

NEW CHALLENGES: BUDDHIST PROPOSAL FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

World is now on the edge of turmoil. Political instability, economic insecurity, excessive exploitation of natural resources, religious conflicts, violence, all are posing a threat for world community. It is becoming more serious with the problem of immigration. Today migration is not a simple issue as it was perceived earlier, it is a complex issue and done with a certain agenda that is creating social anxiety, tension and conflict. Now it is more important to raise the issue as the policy of multiculturalism is questioned, simply policy of tolerance and indifference cannot work though it was believed earlier that the policy of multiculturalism will naturally resolve most of the problems of the modern world and would be able to create a society that would be more inclusive and more just. But now Nations are raising their boundaries to restrict 'others' to take benefit from their social, political, economical and human resources.

*So the world needs new theme, a new proposition for sustainable society that would acceptable to all and accommodate all. Buddhism is welcomed by the world community for its insight for rational inquiry and now it has greater appeal to masses than the earlier generations because of its scientific and analytic explanations which suits to modern man scientific spirit. John Rawls an American philosopher in his book *A theory of Justice* proposed the conception of 'society as cooperation' and perceived society a cooperative venture of mutual advantage and*

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constructed rules for cooperation with the help of artificial devise original position. But it does not claim to create bonding and belongingness among its members. Here it is important to explore Buddhism what is its response in this situation as it is rightly said that any type of major changes brings with itself a sense of uncertainty and Buddhism not only pacifies but also gives methods skillfully approaching difficult situation.

The paper will be divided into two parts. The first part will deal with contemporary issues and Rawls' conception of sustainable society and second part will consider the Buddhist proposal for sustainable society.

"We still in spite of the efforts of three countries of moral philosophy and one of sociology, lack any coherent, rationally defensible statement of a liberal individualistic point of view." Alasdair Macintyre

Contemporary world is witnessing political instability, economic insecurity excessive exploitation of natural resources, religious conflicts and violence. All are posing a threat for world community. It is becoming more serious with the problem of immigration. Because now immigration is not a simple issue as it was perceived earlier, it is a complex issue and done with a certain agenda. So it is creating social anxiety, tension and conflict among the native members. Now it is more important to raise this issue because policy of multiculturalism is being questioned. Earlier it was believed that policy of multiculturalism will naturally resolve the cultural conflicts and social tension of the world and it would be able to create a society that would be more inclusive and more just. But unfortunately the result is not achieved and in the name of multiculturalism separatism and fundamentalism is encouraged and emerged radicalism, and revival of old fashioned irrational practices contrary to human dignity and respect.

This is the reason that most of the countries denounced the policy of multiculturalism. Some though not openly rejected the policy of multiculturalism but limited its scope and application.

In 17th century the world was struggling for better political system that would be accountable to its entire citizens and, would not discriminate among members and have respect and concern for all its members. In 18th and 19th century the focus was on new inventions and new technology for better health services and for better agriculture. In 20th century the world was fighting for the assurance of human rights, but in 21st century the whole world is struggling for sustainability, the sustainability of

society. So it is important to investigate what are the major threats for the sustainability and in this reference I have tried to explore Buddhism if there is any new story or new proposition or principles that would help for sustainability of society.

1. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Sustainability of society is essentially related with the very existence of human being and if it is threatened, the very existence of human beings is threatened. So there is urgent need to work for sustainability and make a long term plan to move in this direction. Many morally concerned people believe “Humanity struggle now it is to survive is to re-examine its experience in the world and come to some deeper understanding of the way civilizations reduced the vividness and range of human experience by confining it to a linguistic system and metaphors that take charge as individuals came up of age.” (Kenneth K Inada, Nalon p. Jacobson 1984 p.381)

Where as some other people believe unless a society is just it cannot be stable and if it not stable it cannot be sustainable. They believe that it is the unjust economic system of the world which is the main threat for sustainability of society. “Many morally unconcerned today believe, we should make moderate changes in the present economic order, so as to render it just and sustainability . Others believe the basic principles that govern the global economy today inherently lead to increasing injustice and unsustainability.” (Light Andrew and Rolston Holmes 2002 p.359) but this is not the whole truth, other factors are also responsible for unsustainability and the sad part is that most of the efforts done by the world community have not shown a remarkable result

So it requires a new framework new theme, and a new propositions so that world can move forward for the sustainability of society. The paper is an analysis of the Buddhist proposal for sustainable society as Buddhism has become a leading voice on global issues. Sustainability is an essential condition for the very existence of human being and if there is problem regarding the sustainability of society, it must be considered urgently with a plan that would accommodate all and assure all ‘Present and future generation’ for just and sustainable social order.

