

Sustainability and New India: Are we on the right track?

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The world in general, and India in particular, are in trying times when it comes to sustainability. We realise that there is no way but forward on the path towards becoming sustainable. India, over the past two decades, has come to terms with this new word and has rapidly started using it in different fora and documents, from public gatherings to public statements. Yet, do we truly understand what the need of the hour is when it comes to becoming sustainable? Are our attempts at sustainability, sustainable in themselves?

To begin with, it is essential to set some global context when it comes to sustainability. Sustainable development as a term was first used in 1987 in the famous report titled 'Our Common Future', popularly called the Brundtland Report, published by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development. The report stressed on the need to link economical development with environmental protection and called sustainable development as the path towards meeting the needs of today without compromising the needs of tomorrow. Since then, multiple meets, reports and movements have been witnessed by the globe to make environment an important part of all discourses on development. 1994 saw John Elkington introducing a now-famous term called the 'triple bottom line', which encompassed the social and environmental bottom line apart from the economic bottom line as a part of development discourse. It, therefore, became imperative to understand that sustainable development could not exist without environmental protection, social development and economic returns. The fact that these three could go hand-in-hand and did not necessarily outweigh one another was a whole new approach for the world. Cut to the 21st Century, we now talk about 'responsibly sourced' products as a regular part of our consumption cycle. In that simple term lies the understanding that business and sustainable development need to go hand-in-hand, that products, from luxury to everyday, need to be sourced without degrading the environment and that human rights should not be harmed, if not upheld, in the process of production.

India, though, has yet to understand these three pillars of sustainable development. While the world moves to talk about creating corporate shared value, we are still talking about sustainable development merely from the lens of the environment. In any sustainability discourse, we hear about three types of impact on the community/ society/ surroundings. The first is a negative impact where the business actively harms the environment and people. The second is a neutral impact where the business activity neither has a positive nor a negative impact on the environment and people. The final is a positive impact where the business activity contributes towards the positive growth of the environment and the people. India, like most other nations, has laws to negate a negative impact. Companies need to follow certain parameters while manufacturing, producing or providing services. This has been drawn out in acts such as the Environment Protection Act 1986, The National Green Tribunal Act 2010, the Hazardous Wastes Management and Handling Rules 1989 etc. In their essence, these acts punish those who create a negative impact on the environment and people, thereby punishing those who tip the scales against sustainable development. Not just companies, individuals who damage the environment or litter, are subject to penalties and punishment as well.

When it comes to actors championing the cause of sustainable development in India, we usually count on non-governmental organisations, individuals and private entities working in the space of development. Most of these, have focused on environmental protection and social development as separate demands rather than integrate them into a single discourse. This, despite the fact, that India has had a rich history with eco-feminism and tribal development and forest protection. The Chipko movement is testament to how woke India was to combining social development with environmental thinking as early as 1973. Activists such as Vandana Shiva, Sunderlal Bahuguna,

Rajendra Singh and Radha Bhatt have combined social development narratives with the need for environmental protection.

But in the last two decades, we have seen the push for sustainable development being through environmental education, tree planting drives, beach clean-ups and propagating re-use of waste. Various NGOs across the country spent large amounts of money teaching children to save the environment. From primary school to college populations, environment support groups, green clubs and the like have set out time and energy to teach people to 'save Mother Earth'. What good these activities do, is yet to be understood. It has been over two decades that environmental activities have been initiated in schools and though, we can state that today we have a more concerned population, whether this can be attributed to environmental education or the sheer emergency nature of the problem, cannot be said for sure. Yet, year on year, crores of rupees are spent of programs to educate young children to segregate waste, keep the environment clean and use less water.

But the actual culprits when it comes to these very wastes are not at the household level. Waste segregation, even if done at the household level, as is mandatory in many locations, is an issue wrought with political will and corporate ambitions. Those working in the waste sector will tell you that creating and cleaning landfills is a lucrative area and hence the solutions are not as easy as having three separate bins. India generates over 62 million tonnes of household waste in a year out of which less than 20% is treated and a large percentage is dumped in landfills. The problem is not in lack of segregation, the problem is rather in efficient management of resources and not looking at waste as a resource in itself. Therefore, does this education/ awareness have any meaning in the real sense?

Again, when one talks about planting of saplings in India, on an average on World Environment Day, June 5th, India sees various organisations and companies pledging to plant saplings to a tune of a few lakhs to a crore. Yet, five years ago, India reported only 21.34% of forest cover thereby bringing to question where these lakhs of sapling go and who maintains and nurtures them. Hence, making children plant saplings does little good to the environment let alone contribute to sustainable development. These are but, minute offerings in the larger scheme of the development dialogue in India as was visible with the Aarey Colony crisis of 2019 and the reported felling of over 2,000 trees to make way for the metro project. This in the backdrop of the fact that India is home to 22 of the 30 most polluted cities of the world. The costs are in front of us, and we employ little but Band-Aid solutions.

Even if one does consider that India is still not in a stage to re-learn the deep interlinkages between social development and environmental protection, it is essential to remember that every year, CSR funds, government grants and foreign money, goes into environmental protection. It is time to ask the tough questions on what the impact of these programs has been. Have these done anything more than enabling children to participate in drawing competitions and make-out-of-waste programs or have they left some indelible mark on our development? Not only is it time to question what environment programs in the non-governmental space have done, one also needs to relook at the role of stakeholders in sustainable development in India. The role of individuals and organisations as advocates for sustainable development, the role of the government as a watchdog and the role of companies as contributors to a positive impact need to be re-imagined. Only then will we be able to foresee a future where the youth of the country create products that contribute to sustainable growth, create dialogues that offer solutions and create a workforce that is prepared to meet the challenges of the coming times.

India cannot survive by turning a blind eye to environmental issues, by punishing those that use their voice to state concerns and by promoting solutions that are not sustainable in its own right. Saving Mother Earth needs meaningful well-drawn out actions and not merely child-engaging activities.

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