Reprint

Reprint and Analysis of "The Rio Conference : Some Bare Truths" from Vol. 6

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We re-print a note, "The Rio Conference: Some Bare Truths" by Prof. Prakash Gole, which appeared in vol. 6 (1993) of this journal, along with an analysis as to where the global community stands on environmental justice and equity 25 years later.

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The Rio Conference : Some Bare Truths

Prakash Gole

For environmentalists all over the world 1992 proved memorable as it saw their largest gathering ever for the global conference on environment held at Rio De Janero in Brazil. India had sent a strong delegation and a number of our eminent environmentalists attended it as representatives of NGOs. Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narayan of Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi, had circulated a draft statement on Global Environmental Democracy for

comments which they presented to the conference.

Everybody now knows what the global conference achieved or failed to achieve. The issues raised, discussed, shelved or thrown overboard by the conference concern everyone living on this planet: human as well as non-human being alike. It is in this context our comments on Global Environmental Democracy appear to be relevant. They are reproduced below. (Editor)

Dear Anil Agarwal, Sunita Narayan and others

Once again I must congratulate you for bringing out a concise, logically argued draft statement on Global Environmental Democracy. I commend your optimism and am in agreement with the basic position taken on the need to formulate a global programme to provide jobs to generate ecological regeneration and restoration and the need to compensate South adequately for their store of germplasm and biodiversity that their traditional practices have helped to preserve.

In some respects however, I find the position taken by you to be too optimistic or too simplified.

With the cessation of cold war and the nations of eastern Europe, the erstwhile USSR and even China now joining the North (USA, W. Europe and the Antipodes), the North is more likely to impose its

viewpoint on the South than agree to any sharing of the burden. The annihilation of Iraq should serve as a warning that whenever necessary brute force will be used. Any talk of the South demanding compensatory payment from the North for its errant behaviour appears to me a bit unrealistic. I do not believe that North will consider it its moral responsibility to provide a lead that gives confidence to the South, instead a new colonialism is likely to emerge.

The only way to bring the North to the negotiating table on an equal footing is to deny them the vast markets that the South provides for their products. The nations of the South must unite to tell them that they do not want the destructive technology: machines, chemicals and weapons produced by the North nor are they interested in selling their raw materials to the North. Their own technology and production system by using their own skills, brain power and materials, are fully capable of satisfying their wants. I have no doubt this alternative technology is possible and is realistic.

Achieving this unanimity among the South is obviously a tall order. As long as this unity and confidence cannot be achieved by the South its bargaining position will continue to be extremely weak.

In your Elements of Global Environmental Democracy a great stress has been laid on participatory community institutions. I find that our environmentalists are greatly swayed by a few successful experiments carried out in our country in that direction. That they are not copied generally is because they demand complex social and legal changes as you have stated. Apart from this I may draw your attention to the north-south divide that exists in each developing country. I am referring to the city and countryside divide (India and Bharat).

Our whole development in the last 40 years has been city oriented. The average city-dweller enjoys a far higher standard of living than even a rural rich. City-life is heavily subsidised at the expense of the countryside. Now if village institutions are strengthened, it will result in the diversion of resources away from the cities. Any fall in the living standards of the

city – dwellers will be resisted by our elite which includes all our social leaders, politicians and bureaucrats.

I believe that if village institutions are strengthened, become fully democratic and are headed by well-trained, skilled rural leaders, they will definitely lower the disparity between cities and rural areas given the existing technology. It will not however, be tolerated by our elite.

The bargaining position of the South is weak because the elite in the South take pride in slavishly aping the North.

You have insisted upon a global right to survival for all human beings. Why not extend this right to the non-human beings also? I find that all environmentalists dither on this particular point.

You feel that the vast numbers of unemployed and underemployed in the South can gain employment through a massive global initiative for ecological regeneration. It is however, not enough to provide a survival wage; it is also necessary to ensure better prospects for the future. This can only be possible if almost each manual labourer acquires a definite skill and takes pride in his work. This aspect is utterly neglected in our educational system. Environmentalists should not take the elitist position that only a survival wage is enough to ensure satisfaction and dignity to a manual labourer.