When we look at the debates on the concern for environment, United Nation in 1972 held the conference on the Human Environment and United Nations Environment Program had addressed various environment issues as increasing rate of pollution. In 1980 United Nations Environment Program published World Conservation Strategy and here the sustainable development was used and here it was recognized that development and sustainability cannot be mutually independent.

1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development 'WCED' published, "Our Common Future." The Brundtland Committee Report which proposed that global sustainability within the context of an interdependent relationship between nations and environment preservation are necessary and indispensable association. In 1991 WWU, WWF, UNEP and IUCN published caring for Earths: A strategy for sustainable living (1991).

The question is if there are so many programmes that have been designed or framed for sustainable societies, why still we are struggling for sustainability. The fact of reality is that it is still difficult to convince nations to implement the policy for sustainable development. Even after 30 years since the Brundtland Committee Report has been published nothing seriously has been done for the sustainability of the society. Though it was mentioned as 'Our Common Future', so there must be a common responsibility of all the members of this world for the sustainability of the world, but the fact is neither the government nor non government organizations are serious on the issue of sustainability. The reason is clear that it does not appeal to common man, it does not awaken and created awareness among common individual for the issue. There is an urgent need for new theme for sustainability that would appeal to both common individual as well as professional and Buddhism can help in this direction.

2. DISCUSSION

The discussion in this paper concerned on two questions that:

- What are real threats for sustainability?
- Is there a new inspiration for sustainability in Buddhism?

Both these questions are very important because unless it is identified the real threat for sustainability, it would be difficult to find the solution.

Buddhism is welcomed by world community for its insight for rational enquiry and it is also true that now it has a greater appeal to masses than the earlier generation, because of its emphasis on scientific and analytic explanations that appeals to the modern men's scientific spirit. It is true that Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world but as a philosophy it cover more than the 80% of the population of the world and the reason behind is its openness to rational inquiry for its fundamental principle, its non essentialist and nor universalistic in approach.

So it is important to explore how Buddhism responds to this situation? It is rightly said that any type of major change brings with itself a sense of uncertainty and Buddhism not only specifies but also gives methods for skill fully approaching difficult situations. The world has witnessed the power of Buddhist practice in approaching difficult situation whether it may be American war on Vietnam or the football team players along with the coach trapped in the cave in Bangkok. How they responded in the situation sets an example for others.

But the first question that must be answered, why sustainability of society is so much important for human being?. The answer is man is characterized as a social animal. It means human history and history of society is synonymous. So if the sustainability of society is in danger, it is also true that even the existence of human being is endangered.

Rawls in his book A theory of justice proposed the conception of 'society as cooperation' and he perceived society as a cooperative venture for mutual advantage. To construct the rule of cooperation he used an artificial device 'veil of ignorance', so that rules will be rational as well as reasonable and would be acceptable to all under impartial point of view. Unless a society is just it can be stable and it cannot expect cooperation from all the members and if it is not stable it cannot be sustainable. But only a theory cannot help a society to become just, stable and sustainable. It is claimed by the

most of the sincere thinkers of the world that present economic system is unjust and responsible for deeper inequalities. So they believe that “we should make moderate changes in the present economic order so as to render it just and sustainable.” (Light Andrew and Rolston Holmes 2002 p.359) But the threat for sustainability does not come only from unjust economic order. It comes from two directions:

- Exploitation of natural resources
- Conflicts in social relations.

