

## UNDERSTANDING NATURE AND UN-UNDERSTANDING ENVIRONMENT: A NON-WESTERN CONCEPTION OF SUSTAINABILITY

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### ABSTRACT

*Arturo Escobar in his book Encountering Development (1995), draws attention of the world on the special formation of development discourse and how this formation changes the world view of third world countries towards development, sustainability and growth. Based on works of Foucault, analyzed discourse of development that how “dynamics of discourse and power in the representation of social reality, in particular, has been instrumental in unveiling the mechanisms by which certain order of discourse produces permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and even making others impossible” (Escobar 1995: 15). In this context, this paper discusses how by emphasizing on the discourse of environment, the west had made the other discourse, the discourse of Nature impossible thus changing the whole worldview towards sustainability of life. This paper first discusses how the very concept of development, growth itself is unsustainable, second, how the western discourse of development has changed the concept of Nature to environment, thus changing the whole worldview towards sustainability, and finally, some recommendations that how once can by reversing the concept of Nature from environment can make the life more sustainable. My final arguments would be based on indigenous knowledge of sustainability.*

**Keywords:** Discourse, Development, Nature, Environment, Indigenous knowledge.

### INTRODUCTION

In modern period, world competes in quantitative terms, not in qualitative. It is the GNP, GDP, per capita income that determines the ‘growth’ of people and countries. Therefore, underdeveloped, developing and developed or first world and third world countries have become the common notion of measuring the growth rate. Thus, it is not the basic needs that determine the production, but on the contrary, it is GNP and GDP ratios that determine the production. In this context, countries rush to exploit ‘Natural resources’ to expand their growth rate and increase GNP, but “third world government’s compulsion to drive up the GNP, turn many into cheerful enemies of nature”. (Sachs 2010: 26). In this economization of world, nature have become key target and victim of countries thus natural resources is not any more for human survival, rather than as an indicator of country’s growth. Developed countries are developed because they possess technology to exploit the natural resources more than underdeveloped countries and lesson for underdeveloped countries are to use that western led technology more and more to exploit their natural resources so as to be termed as developed. And for that underdeveloped countries unleash their environmental programs on nature, at the level that nature remains only for exploitation, not for survival or sustainable.

For modern economics non-monetary measures of well-being are not important. For example, “UN lists Bhutan as one of the world’s most improvised countries, even though almost all of its people have adequate food, clothing and shelter.....and more time for families and friends than most western countries (NorbergHdgc and Goering 1995: 12). The only things Bhutan perhaps lack is industrialization and high-tech society, that is must in modern sense. What matters for modern economics is GDP and per capita income, even on the cost of basic human needs. This is because; modern economic system is a reductionist science. It is reductionist because it views the whole world in economic terms only. The following pages are the story of that modern economic development that has changed the concept of nature into environment, thus nature remains only for exploitation. For that

West has created the development discourse and that has changed world view of third world countries towards development, sustainability and of nature.

### **Development: A story of violence on Nature**

Development in East comes as a form of redemption for ‘uneducated and barbaric lifestyle of people...that development, through its scientific rationality could eliminate the irrational and “idiocy of rural life” (Nandy 1994: 07). To put it in other words, for East to become the West, it is important to follow the lines of scientific development, but not cultural or natural order. In this regard, Escobar’s critique of development has important connotations. For Escobar (1995), the important question is “how certain type of reality has been produced along with disqualifying and even making others impossible” (Escobar 95: 05), that means how underdeveloped countries started to see themselves as underdeveloped? How the other realities for underdeveloped countries – the natural or cultural realities – become impossible?

For Escobar, development works at three major levels, “first, the forms of knowledge that refer to it and through which objects, concepts and theories come into being, second, the system of power that regulate its practices and third, the forms of subjectivity...through which people come to recognize themselves as developed and underdeveloped” (Escobar 95: 10 -11). Here, reality has been created, the reality of being developed and underdeveloped. Knowledge of being underdeveloped created through expert economic theories and through these theories power of western development as a social reality has been imposed on all third world countries and this was the new form of colonization, the colonization of subjectivity. This all has produced the reality that “development is the fate of all societies” (Nandy 1994: 09).