I also do not agree that this massive employment programme should be financed through a Planet Protection Fund. The North will never agree to tax themselves to the extent suggested. Indeed it is in their interests to keep unemployment and social divisions high in the South, as it is the interests of our elite too. Such a programme should be financed through taxing the rich agriculturists, denying subsidies to industries and levying an environment tax on city-dwellers. I do not want here to go into the details of the eco-regeneration programme.

I do not know how you can incorporate my comments in your draft. If you succeed in bargaining on the position taken in the draft, nothing like it. All good luck to you!

25 years after Rio

It is 25 years after the first multi-nation conference called the Rio Earth Summit, specifically focused on climate change, was convened in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and saw representation from 172 nations. 108 Heads of State attended this summit. It is worth

looking at the current status vis-à-vis outcome of the Rio conference and in the context of Prof. Gole's input to the India delegation which represented our country then. This note tries to take stock of where we stand 25 years hence and is there anything that is done in the

direction of what Prof. Gole suggested in his letter to Sunita Narayan and Anil Agarwal of CSE.

This commentary refers to the position that was stated by Professor Gole in his communication to incorporate views on India's position at the Rio Earth Summit 1992. The communication titled 'The Rio Conference – Some Bare Truth' is reproduced below this note for reference.

In the last 25 years, against the base commitments by many countries, our fossil fuel use has certainly not plateaued or decreased. It has only shifted more and more to the South (i.e. more developing and populous nations) making China at #1 and India at #4 among the top five CO₂ emitters in the world. Aggregate energy use in the world has only increased. Even while India's per capita emission is substantially below the world average, the aggregate emission is now at #4. This has been so for two reasons – The North (i.e. developed countries including the West and Japan) has found a way to enjoy the benefits of goods and services to their liking, but by externalizing the cost by outsourcing and importing the goods of necessity and luxury. The countries supplying these goods are bearing the brunt of pollution and also taking the blame of polluting, even while the North is enjoying the fruits of these products and services and claiming that they are using similar level of energy as before or have dipped marginally in the energy use within their boundaries.

One of the key phrases used by Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narayan in their discourse then was 'Global Environmental Democracy'. If we interpret this literally, a global citizen must be able to decide what she or he wants from the environment and must have a corresponding choice. Unfortunately, most of the citizens of the world, predominantly from the South, still do not have that option. One section of the populations across the world, irrespective of the country borders, consume as much as they want to, emit far more carbon in the atmosphere than they should, and the consequences are being borne by those who do not necessarily belong to this section and do not have a wherewithal to counter the downsides for this negative environmental impact. This is not just so with CO₂ emission but true of all the commons. Garret Hardin's 'Tragedy of the Commons' is showing its most serious facet in terms of climate change today. Bottom line – we are as far away from achieving Global Environmental Democracy and are at the same place as we were in 1992, if not in a worse position. Only difference that we see has happened is that people do talk about this as an important subject and give it only a

lip service in most cases. Even then I believe this is one positive step.

If we look locally and our position at large, there is still the same divide between the haves and have nots as 25 years ago. If at all, it has increased. Income share of the top 1% has grown by around 8% since 1993. Clearly, this is at the expense of the remaining population. It may be argued that percentage of people living below poverty line has decreased substantially in absolute terms and the economic dividends are making some headway in relieving the short-term poverty situation in the country. But the data also says that this has not resulted in equivalent reduction in malnourished and hungry children. There is only a marginal improvement (46% to 40%) compared to the more dramatic reduction in absolute poverty from more than 50% to around 21%. It must however be noted, that is at the expense of continued damage to the commons which is bound to lead to serious questions on sustainability in view of energy and other resources. Having said that, has the income of the poor grown at the pace of income of the already rich? A sad state of affairs one must admit. The divide between the city and the countryside continues, even while some welcome moves to make villages better are coming forth. Hopefully villages do not become another incarnation of cities and become unsustainable and energy guzzling beasts. Moreover, increased dependence of products of fossil fuels in terms of agrochemicals and fertilizers is leading to substantial loss in soil quality and water quality.

