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Narratives of Sustainability and Inclusivity. Re-thinking 'Development' from the Lens of Buddhist Ethical Thought

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Abstract

The idea of 'self-reliant' India or the present day idea of 'Viksit Bharat' is not only limited to outside economic development of the country but it is about the ethical and moral development of each citizen leading to a nation where everyone is equally involved in the decision making process of the country. Buddhist literature in the form of Jataka tales and Dhammapada instills ideas of good leadership, empathy and ethical governance in the masses. Buddhism's emphasis on interdependence, moderation, compassion encourages the policy makers towards building a nation that believes in inclusive development, sustainability and social justice. Literary artists can stir the consciousness of the masses and can go a long way in achieving the concept of Viksit Bharat. Many legendary Indian writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Amratya Sen, Arundhati Roy, Mahashweta Devi, Vandana Shiva have envisioned Viksit Bharat in their literary texts. Their imaginary compass has offered role models to policy makers in developing a society that is not only laterally developed but rather holistically developed. Social thinkers like Rousseau, Nietzsche, John Locke, Karl Marx, Thomas Hobbes have time and again stirred the conscience of the nations. The aim of the present paper is to re-think ideas of justice, sustainability and inclusivity in the selected work of Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva and Zen Buddhist novelist Ruth Ozeki. The purpose is to show how literary discourse offers and critiques un-sustainable models of development and can critically impact policy making in India as well as in other developing Nations.

INTRODUCTION

The crisis of environment is not only affecting individual lives but is influencing communities at large. The contamination of air, soil and water through heavy use of chemicals, pesticides and insecticides is polluting environment and also disrupting food chain in nature, which in turn is affecting the genetic makeup of individuals. Excessive human interference has led to the extinction of many

plant and animal species. It has badly influenced the biodiversity. To re-develop any nation the government is accountable towards framing adequate policies for achieving sustainable models of growth. Without sustainable growth development at the cost of environment has no meaning. The true dream of 'Viksit Bharat' can't be achieved without re-thinking about a sustainable model of development for Indian cities and villages. Today, the real challenge lies not in achieving rapid development of metro cities but in the building of villages and small cities without hampering environment.

Literature being the mirror of society helps in influencing the culture, attitude and behaviour of people towards society. Literary works of Indian writers in English like Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva as well as writings in world literature like novels of Zen Buddhist novelist Ruth Ozeki have reflected Buddhist ethics of 'karuna', 'compassion', 'ahimsa' 'Madhya Marg' (balance), mindfulness, sustainability, ecological justice and 'pratityasamutpada' (interdependent origination) and 'jeev vividhta' (biodiversity) in their works.

Since human practices in the past have negatively impacted the environment and the way humans look at life more and more thinkers are now concerned about the role of environment in shaping our lives. These writers have shown awareness for local economics and local narratives. They can help the policy makers in making development models keeping in mind sustainable development and management of society.

DISCUSSION

Buddhist ethics have provided ways through which suffering of humanity can be reduced by purifying the human consciousness which is intricately connected with cosmic consciousness. Buddhism has shown us the ways to get rid of suffering resulting from over consumption and greed. Lord Buddha's 'madhyamik' or middle path is the way for sustainable and mindful consumption of resources for a peaceful living. Various environmental thinkers, philosophers and activists are reflecting upon the issue of right to live .In Buddhism life consists of not only human life but also biodiversity. Various global issues like ozone depletion, global warming, and deforestation are result of a right wing thinking where few individuals will flourish at the cost of others. In Buddhism environmental concern is important branch of ethics. India is the land where Lord Buddha was born and gave his first sermon. India should adopt Buddhist principles of governance because that would automatically ensure the solution of all environmental development and ethical problems of today's era. The issue of over consumption in developed countries and survival of marginalized groups in developing countries are the real challenges for policy makers. Rapid development of cities and recreational centres for finer living pose environmental hazards. Irresponsible use of natural ecosystem by destroying natural habitat of animals for the greater safety and security of human beings is not only a Post-human question but first a question of ethics. Poverty alleviation programs seldom think about environment factors. The problem of over consumption is not new in Literature. The myth of Icarus in Greek mythology and the legend associated with Ram and Ravan have told us in- numerable times about the human dilemma of seeking completion.

Attainment of 'Absolute Wisdom' (prajna parmita) in each individual is the key to enlightenment in Buddhism. This idea of enlightenment negates every possibility of independent origin. Buddhism complements the Hindu karmik idea of re-birth where re-birth does not mean individual rebirth in time but means trans-migration of life in the evolutionary process of life. In Buddhism all cosmic phenomena is interconnected and time refers to the process of evolution in nature. In the worlds of Shuichi Yamamoto-"Since in Buddhism the trans-migration of life is based on the concept of non-self, it does not refer to the trans-migration of life with a permanent entity"(143). This oriental idea of enlightenment contradicts the Western idea of enlightenment based on independence of individual perfection and the special role it ordains to humans in the great chain of being.

