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Towards a New Society: A Feminist Perspective?

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Abstract: The journey of a society is marked by quests and realizations, challenges and responses to myriads of happenings, all of which partially satisfy the continuing search for self-realization in an environment that is at times facilitative and at times self-defeating. While the search for self-realization is universal, the events of human history tend to favour some rather than the others at different epochs. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, there has been a greater consciousness of the inequalities in society, which give a privileged position to some, while others remain in a state of passive dependency. The tension and conflict provoked by the practice of inequality in various contexts of human interaction give rise to initiatives and movements that tend to restore the balance of a society and open vistas of thought and action.

Keywords: Industrial revolution, Feminine perspective, Gender studies, Self-realisation

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While the search for self-realization is universal, the events of human history tend to favour some rather than the others at different epochs. Ever since the Industrial Revolution, there has been a greater consciousness of the inequalities in society, which give a privileged position to some, while others remain in a state of passive dependency. The tension and conflict provoked by the practice of inequality in various contexts of human interaction give rise to initiatives and movements that tend to restore the balance of a society and open vistas of thought and action.

It is through the dissatisfaction and restlessness created by social inequality, that one searches not merely to restore a balance but to find the deeper foundations on which human dignity stands. In our times, there is no word more frequently used than the word "development". This concept seems to embrace the goal of all social planning and endeavour. Has it enabled society to come closer to the goal of self-realization for the millions who populate our planet earth?

The Quest for Development: A Patriarchal Paradigm

The quest for development was originally to give persons a better standard of living, with the understanding that improvement in the economic sphere determines "better standards" of life. Growth in (the possession of) capital has thus become the highway of progress and status in our world. Technology has become an instrument of economic growth and a source of power to control the destiny of society within nations the world over. The technological explosion has created such a sense of euphoria among the "men" who mastermind it that their claim to power becomes an end in itself. Power seeks to justify its position under various reasonings and holds sway over person and natural resources, reducing them to the status of objects to be used by the one in control.

In this perspective, plans and policies are framed to safeguard and promote the interests of the powers that be, not the good of all. To take measures that empower others becomes threatening to their own position, hence plans remain on paper, not an action to follow up and carry out.

The lust for power is accompanied by the fear of losing power, hence every care must be exercised to consolidate

and entrench one's position by fair means or foul. Those who can question the status quo must be held in check by any means, even aggression, violence or annihilation. Thus is continued the stance of neglect of and violence towards vulnerable groups like women, children, dalits, tribals, etc. Despite international conferences and increased legislation to promote the cause of women, violence against women continues with blatant disregard for legal norms.

The centres of affluence and power must flourish at any cost, even if they become overgrown, congested, polluted urban agglomeration. To feed those centres of industrial development, rural areas must sacrifice their natural resources and the harmony of their being; to accommodate mega-projects of development rural and tribal populations are uprooted into the nowhere of impoverishment.

In the quest for development, thousands must survive on pavements, streets and slums in the most dehumanised conditions of life. Elaborate systems of health care with ultramodern equipment for diagnosis are proliferating but the common man and woman breathe polluted air, drink contaminated water and live in unhygienic, dilapidated homes and surroundings. Our communication system is binding us by cables, but we need to be frisked at airports and to look for signs of possible bombs as we move around. The rate of literacy and education is moving upwards, but one lacks courage to take a stand for social justice. Human life is

the easy target of political, criminal and terrorist attacks. Investments in nuclear weapons are increasing to maintain security on our borders but panic and fear are increasingly gripping the hearts and homes, the buildings and streets of our neighbourhoods.

In this dismal scenario of a development that tends to remain primarily economic and gender-biased, one looks for signs of hope that can challenge the domination of a patriarchal system. The Eco-Feminist movement which came into being as a response to violence against women and nature provides a new perspective in the search for a meaningful development.

Eco-Feminism: A Concern for Life

The Concept of "Eco-Feminism" took off from movements like "Chipko" and "Greenpeace," where women took the initiative to protest and prevent the destruction of nature that infringed on people's right to livelihood and health, under the label of development works.

The growth of women's and ecological movements is a response to the aggressive domination of the existing paradigm of development, but the search for meaning goes beyond mere profeminist or environment-friendly stands. It is in effect a pro-life quest which recognises the deep mystery of life in the womb of woman and mother earth. It is there that life on this planet takes root and receives the nurturance required for growth and development. How then can development effort streamroll over the very stirrings of life and energy on our planet?