The term sustainability was first popularized in the field of resource usage and had very limited applications. “Such as maximum sustainable yield which represents the highest level of exploitation consistent with maintaining a study flow of resources.”(Neil John, Turner Kerry 2001 p.616) The most cited definition of sustainability given by Brundtland that mentioned multiple interrelated environment and human problems that affecting the planet; and it suggested that development should meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need.

Almost all definitions of the sustainability focuses on the economic relation between nature and human being but sustainability is a moral concept also which expects moral obligation from human being towards nature and towards other fellow beings (present and future) and it demands a balance and harmony between environment sustainability, economic sustainability and socio political sustainability and it demands a social order which would embrace all the members and would guarantee the same for future generation.

3. EXPLOITATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Exploitation of Natural Resources is the first major threat for the sustainability.

The natural resources are of two types:

- Reservoir
- Regenerative Resources

Reservoirs are that natural resources which are created by nature in the course of millions of years. Human being cannot create these with his own effort. These resources are essential for human life and men were using them since the beginning of this existence on earth. If it is the case how it has become a threat for sustainability. The reason is with the advancement of technology one can extract these reservoirs to maximum limit and the new materialistic thinking provoked him to extract these to the maximum and this has created a threat for sustainability.

But sustainability in this sense challenged on two grounds:

- There reservoirs are limited in character. So it will end in the course of time, so if they end today or tomorrow, it does not matter. The fact is that it will end on some day. We cannot extent it to unlimited generations. So the critics challenged the urge for sustainability. They claimed “As a social goal sustainability is fraught with unresolved question. Sustainability for how long; a generation, one century, a millennium, ten millennium.”(Neil John Turner R. Kerry and Bateman J Ian 2001) One cannot stretch it for eternal. So what is wrong in using these resources lavishly for our pleasure?
- Men is the in the centre place of the nature. Everything in the nature is created for his use. So there is nothing wrong in exploiting nature for his own purpose.

Both these arguments raised against sustainability are misleading. The first argument that claims sustainability as fraught is misguided because it is not about calculation of the quantity of natural reservoir but it is the question of moral responsibility for future generation. And second argument that claims as men as supreme creature in this universe that he is in the centre of this universe has no scientific and empirical support.

4. REGENERATIVE RESOURCES

Such as water, air and agriculture etc., if these are used with caution it is regenerated by the nature itself, but today excessive exploitation of water, air pollution and over exploitation of land, use of chemicals endangering even the existence of human being.

It cannot be stopped without change in the perception of human being towards the world.

5. CONFLICTS IN SOCIAL RELATION

The most serious threat for sustainability comes from conflicts in social relations. Diversity is the characteristic of modern society. People with different culture, tradition, different way of life, having different values have to live together. The better modes of conveyance and liberal laws of immigration made it easy for the people to migrate from one place to another, but the problem is, this migration flow is only one way. Sometimes migrants move in search of better opportunity, sometimes because of exploitation, sometimes because of the threat of terrorism and because it is only of one way, it is creating burden on the natives and leading violence, anxiety, conflicts and tension among the people.

It was in the latter half of the 20th century, diversity was acknowledged by the states and most of the countries in the world adopted the policy of multiculturalism to resolve the conflicts and to create a space that would embrace and respect all. It was believed that policy of multiculturalism would create a space where everyone can respectfully lead one's life. It was introduced to create harmony and togetherness among its members but in the name of multiculturalism emerged radicalism, conservatism, fundamentalism and revival of old fashioned, irrational traditions contrary to human respect. This is the reason the policy of multiculturalism is now questioned and most of the countries some explicitly denounced this policy of multiculturalism and some though not openly rejected the policy but limited its scope and application, it is also true the diversity is the fact of reality and no one can reject and neglect it.