The air of development that started in 1945 after World War II has started to shape the world, especially to newly independent countries, to shed cultural way of life and to adopt scientific rationality. And this was first echoed in the speech of US President Henry Truman, when Truman declared that “More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery, their food is inadequate, they are victims of disease, and their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas (cited in Escobar 1995: 01).

He further illustrates, recommending the recipe for third world countries to get rid of these miseries. He said, “For the first time in history humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people....greater production is the key to propensity and peace. And the key to greater production is wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge (ibid).

In his recipe the only and important thing is to use the scientific technology for greater production or in other words to avoid the miseries of underdevelopment, the third world countries must develop themselves and for this development they must unleash scientific technology over nature. In this dream of development, third world countries started to see electricity in water rather than previously where water was for survival, in this dream trees becomes timber, mountains becomes minerals, earth becomes oil etc., this changing of reality through dream, changes whole notion of sustainability.

For underdeveloped countries, it is important to take their ‘development train’ on the ‘developed tracks’ set by west and for that it is important for them to improve their production or industrialization. Development remains then the only option and that is to ‘use/exploit nature to unlimited levels. At this level development by achieving the status of a certainty in the social imaginary or as Escobar said “it seemed impossible to conceptualize social reality in other terms ‘today’ (Escobar 95: 05) changes eastern perception of Nature into western concept of environment.

Development put an end to the knowledge or perception of nature, making it impossible and instead putting a new knowledge, western led economic knowledge of ‘environment’. This transformation of knowledge is inevitable for the growth of capitalism. For capitalism, it is important to exploit nature and for this exploitation the change in knowledge, thus perception is very important. Before going to details, let’s talk about how perception of people shapes their actions. For that we have to consult cognitive anthropology.

## Cognitive Anthropology

Cognitive anthropology, Tyler (1969: 6) explains, “how other people create order out of what appears to him to be utter chaos.” To say, these are humans who make the world in order by using different things in particular way. “There is nothing in the external world which demands that certain things go together and others do not” (ibid). Humans classification of things, and its perception is subjective depends upon cultural models. Cultural models are important in offering a “description of the world framed in terms of network of interconnected images or propositions, in which objects, events and situations take on regular prototypical form. Actual experience in the real world is then organized by matching it to the prototypical scenario built into the simplified worlds” (ibid). Thus human perception of things, its use, and classification actually depends on cultural models. “Cultural models do not merely describe or represent the world; they also shape people’s feelings and desire. That is to say, they can have motivational force” (ibid).

One can conclude from this that the diversity of cultural models provide us with the diversity of classification and use of things in universe or in other words people from different culture will use differently of same thing. One can say that the perception is actually a cultural model and same cultural model provide justification for particular action in that culture. For example, the concept of Gaia, Mother Earth in Greek mythology or Prakriti in Hindu mythology actually is a perception of people of respective culture about nature and same is the motivational factor behind their actions with nature. In this context, one can trace that when people start to view things around him or her as environment, they also behave accordingly that is to say exploitatively. But when people’s vantage point is of Nature, their actions tend to be reciprocal.

## Non-west’s Nature and West’s environment

One should not confuse the words environment and nature. “Environment is more recent scientific discourse, while nature is as old as the earth itself is – nature when she becomes the object of politics and planning turns into ‘environment’ (Sachs 2010: 33). Timothy W. Luke (1995) in his article “On Environmentalism: Geo-Power and Eco-Knowledge in the discourse of contemporary Environmentalism” traces the use of words ‘environment’, ‘environmentalism’ and ‘environmentalist’ in western discourse. He said that “before 1965, the use of environment in ordinary discourse actually was quite rare in most policy discourses. But later in the 1990s and after, nature in these discourses occasionally will speak as ‘Nature’ but increasingly its presence is marked as ‘the environment’ (Luke 1995: 59, 60). Such transformation of Nature to environment is very important to change the perception, thus whole actions of people towards Nature.