The principle of life is a mystery. It cannot be produced in the laboratories of this world. It is a gift to value and nurture according to its own rhythm of growth. Life is sacred. It calls for recognition and respect; it is not to be used as a commodity. Life has a purpose – a purpose which must be understood and accepted according to its plan in the divine panorama of creation.

Interconnectedness of Life

The first law of ecology is, everything is understood as connected to everything else. This consciousness that everything and everyone is connected to everything and everyone else allows for a recognition of self as one really is, and not as dependent on the dynamics of power equations.

The interconnectedness of persons and things is necessary for the completeness of the whole. The mutual dependence of the parts is not a weakness but a bonding for the strength of the whole. Each part is important and contributes to the well-being of the whole.

In this perspective there can be no domination or trampling upon the rights of the other. If such a deviation occurs, the whole suffers by being deflected from its goal. If there is male domination or even female domination at any point, it will adversely affect the growth of the whole – our planet, Earth. Our society today seems to be heading along the path of self-destruction. The principle of domination must yield to respect for life and life-nurturing processes. Eco-feminism is a call to an awareness of life, not in the frozen figures of the

gross National Product but as it flows in our homes, fields and villages, in our tribal hamlets and urban slums. It is an awareness of life as experienced in the present reality. It is a call to experience the inter-connectedness of persons as one shares the “joys and sorrows, griefs and anxieties” beyond the barriers of gender, race, religion or culture.

A Way of Life

Contemplation: Eco-feminism invites us to develop a contemplative attitude towards creation. It rejuvenates the story of creation and invests nature and persons with a reverence that development workers tend to take for granted. How deep are the lessons that Mother Earth unfolds as she gives birth to life in its varied splendour, nurtured in the silence and hiddenness of her womb! Her rich contribution is integrated into the quality of human life. How much more does one need to read the book of nature to sense the serene touch of the divine in our world?

Collaboration: The very breath of our lives keeps humanity in constant communion with the cosmos. God breathed into the human form and man and woman received the breath of life. It is this breath of life that moves in harmonious unity between people, earth and sky. Each part has a place in togetherness with the whole to keep the purpose of creation alive. We may call it solidarity or networking, but it brings together a collective interest and action for the larger causes affecting our world. Nature has her own identity and pattern of living which humanity cannot ignore. Our collaboration must encompass, not

only the human element, but the vast, varied forces of nature.

The spiritual tradition of India has much to contribute in this regard as embodied by the prayer of the Rishis: "*Loka Samastha Sukhino Bhavantu*" (May the entire world be in happiness), or by the line in the Upanishads: "*Vasudhaiva Kudubakam*" (The entire world is my family). Such an attitude also breeds a sense of concerned vigilance for the interest of the larger family.

Simplicity of Life-Style: The restlessness of modernity makes people ill at ease with the simplicity of nature. Baba Amte, speaking at the protest against the Narmada dams in Harsud, said: *The objective is not to stop a dam but to change human wants and life-styles.*" On the same occasion, Sunderlal Bahuguna said: *"To my mind the two basic characteristics of development are that it should be sustainable and ethical. This is possible only if we adopt a life-style in which we practise austerity and fulfil our basic needs from renewable sources."*

Person-Centred: The thinking, prayer, reflective power of our world is

invested in human persons. More than material constructions and machines it is the inner potential of our being which enables us to live life to its fullness. It is this creative energy which is the true source of power in the search for happiness and fulfilment; whereas the domination of the patriarchal paradigm leads to the triumph of a few at the cost of the society where their life-energy loses its scope for creative contribution. It is a sensitive concern for that which can sustain the deep yearnings of the human heart in the hidden recesses of our world. It is from the wellsprings of power within persons that one can draw creative resources to give shape and direction to our planet.

The questions of conflict and competition in the collective movement of humanity towards self-realization can best be answered when our common, ultimate goals become clearer and closer to our deep inner striving. In the words of Isaiah:

*"Yahweh shaped the earth and
made it.*

*He did not create it to be chaos
He formed it to be lived in ..."*

That we may live, as a community,
unto Him.

Notes

1. Joy K.P.(ed.), *Eco-Development and Nature Conservation*, New Delhi: AIACHE, 1994.
2. Bernice Marie-Daly, "Eco-Feminism: Sacred Matter/Sacred Mother," *Teilhard Studies* 25 (Autumn 1991).