The philosophy of 'madhyamika' or the middle way founded by great Mahayan Buddhist

philosopher Nagarjuna can teach sustainable development models to policy makers in both developed as well as developing nations. This concept of emptiness or 'shunyata' has been influential in developing the concept of deconstruction by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. As we are discussing about 'Viksit Bharat' the Buddhist idea of middle path can prove a long way in building intellectual culture in India that will further rethink the questions of development, governance and progress. This is where the role of a literary artist comes in. The role of a writer is not pragmatic but rather critical. Influenced by Buddhist ethics literary artists can influence the policy makers in developing more reflexive and inclusive approach towards progress. The pleasure-pain principle of the 'madhyamik' questions the linear models of development by denying deterministic stand towards either hedonism or austerity (ibid). Rather it will encourage participatory development models which are human and sustainable instead of GDP centric. The 'madhyamik' concept of emptiness, which claim the lack of inherent nature or svabhav in all things, and the concept of dependent origin making all phenomena temporary and interdependent will encourage the policy makers to look with suspicion all technocratic and capitalistic models of development ultimately leading to inclusive economic policies for a peaceful welfare state. The idea of 'Viksit Bharat' and 'Ram-Rajya' is not only about colonizing the colonial mind set but it is also about justice, welfare and social inclusion for all.

In *God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy has depicted the effect of growing population on the natural resources of the country. Velutha, the protagonist of the novel takes refuge in nature when he is betrayed by his own family members. Roy has also shown how poverty in an under developed country like India became a hindrance to environment management systems. In the novel the physical space and environment are mixed with the lives of characters. The river Meenachal is an active character in the novel, developing experiencing and suffering along with the main characters. Through the history and culture of Kerala the novel presented Roy's version of sustainability for the readers. In the novel environmental decay stands for moral and ethical degradation of the whole society because when a society participate in the over exploitation of natural resources to satisfy its greed it is already standing at the brink of destruction. This decay in values is the result of excessive desire and ignorance of human beings which are called 'lobh' and 'avidya' in Buddhist terminology. It will bring suffering to the whole humanity. The remedy lies in moral restraint and sustainable consumption.

The river Meenachal in the novel is the subject of moral decay of society. Because of irresponsible use of natural resources not only human beings have suffered but also the river has undergone tragedy. Due to accumulation of garbage in it the river also suffered along with the human subjects. Pollution of the river points towards the Buddhist principle of 'pratityasamutpada' (interdependent origin) where one aspect of biodiversity is ruled and affected by the other. Through the question of environment Roy has also bring into limelight the question of exploitive caste hierarchy in society. Without being compassionate towards nature human beings can never be compassionate towards each other. The way they have exploited nature for their greed in the same way they have exploited the caste below them in social hierarchy. Caste divisions have depicted that achieving complete sustainability in nature is impossible without achieving equality in society. The culprit here is human greed which is responsible for injustice towards nature has well as towards fellow human beings. Here it is not a question of environment but it is an ethical question. Roy envisions society where all human beings can identify their true potential without harming the interest of others and can live peacefully with nature.

The title of the novel also hints to the Buddhist principle of mindfulness of body, feelings, mind and object. It is an honest plea towards experiencing the little pleasures of life without being distracted by the lust for power, pelf and money. Roy advocates for experiencing little joys of life and seize the present moment. The novel in its portrayal of ethical collapse of a society becomes a Post-human novel. It questions the Grand narratives of progress and human

advancement. The novelist has again and again portrayed in the novel that without improving the environment question human supremacy is a hoax. The death of Velutha is not only a social and moral failure but also an ecological failure.

Vandana Shiva in her work *Staying Alive and Earth Democracy* looks with suspicion the lack of organicity in the approach of Western scientific thought. The West has never realized the principle of 'pratityasamutpada'. Their outlook at nature as an outside object of enquiry is critiqued by Shiva. She advocates nature's organic presence in the lives of human beings. In her work, she resonates Mary Shelley's famous novel *Frankenstein* which also questions Western scientific methodology of reducing nature as an object of introspection. In an apocalyptic fashion Frankenstein also forecasts the dangers of this minimalistic stance. Apart from questioning Western scientific methods Vandana Shiva also questions certain important issues like violence of Green revolution and the resultant displacement of local communities. She also portrayed women and ecology as care givers and culture and patriarchy as tools for dominance and control. She also depicted Neo-liberal Globalization as an uncontrolled monster creating suffering for the whole humanity by intensifying greed and desire. Her work in an indirect way recommends middle-path, equality and inclusiveness for all forms of life and compassion for the marginalized of the world. She also talks about the violence inherent in seed monopoly and ignorance of local indigenous ecological wisdom in favour of totalitarian modals of Western modernity.

Novels of Zen Buddhist novelist Zen Ozeki also reflect Buddhist environmental ethics of mindfulness, interdependent origin and compassion for all human beings. Her novel *A Tail for the Time Being* written in 2013 portrays the tsunami as a symbol of Impermanence and futility of human attempt for perfection. Her careful attention towards the smallest creatures of nature reminds of the Buddhist principle of mindfulness. In the novel *My Year of Meets* she vehemently opposes violence and cruelty towards animals. Through her cyclical method of storytelling she also questions Neo Liberal Capitalistic policies. She regards universal consciousness as fluid. Her view finds parallels with the non-dualistic; advaitic' principles of Indian philosophy. Critical reading of her novels can contribute towards India's post-colonial critique of Western Grand narratives of progress.

Thus, in conclusion we may say that literary works of above mentioned writers act as prophetic allegories for the dream of 'Viksit Bharat' and cautions the policy makers towards the hazards of Neo Liberal Consumer politics which negate indigenous local wisdom as obstacle in the Grand narratives of progress. The idea of 'Viksit Bharat' is not an idea for one sided progress making the citizens as passive consumers of industrial modernity, but an idea of inclusivity where the subjects are creators of a sustainable society, and where citizens can attain their agency and belongingness by actively participating in governance and policy making.

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