When we speak of environment, it put everything in the context of being superior and inferior. Humans because of its ability to use mind and can convert or divert the nature, is superior. Thus, everything becomes at the disposal of humans. He can use it, manage it, divert it or can exploit it for his own self-interest. The definition of environmental discourse defines the relationship between man and nature very impersonally, as if nature is something dead.

Indigenously the relation between men and nature is reciprocal, what you give the nature, the nature will return back. For example, in Sindh, the Sindhu River is known as Khawaja Khizer, a saint, who is sole powerful, having unlimited powers and that the saint can bless as well as desecrate. So, the whole life of the people in Sindh, especially, those who are living near or around Indus River, is defined by such elements. The reverence, veneration and awe all are owed to the saint thus to the River Indus.

In this perspective, such relationships of people with nature, in this case with River Indus, gives them self-evident knowledge about how to predict and manage the natural events. Most of the people living around the Indus River believe that ‘The Saint’ (Indus River) himself tells the local people about his coming (flood), his strength (how much flood would be), his anger or his blessings (if comes bluntly or softly). Such signals communicated by the mighty river are interpreted and translated by an elaborate system of signs and symbols embedded in the culture of Sindh. Thus the interpretation of the natural signs and symbols helps the people to successfully settle themselves in and around the river and in a harmonious relationship with nature.

For local people Nature is not divorced from human relationships rather it is important and integral part and parcel of their life and culture. Locally, the life is not defined only in terms of human or living beings, but nature is very much alive as well. Nature is not considered as indifferent towards human actions rather it is believed that ecology is sustained by a mutually beneficial and respectful relationship between human and nature. To say this ecology always returns what we give it. Locally, it is believed that if we respect the ecology it will be most benevolent to us and if we disrespect it would be malevolent. In this regard, the whole life of local people is arranged accordingly. That is to say, what they act is actually to protect ecology as if it belongs to their community like humans.

Other examples can also be derived as in Hindu mythology the concept of 'Prakiriti', "the active and productive power which permeates every stone or tree, fruit or animal and sustains them along with the human world. Prakiriti grants the blessings of nature as a gift; she has consequently to be honored and wooed (Shiva 1989: 219). Such is the perception of local people towards Nature but for industrialization, this transformation of Nature into environment was necessary; indeed, one can trace this transformation during industrialization.

During industrialization and later colonization – in search of raw materials and markets – can be taken as starting point of shift of nature into environment in western discourse. During industrialization, nature was first time seen as exploitative, not for people's needs, rather for industrial and economic growth. Human needs always have a limit, but economic growth is limitless. Thus, it has changed people's relationship with nature. Nature is something outside humans, and that human has to exploit it, not to use it.

Further one can also view that how 'resources' were being used in this industrial time, because during industrialization definition of resources were also transformed that again previously, resources were for people's survival. John Yeats said in his *Natural History of Commerce* 1870 that "resources of any country are the ore in the mine, the stone un-quarried, the timber un-felled etc. (cited in Shiva 2010: 228) Nature, here, gets new meaning of exploitation that human can for their economic growth. The mother earth termed as 'ore mines', Himalya Gods as the stones, living tress as timber and the living nature turned into "dead manipulative matter (ibid) before, industrialization or development discourse man was dependent on nature, but after its transformation into dead matter "it had become dependent on people" (ibid).

This is done through expert economic opinion or knowledge, the 'use' into exploitation and the whole interaction of people with nature into environment. This reorganization of knowledge is to "suite the demands of the new development order, which relied heavily on research and knowledge that could provide a reliable picture of country's social and economic problems" (Escobar 1992: 24).

