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THE PLANET IN PERIL AND A CIVILIZATION IN CRISIS: Reviving a Sense of the Sacred

I. The Global Environmental Crisis

Over the last three centuries following the industrial revolution the stress on the world’s eco system has been building up and has now reached a critical point. At each stage in the process of production, extraction of raw materials from the earth, fabrication of these raw materials to produce products, the consumption of products and the disposal of waste involves in most cases the generation of heat through fossil fuels. Consequently greenhouse gases are emitted into the atmosphere such as, carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. This has resulted in the phenomenon of global warming. The UN Report of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2013 reiterates the findings of the earlier 2007 IPCC Report that global warming is indeed occurring. It can be argued that this has been caused by the impact of the forms and levels of production and consumption on the planet’s eco system: “Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, [...]”¹ Furthermore the 2013 IPCC Report observes that: “The atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide have increased to levels unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years. Carbon dioxide concentrations have increased by 40% since pre-industrial times, primarily from fossil fuel emissions and secondarily from net land use change emissions.....”²

¹ *Climate Change 2013, The Physical Science Basis, Summary for Policy Makers, Working Group-I Contribution to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, [Stocker, T.F., D. Qin, G.K. Plattner, M. Tignor, S.K. Allen, J. Boschung, A. Nauels, Y. Xia, V. Bex and P.M. Midgley (eds.)] (Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 2.*

² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Climate change associated with global warming has caused an increase in the intensity and frequency of extreme climatic events such as droughts, floods, hurricanes and extreme cold in some places and extreme heat in others. These phenomena have caused large scale destruction with loss of life and livelihood and associated human suffering. Not only human beings but other living creatures and plants will also be adversely affected by climate change over the next four decades. If average temperatures exceed 1.5 to 2.5 degree centigrade then approximately 20 to 30 percent of plant and animal species are likely to become extinct.³

At the same time, during the process of production and consumption the disposal of toxic materials into soils, the hydrologic system and the atmosphere have reached levels which may be beyond the loading capacity of the planet. The delicate balance in nature that is now called the eco system is being disturbed. Consequently the ability of the life support system of the planet to sustain life is being undermined.

II. The Environmental Crisis in South Asia

South Asia with its delicately balanced ecology, its heavy reliance on monsoons, its critical dependence on agriculture and persistent mass poverty, make it one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to climate change.⁴ The increased variability of the monsoons and declining river flows are likely to increase the instability of agriculture output and push large numbers of vulnerable peasants into poverty. The Himalayas containing the region's glaciers, source of its rivers, and key to the region's climate and economy, are highly sensitive to temperature increases. Some Himalayan glaciers are receding more rapidly than the global average.⁵ Dr. Pachauri of the IPCC estimates that 500 million people in South Asia will be affected by reduced river flows and changes in water availability.⁶

³ IPCC, 2007: Summary for Policymakers in, *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, Contribution of Working Group-II to the *Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, M.L. Parry, O.F. Canziani, J.P. Palutikof, P.J. van der Linden and C.E. Hanson (eds.) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 11.

⁴ Akmal Hussain, *Climate Change and Cooperation*, *the Express Tribune*, 22nd August 2011.

⁵ Leena Srivastava, "The Environmental Challenges in South Asia: Regional Cooperation for Adaptation Strategies" in, Akmal Hussain and Muchkund Dubey (eds.), *Democracy, Sustainable Development and Peace*, New Perspectives on South Asia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 276.

Given the fact that the grain seeds currently in use in South Asia are sensitive to heat, the IPCC projects that the expected increase in summer temperatures are likely to decrease crop yields up to 30 percent by the middle of this century.⁷ The decrease in fresh water availability will be affecting over a billion people in South Asia by 2015.⁸

Human health is also expected to be adversely affected with illnesses and mortality due to increased diarrheal diseases.⁹

Rising sea levels resulting from global warming are likely to salinize large areas of coastal agriculture plains along the coasts of South Asia causing the loss of livelihood and displacement of an estimated 125 million people¹⁰. Coastal erosion and inundation associated with sea level rise could threaten the survival and well being of people inhabiting small islands and mega deltas in South Asia.

Apart from the impact of climate change on South Asia, the process of deforestation in some of the countries of South Asia and pollution of soils associated with disposal of toxic materials has resulted in the degradation of about 16.6 percent of the total regional land mass of South Asia¹¹.

It is clear that the environmental crisis is likely to cause widespread human suffering and destruction of plant and animal species in the world, unless the human community unites in

⁶ R.K. Pachauri, "The Impact of Global Warming and the Imperative of Mitigation", chapter 29, in Akmal Hussain and Muchkund Dubey (eds.), *Democracy, Sustainable Development and Peace*, New Perspectives on South Asia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 599.

