increase only the human standard of living. It does not guarantee an increase in happiness and quality of life. The demand for more production of commodities arises from the need to satisfy pleasure, which is the lower faculty of human gratification. The human search for luxury puts enormous pressure on earth and other entities, as this could be fulfilled only at their cost. However, if human beings can move to higher realms of gratification in the form of happiness and joy, the need for the production of luxury will gradually decrease. This is what Naess pointed out as the quality of life, that depended upon the experience of happiness rather than the gratification of pleasures.

The drive to have more luxurious objects is the outcome of human inability to find the actual objects of gratification that will fulfil their highest desires. Thus, consumerism results from the absence of genuine satisfaction of human desire. According to psychoanalytic theory, the highest desire of humans consists of their union with the desired object, which in most cases is the beloved lover of the opposite sex. What Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis characterised as *libido* is the essential drive of beings that triggers them to achieve fulfilment in being united with the chosen object of love. Freud explains in his works *On Narcissism* *An Introduction and Mourning and Melancholia* that being united with the (m) other, a person has no differences like inside and outside, self and other, want

and need, but remains in an experiential state of fullness (Freud 1995, 545–62; 584–89). However, modern civilisation prohibits human beings from finding their libidinal fulfilment by preventing them from seeking their actual love objects. The powerful patriarchal/industrial-capitalist institutions in the contemporary world do not permit such a realm of joy to be sought after. Psychoanalysis explains how childhood–life of all humans is filled with libidinal *jouissance* when their bodies exist in libidinal unity with their mothers' bodies. However, the patriarchal institutions forcibly dissociate the child from their (m)other to make him a productive/cognitive/responsible subject in the social order. Modern civilisation takes the actual object of fulfilment away from the person forever and substitutes it with consumer goods. Thus, the course of desire of a person is being diverted from real objects of desire into the desire for cars, bikes, cosmetics and varieties of objects which bring symbolic satisfaction. Lacan writes that once the 'self' has been dissociated from the mother/other (which is their highest libidinal object) through the resolution of the Oedipus complex, the remaining life of the native becomes a perpetual search for the lost object. They mistakenly seek it in the world of commodities. However, accumulating wealth and amassing material goods do not bring genuine satisfaction to human beings. A person very soon loses interest in those things. Moreover, to fill the 'lack', he always strives to get newer objects. In a similar vein, Martin Heidegger writes that Dasein seeks newer objects, not to find genuine experience, but to stimulate oneself with their newness. Thus a human being lingers in any given environment for shorter and shorter periods, floating everywhere and dwelling nowhere (Heidegger 1996, 161). As Lacan says, the drive to possess new objects is not meant to satisfy that object but is meant to increase one's image and power, which in turn is used to increase the symbolic value of that person in society. This is used as a means to attract the (m)other by presenting oneself as a desirable object (*phallus*) before her/him. Thus, all luxury objects are mere instruments for the subject to come to the other by boosting his/her image in the eye of the other (Bohm & Batta 2010). However, if one is allowed to have his actual desired love object (the other) for himself, all these consumerist commodities will become less attractive. So, capitalist production that destroys nature is the outcome of the 'lack' created in human beings by society, which is guided by the wrong understanding of life.

Deleuze and Guattari, modifying the psychoanalytic theory as Schizoanalysis, explain how libidinal desires have been contained within the unconscious through the institution of Oedipus within the psyche. Its outward expression has been interpreted as schizophrenia and thus suppressed. However, Deleuze brings out the positive dimension of schizophrenic desires. Schizophrenic desires operate through assemblages of humans with myriad forms of entities of nature such as plants, flowers, sky, water bodies and stars (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 2). What Deleuze calls the 'desiring machine' is the outcome of such assemblage/connection of man with nature, where one feels full and satisfied. However, in the form of despotic ruler, religious priest and capitalist state, Oedipus crushes the desiring-production. As a result, humans are urged to make production elsewhere in the form of material production of goods. In the opinion of Deleuze and Guattari, man does not have any lack when he is in intimate connection with entities of the world. Lack is artificially created at the disruption of desiring-production. Man is asked to possess material goods and commodities to overcome the lack. However, the lack produced by the dissociation of a person from the libidinal objects is never filled by possessing material commodities. For the experience of fullness, human beings should be able to find their actual libidinal objects of desire. So they shall be allowed to relate with nature at the micro level, whereby schizophrenic bliss can be reinstated. All these psychoanalytical discourses remind us, as Arne Naess insists, of the necessity of separating the quality of life from the possession of material goods.