For example, the Indian Chipko Movement, women protected trees with their bodies against chainsaw of loggers, because, women viewed those trees in symbolic and religious perception. But soon, "soft spoken forest expert moved in with their surveys, diagrams and growth curves linking trees to Indian economic growth and GNP. All this was done to lure the villagers into becoming small timber producers" (Sachs 2010: 33)

Another important notion in this regard was to change common into private, because in common, communal property, it is culture and values that protects the resources, not individual interest or invisible hands. Vandana Shiva, wonderfully portrait this that in 'ecological culture with resurgent nature, limits are recognized as inviolable and human action has to be restrained accordingly" (Shiva 2010: 234). But when goes 'private' that mean "limits are viewed as simply constraints to be removed." (ibid). Viewing limits as constraints is reductionist view of modern development discourse, while on the other hand indigenous/local knowledge view is much more contextual and diverse.

Nature is meaningless, "until humans assign meanings to it by interpreting some of its many signs as meaningful" (Bramwell 1989: 07). Putting this in this context, nature becomes as much diverse as people are, because different people, belonging to different geographical locations would interpret the nature differently. Thus, "nature's meaning always will be multiplied and unfixed" (Luke 1995: 58).

The scientific world of the west is actually a homogenization process of these cultural models. It is about to make all people of the world to view things in scientific perspective, a single homogenous

model. Science as a homogenous cultural model tries to replace itself with heterogeneous or diverse nature. As Claude Alvares states that “Nature acts according to her laws. The scientist wishes to discover these laws. He may discover a few, but the totality eludes him and will always to do so. Despite this, his effort to substitute his knowledge of natural laws for such laws themselves. (Claude Alvares 1989: 60).

The struggle of science to homogenize the world cultural on single scientific discourse is because science is innately a reductionist in nature. It’s “reductionist nature under-girds an economic structure based on exploitation, profit maximization and capital accumulation” (Shiva 1989: 121). Such reductionism of exploitation of nature is at the “root of the growing ecological crises, because it entails a transformation of nature *into environment*, such that the processes, regularities and regenerative capacity of nature are destroyed. (ibid, italic added). To say, the diversity of nature, Mother Earth, *Gia*, *Prakriti* and *Qudart* all transformed into single concept of ‘Raw material’.

## CONCLUSION

In Brundtland Report on Environmental Issues, sustainable development is defined as “the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987). In development discourse this definition is considered as a hallmark but there are certain problems in this definition if one looks in depth. For example, it is never defined in the definition that what it does mean by ‘need’? Need of whom? Need for what? Rather than defining this, the report defines the great production as the remedy of all problems including environmental. Thus, one can conclude that this ‘need’ is not need of all common people of the world, for which the commission was formed and termed as ‘our common future’, rather it is the ‘need’ of capitalist world or to say ‘a capitalist need’ has been defined in the report. Our common future has been transformed into ‘capitalist common future.’

Moreover, the report also did not define that how much we need today? How much we should exploit so as future generations need should not be compromised? And off course how much future generations would need? Moving from such questions to more critical questions that who will ensure that sustainability has been maintained or to say that we are ensuring the future generation’s needs? How we will ensure this? For me the actual problem lies in the way modern world is looking at the problem and solutions as well. They are looking the problem from single homogenous perspective of western world, though “modernity’s ability to provide solutions to modern problems has been increasing compromised. In fact, it can be argued that there are no modern solutions to many of today’s problems” (Escobar 1995: 209).

One has to look for another definition of sustainability, rather than that of Brundtland’s definition, though the same report provides us the key to the new definition that is ‘Our common future’. Here our should be heterogeneous that mean respecting and learning from other culture as well for the sustainability that how other world cultures are sustaining their resources without compromising the future generations. Rather than only imposing western development discourse on the world. Because Nature is meaningless until humans assign meaning to it and such meaning is as diverse as the human culture are.

What modern development discourse is doing that it is eliminating the people, who have been respecting nature living with it since thousands of years. But in reality the case is quite different. To put it simply, the diversification of culture gives us many insights about how nature works. The development of specific culture is actually people’s thousands of years of knowledge that they used and saved to cope with different nature’s challenges. That knowledge is meaningful; it must be conserved and used to solve the problem rather to do opposite.



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