Prof. Gole had suggested strengthening village institutions then. There have been some positives in terms of putting decision making at the village level. The concept of Panchayat Raj has been a good political experiment in this direction, however we may not be able to say that of most other village institutions today. There is an ongoing need to strengthen the healthcare infrastructure and capability in rural areas. Should wisdom prevail, decision making at the Panchayat level could make changes in the desired direction. Efforts by village communities to own and conserve forests and other natural resources around them are more of an exception than a rule, though the constitution now gives them this ability.

Prof. Gole's prophecy of continued use of brute force for resources (read 'Oil') after 1989 Iraq world war has also come true. We have had the 2001 Iraq war as an unfortunate testimony.

The current perspective of most policy-makers and business leaders is very much anthropocentric and there is no realization that unless we as humans take

care of all the Bio-Physical capital and assets at large, we have no real future.

There has been some movement in the direction of vocational education in schools at least at an education level. Hopefully, this will be translated into creation of good quality jobs in the countryside. The program of mass scale ecological regeneration to create jobs and conserve natural resources, proposed by Agarwal and Narayan and also by Prof. Gole, has still not taken off. On the contrary, industries are being further subsidized and protection of our nature continues to be a serious question mark.

Policies do not seem to be oriented towards better equity and sustainability. The direction still is GDP growth, which translates into accelerated pace of natural resource use under the assumption that this will bring us out of poverty. This effectively means we are moving towards an unsustainable world more quickly.

One of the suggestions that came from Prof. Gole was denying the market access to the North by the developing world as a negotiating tool for resource equity. The reality today is probably exactly the opposite; most markets of the South are wide open for business for the North, courtesy WTO. Interestingly, the North is facing a bit of heat more due to labor mobility and they are now turning protectionist, after having fully reaped the fruits of global high-value trade. Would that mean that they will be all fine if South denies them to get in their markets? I doubt if that would be so. The North has become more and more dependent on the South not just as a market but also as a factory of the world. The world has become far too interconnected for any easy resolution of who is whose market.

To summarize, Professor Gole's inputs are at least as valid as they were 25 years ago, if not even more valid today. He had commented that a proposed 'Planet Protection Fund', where using more technology to solve the problems of 'pollution' in the developing world is not a sound idea as historically, more technology has meant even more pollution at a planet level. A similar idea has been proposed again at COP21 in Paris (2015) and it was accepted that a fund be created by the developed nations. However due to political reasons at the international level, such a fund is not yet functioning in any serious way.

The increased change of pace of doing business, extensive dependence on IT and other complex technologies, higher per capita calorie intake, and hunger for mobility of the global population, are further accelerating use of natural resources and change in land use. This is creating further stress on already stressed planetary boundaries. We are on the way to 6th Mass extinction, the world is warming at a rapid pace and looks like we will cross the 2°C critical limit. Countries seem to be saying that they will follow protectionist policies – which might be a ray of hope in fact. Globalization and its untoward impacts on social and ecological health of countries might just get arrested by these overtures by countries like the US and the UK. The US however might flout all the restraint required on fossil fuel use, which has always been a contentious issue. This will raise further questions on a sustainable future.

The ensuing scenario will be topsy-turvy at best. We must continue with our efforts to push for ecological restoration as means to restoring natural wealth and at the same time create a large number of jobs. Supplementing these with vocational inputs and village improvement programs for sustainable future will remain important for us to tread a path of improved well-being for the masses.

UNDP has been working on finding ways to make the world a better and more equitable place and has come up with Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. While these initiatives cover some of the areas, both these still subscribe to the economic growth paradigm in conventional terms, which makes the possibility of sustained success a huge challenge. India, has performed modestly on the MDG front. A detailed analysis is available at <http://www.in.undp.org/content/india/en/home/post-2015/mdgoverview.html>.

Prof. Gole would have questioned the technology and growth paradigm that is professed while talking about implementation of MDGs and SDGs. He would have hoped that a more holistic and bio-environmental approach would make far more sense than keeping the current anthropocentric model with excessive focus on technology.

His visionary thinking, this reprint being an example, continues to guide us at Ecological Society.