The demand for domination over the earth and natural resources begins with human separation as a conscious subject who feels different from objects and others. Its history, as Heidegger writes, goes back to the beginning of abstract thinking in the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato. This, says Heidegger, marks the beginning of the alienation of humankind from things of nature (Heidegger 1978, 193-242). Since then, the human being has begun to approach the world as a separate entity different from their consciousness. He dressed up in the garb of an observer of the world rather than relating with it in the first-person experiential realm. Cartesian dualism further accelerated this alienation while depicting nature as an inert extended substance. Husserl claims in his work *Phenomenology and the crisis of European Sciences* that the separation of humans from their spiritual sources results from such a dualism caused by the influence of the modern empirical sciences. It created a spiritual barrenness in humankind

(Husserl 1970). The recovery of the life of consciousness is the remedy suggested by phenomenology. According to phenomenology, recovery requires recasting the meaning of material things differently from natural science's understanding of them. If we realise that object is a correlate of human consciousness, we will accept the precious value of all existing entities of the world. Then, we will not look at them as mere resources to increase the standard of living

Nature can, thus, be saved by bridging the gap between the self and the other. This shall be achieved in three levels. One is at the level of phenomenology, where the separation of the consciousness and its object can be overcome. Another, as psychoanalysis points out, is achieved when humans are allowed to be united with their genuine libidinal object of desire. The third is when humans perceive the world and entities as beautiful objects that act as a perennial source of joyfulness.

This third point requires more elaboration. Regaining aesthetic sensibility enables us to experience the world and its entities as the embodiment of beauty rather than as resources. It can be demonstrated with the help of Kantian aesthetics. Immanuel Kant explained three faculties of human consciousness, which are the faculties of thinking, feeling and desiring. Though equal cultivation of all these faculties is essential for human enlightenment, in modern times, the thinking faculty got predominance over others faculties. This faculty is being utilised mainly for increasing material profit. At a time when science and technology have become the guiding ideal, it is pretty natural that ethical and aesthetic sensibilities are sidelined to give more room for cognitive thinking. The human being was cast primarily as a truth seeker who explores nature to know its hidden secrets, relegating the domains of goodness and beauty to an inferior place.

Kant speaks of a disinterested way of perceiving nature through the faculty of feeling. He claims it to be independent and different from the faculty of knowing nature. For him, knowledge is always coupled with an interest in using the nature for selfish purposes of human beings, whereas feeling objects disinterestedly is the way to reveal their beauty (Kant 1961). If we adopt this approach, the entire world will feel as beautiful. This, for Kant, is a deeper source of joy than any other experience of pleasure gained by knowing or consuming things. Explaining it with the help of Heideggerian thought on being, we can rightly say that the



primordial people of the world once had this approach. However, that approach has been lost in modern times due to the perception of things as resources for use. If the present humanity regains that attitude of the ancients, the whole world will be experienced as an ocean of beauty. The environment, then, will no longer appear as strange and hostile, as something to be conquered. Instead, it will be viewed with reverence and as a primordial source of joy in life. Then, nature will not be destroyed for serving our narrow self-interests and for our unbridled self-expansion. We will then allow the richness of bio-diversity to prevail. As Arne Naess said, we will learn to use only the bare minimum of resources required for our biological survival, only to satisfy our vital needs (Naess, 2001).

True enlightenment requires equal cultivation of all the faculties. A person cannot be considered genuinely liberated unless he/she has an aesthetic subjectivity that enables experiencing his oneness with nature. Experiencing the beauty of things gives a person aesthetic delight. Kant reminds us that cognitive understanding of things does not provide any delight. For Kant, delight is produced only by employing the faculties of desire and feeling. Unfortunately, these are the domains most neglected by modernity in its quest to produce more wealth. Therefore the present ecological catastrophe can be arrested to a large extent by activating the moral and aesthetic faculties in everyday living.