So, there is an urgent need for new theme and new perspective to acknowledge this diversity and create a bond and togetherness among members. Buddhism is trying to provide a new theme and new framework for plural society. It has become a leading voice for environmental ethics and for pluralism. The question again comes why the world is expecting new framework for sustainability from Buddhism, because there are so many religions which also have

something to say on these problems then why Buddhism has greater responsibility? The reasons are, that the virtues and scientific temper of Buddhism not only appeals to its followers but to most of the rational groups of human beings and second the method of Buddhism that diagnose the cause problem as physician diagnose the disease by seeing the symptoms and this diagnosis is done on four stages, first identifying the problem, finding the cause of the problem on the basis of its principle of .Pratityasamutpada, finding the way to cure it and finally .curing it. Pratityasamutpada is the causal principle of Buddhism that says if 'this' exists, that will follow and if 'this' do not exist 'that' would not follow. So if you want 'that ' continue to 'this' and if you do not want 'that' discontinue 'this'. Nothing in the world is uncaused. So if there is a situation which is endangering the human existence, it also must be caused and through the chain of causal relation, one can reach the main cause then only it can be cured.

If we look at the irrational and selfish behaviour of human being towards nature it is only because of the wrong perception about nature of human being. On the one hand he is perceived as material body where he is only a material body where he is only consumer and confines only to his body because each body is individual body. So he does not have any concern and responsibility for other individuals and on the other extreme he is perceived as eternal self who is indifferent to the world, but according to Buddhism human being is the combination of five skandhas Rupe, Vedna, Samjna, Samskara & Vijnana. So man is neither material body nor only consciousness, but he is the combination of five elements along with the three other elements, he is the combination of the five elements and so it needs the balance among these five elements. It is also important mote that among these five Skandhas there is only first one that expresses physical body and rest four are the mental body and so when individual acts as a consumer, he focuses only on his physical body and neglects his mental body so he cannot lead harmonious life and the result is suffering. Man is not something over and above the nature, neither he is apart from nature but he is part of nature. So in this world of interdependence, exploitation of one effects the whole series. So if human race wants to survive, it must have harmonious relation with nature, society and world. Buddhism do not support

anthropocentric approach that claims that man is superior or supreme in this world and he must protect nature for his own welfare, instead it claims that it is a moral claim 'not to kill' and 'not to destroy' and lead a harmonious life with nature then only he can realize his true nature. That is egoless, substance less and momentary and in this way it attacks on the root of exploitation of nature that is the greedy attitude of human being towards nature. It does not boast to change the world rather it changes the perspective towards world.

Conflict in social relation usually occurs because of the non acceptance for opinions, traditions and culture that are different from their own. Buddha not only acknowledged the existence of different opinions and faith, he advised his followers to have patience to listen the views that are different to them, it will help them to explain their views with more clarity even in the case. "Other should malign the Buddha the Dhamma and Sangha, you must not feel resentment, nor displeasure, nor anger on the account. You should explain (to them) what is false as false and saying it is not so." (Brahmajala Sutta of Digha Nikaya p.5) Open-mindedness and rational discourse are essential for conflict resolution and Buddhism favours both. In Culaviyha Sutta of Digha Nikaya it is advised by Buddha. "Standing rigidly to his own views and depending on his own criteria, he enters into dispute in the world. Desisting from all the theories the wise one does not enter the dispute in the world" (Sutta Nipata) Difference of opinion is main reason for social conflicts and the liberal model to avoid this conflict is non interference and toleration but it does not has any positive approach to ease the tension. In Paramatthapa Sutta of Sutta Nipata mentions- "The person abiding by a certain dogmatic view considering it is the highest in the world claims this is the most excellent and disparages others view, different from that as inferior. As a result he is not free from disputes." (Sutta Nipata 796) Buddha's approach towards other faith is not based on mere toleration. Toleration is a rational behaviour towards different faith and beliefs but mere toleration cannot built a bond among the members and it is the compassion which relates oneself to others and because of the compassion one can extend oneself to such an extend which includes otherness and so he can feel the pain and sorrow of others and can subverts his egoist nature.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude it can be said that Buddhism has lots of potentiality to construct a new proposition for sustainable society. Though it is true that there is no set or universal formula to settle the problem in Buddhism but the important is its unique methodology, its scientific temper to inquire into the problem. To trace this cause, then to try to end the cause of that one and the interest point is Buddhist approach appeals both to its followers and non followers.

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