Though Kant has limited the sphere of ethics to the human realm, it is possible to extend its application to non-human entities of the world. Its spirit has to be drawn from the truth that if the earth and other entities are approached as objects of beauty, they would be felt as deeper sources of human delight. Such a delight would not depend on their use value for human needs. Rather than as means, all entities would be valued as ends-in-themselves. The second law of Kant's categorical imperative says about the necessity of 'treating every human being including oneself always as an end and never as a mere means' (Kant, 2002 46-47). If the yardstick Kant applied here to measure the ethical value depends on the human existence as ends, then the second law of categorical imperative can apply equally to the non-human realm. Other entities of the world are also felt as ends in themselves when they are experienced as aesthetic objects. If Kant did not bring them under the purview of his ethics, it is because, during his time, there was no human invasion of the ecosphere as we see it in the present times. Therefore the first and second laws of the categorical imperative are equally

relevant for constructing an environmental ethics. If Kant lived today, he would have included nature also under the concern of his ethics.

Until and unless the science of ecology takes joyfulness to be the real objective of preserving the earth and other species, environmental approaches will remain shallow. That is the drawback of the present movement of sustainable development. As long as human beings value a life of pleasure more by increasing the standard of living to optimum levels, the exploitation and destruction of the earth will go on unabated. Therefore the idea of sustainable development cannot be seen more than a new *mantra* introduced to gain legitimacy for continuing the unbridled growth of the production of commodities. The dictum can be seen as a very shrewdly coined concept meant to ease people's fear about the imminent environmental catastrophe lying in store.

Deep ecology, on the other hand, instead of trying to find short-term solutions to the present crisis, speaks for a new beginning for humanity. For the dawn of a new civilisation, entirely different goals and purposes for life have to be set. We see several environmental activities around us. People engage in them as responses to the ecological destruction around us in the form of soil erosion in rain forests, contamination of water bodies, etc. In many parts of our country, campaigns to save rivers from pollution have been happening for the last few decades. Similarly, struggles to arrest air pollution in the cities are also occurring. However, no sufficient remedy could be evolved to solve these problems so far. Air and water pollution and the destruction of the environment continue unabated. It will go on as long as people are not ready to minimise their desire for comfort and luxury. They are trained to think of pleasures as the most valuable object in life. Hence people will not be in favour of the reduction of the manufacture of commodities.

Thus, sustainable development's contribution to saving the planet will always be minimal. Instead of making qualitative changes in the lifestyle and values, it only suggests short-term remedies to reduce pollution and destruction. Sustainable development suggests pollution control through technological means. One of its major concerns is how waste can be managed, processed, or recycled. We know that waste production is inevitable. Waste cannot be fully eradicated as long as there are industries. By managing waste through technological means, people

may be able to get rid of its menace temporarily. Nevertheless, the real problem with waste is that it irrecoverably and irretrievably converts natural substances into synthetic forms. The electronic equipments, plastics, cars, building materials etc. we use today will be thrown away soon as waste. Now waste is heaped up in many parts of the world. However, they are never converted or integrated back to nature. Perhaps the whole world may become a heap of waste in the future. The shallow ecology has no long-term perspectives to address such problems and only wants to find temporary solutions to the sufferings and ills created by the current lifestyle.

Installation of waste treatment plants, use of solar energy in place of fossil fuel, use of lesser hazardous chemicals in the manufacturing of commodities etc. is the solutions suggested by the supporters of development. The ecological benefits of such measures are not underestimated here. They serve to minimise the degradation of our ecosystem to a considerable extent. However, without a change in human preference in the direction of improving quality of life rather than the standard of living, no radical changes in our approach to earth and ecology will happen. In the absence of proper wisdom about genuine goals in life, the ideal of sustainable development will fail to take humans along the path of self-realisation.

That is not to say that we should end all types of developmental activities. That would be neither possible nor desirable. Nevertheless, as Arne Naess argues, production must be limited to serving our most vital needs in life (Naess 2001, 29). However, since the goals of present humanity are set in the direction of increasing pleasures, people, instead of choosing to minimise commodities, will opt only for the continuation of the present form of development and enjoy its fruits. At present human beings lack the resolution to live without physical comforts and commodities. They find the value of life in consuming commodities. So they do not see any fault in using nature as a resource for increasing human pleasure. They want transportation, airports, highways, car manufacturing, air-conditioners, and shopping malls, to be continued. As beings mired in a hedonistic worldview, they would not think of any alternative ways of living. As a result, developmental experts will opt only to find remedial measures within the existing condition. The ideology of sustainable development is to be seen as the outcome of it. Such environmentalist thinking shall be considered shallow because it does

not go deep into the real problems. Instead, it accepts the existing ideal of the continuation of progress through science and technology.

Though problems like soil erosion, deforestation, water contamination, and climatic change have been created by modern technology, ironically, man seeks to reverse these problems also through the help of science and technology itself. Sustainable development believes that human beings can find solutions to problems with the aid of science and technology. The very science and technology, however, is mistaken as value-neutral. So that people believe that they can employ technology in either to exploit nature or prevent its ill consequences. They think it depends entirely upon human will and how we use it. However, this hope shall be seen as the outcome of a wrong understanding of the real essence of technology. Heidegger rightly points out that the disclosure of truth in modern technology is always meant to release energy from the objects of nature (Heidegger 1978, 287-317). So technology can be seen as value-laden, and its origin lies in the drive to increase human power through the management and production of energy. As long as the ideology behind science and technology remains increasing commodity production, it will only increase further manipulation of nature.

That is why we cannot produce enough results despite all our attempts to reverse destruction with the help of technology. Instead of halting the process, it has only been accelerated. Day by day, more forest areas have been lost and carbon emission has increased. We could not so far put an end to air pollution. More and more species are disappearing every day. Human beings should realise that the present system will be short-lived due to the limitation of resources on the earth. So luxury can be enjoyed only by a minority in urban parts of the world for a limited period. If a similar increase in affluence is provided in all regions of Asia, Africa and South America, the end of the ecosphere will not be very distant. We cannot hope that the impending ecological catastrophe be arrested with our present form of environmental perspective. Humanity must realise that once a catastrophe has happened, they cannot return to the normal state of affairs. Therefore the present crisis should serve as an eye-opener. We should seek more deep ecological reflections to find guidelines. Saving the earth requires such a severe change in our attitude. A profound change in our political and economic objectives is required.

At present, shallow ecological movements lack proper ecological wisdom. Wisdom consists of deeper-level experiences produced in human interaction with nature. If we rely entirely on a scientific understanding of the ecosphere, we will not be able to derive such wisdom. For greater changes in our lifestyle, understanding nature through the eye of science will not be sufficient. We demand the closing down of a factory from the riverside not merely because of the contamination of the drinking water it creates. Besides that, rivers and water bodies have always been primordial sources of our happiness in all ages. It has provided solace not only to human beings but also to myriad types of animals, plants and other species. Likewise, the serenity the rivers produce is more valuable than the pleasure we get from possessing a car or a computer.

Here is where we have to distinguish between instrumental and intrinsic values. Without serving any purpose (as instruments to some other ends) nature has a value in itself. If most of our value judgments are based on instrumental reasoning, we cannot produce profound changes. Genuine environmental action should be grounded on intrinsic goals. Scientific understanding of ecology cannot inform us about such goals. A forest can be saved for human benefit (water conservation and climate maintenance). It can also be preserved for itself. Those who speak for the conservation of forests based on their use value do not see their invaluable worth as a perennial source of joy for the life of human beings.

There is no need to exploit the vast resources of nature to meet such higher ends of life. As Arne Naess says, one requires only the bare minimum to meet one's vital needs (Naess 2001). If one comes to know that joy and self-realisation rest on the quality of life and not on the improvement of the standard of living, one will find the materialist pleasure produced by consumerist goods less relevant. Kant once proposed the possibility of finding a kingdom of ends. However, unfortunately, modernity deviated from Kant's practical reasoning and prioritised instrumental reasoning.

Nevertheless, deep ecology has its critics too. Thinkers criticise deep ecology for reducing humans to simple species of nature rather than complex social beings. To them, denying human beings' uniqueness is a contradictory and unworkable ethical tenet. The ecofeminist criticism contends that while it opposes the logic

of dominance of certain sets of entities, deep ecologists like Naess emphasize abstract equality between humans and other beings of nature.

Many environmentalists in our country are not yet clear about where they stand. They must introspect their perception of ecology to know whether they are sustainable, shallow ecologists or persons who look ahead to see a healthy future of humanity on earth on a deeper level. Only then the right kind of direction for future course of action can be gained.

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