⁷ Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Contribution of Working Group-II to the *Fourth Assessment Report of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change*, M.L. Parry, O.F. Canziani, J.P. Palutikof, P.J. van der Linden and C.E. Hanson, (eds.) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 13.

⁸ Ibid., p. 600.

⁹ R.K. Pachauri, op.cit., p. 600.

¹⁰ S.C. Rajan, *Climate Migrants in South Asia: Estimates and Solutions – A Report by Green Peace*, Green Peace India Society, 2008, cited in, Leena Srivastava, "The Environmental Challenges in South Asia: Regional Cooperation for Adaptation Strategies" in, Akmal Hussain and Muchkund Dubey (eds.), *Democracy, Sustainable Development and Peace*, New Perspectives on South Asia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 356.

¹¹ Leena Srivastava, op.cit., p. 335.

undertaking urgent mitigation measures. In South Asia the impact on human and animal life is likely to be particularly acute due to the ecological vulnerability of the region, the dependence of over 60 percent of the population on agriculture, the critical reliance of crop production on the monsoons and the large populations earning livelihoods from coastal agriculture plains. The need for cooperation amongst the peoples and governments of South Asia to mitigate the impact of the environmental crisis is particularly acute.

III. Key Factors Underlying the Environmental Crisis: The Relationship between Humans, Commodities and Nature in Capitalism

Beyond the immediate mitigation measures the long term effort by the human community to restore life support systems of the planet can only be undertaken by recovering our humanity and a shared sense of the sacred in nature which is an essential dimension of our humanity.

The consciousness that emerged from the social and economic life in the industrial era is characterized by a particular relationship between humans, commodities and nature. Individuals and economic organizations within the market system are pitted in aggressive competition in the pursuit of the accumulation of profits or consumer goods. Interaction with the 'Other' is seen not as a mode of enhancing the self but rather as a means to achieving material ends. This restricts the possibilities of loving one's neighbour as oneself as the Holy Bible enjoins.

The individual is driven by an insatiable desire to acquire more and more commodities, which are seen as the emblem of one's worth. The production system through its sales efforts has engendered a consumerist culture whereby commodities are perceived not merely in terms of their functions as objects of convenience but as the receptacles of the qualities of attractiveness, efficacy and power. Thus qualities which are inherent to human beings are alienated from them and transposed into commodities. We are then invited by the advertisement industry to acquire commodities not simply to fulfill our material needs but essentially to repossess ourselves.¹²

¹² For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see: Akmal Hussain, "Commodities and the Displacement of Desire", *Daily Times* (Lahore), 28 November 2002.

The market based production system with its competitive process induces a tendency to continuously increase output. At the same time, it has engendered a culture and constructed a psyche which impels the individual to strive to acquire more and more products. It is not surprising therefore that the historically unprecedented increase in the volume and range of commodities within Capitalism may now have gone beyond the maximum loading capacity of the eco system, thereby threatening the life support systems of the planet. Nor is it surprising that within such a mode of production and forms of consciousness nature is regarded as an exploitable resource. There is a tendency therefore to objectify nature as if it were divorced from the spiritual experience of knowing ourselves as human beings connected to God.

IV. Addressing the Environmental Crisis: Recovering Our Humanity and the Sense of the Sacred for Nature

In addressing the environmental crisis of course the states and the peoples of the world would have to work together to take the urgent mitigation measures at the local, national, regional and global levels to minimize the human suffering that could result from the damage to the environment that has already occurred. It is also necessary in the medium term, to slow down and even arrest the process of further degradation of the environment. It can be argued that the former requires new treaties and institutional structures for initiating mitigation measures. The latter requires a profound change in the relationship between humans, commodities and nature that has emerged over the last 300 years within the social, economic, cultural and epistemological framework of Capitalism. Forms of consciousness in which the ego dominates and pits human beings against each other in competition and conflict would have to be informed by the consciousness implied by the wisdom traditions across the world. Bringing this “unanimous tradition” to bear on the contemporary crisis of civilization involves bringing back into human civilization the “sacred, the true, and the beautiful”.¹³ Some of the religious traditions in South Asia such as that of Muslim Sufis hold that the other is not simply to be tolerated but is a vital fertilizing force in

¹³ Ranjit Fernando (ed.), *The Unanimous Tradition, Essays on the Essential Unit of All Religions* (Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1999 [printed in England]), p. 5.

the growth of the self.¹⁴ It is when love and compassion define social and economic relations that human beings can fulfill themselves and give meaning to their existence.

As Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* suggests that goods cannot be of value since they are merely useful. What is of value is the functioning of human beings according to the principles of virtue. He argues: “if [...] we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be the good and noble performance of these,if this is the case, human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue...”.¹⁵

For human beings to function as human beings the social, economic and political conditions need to be created whereby everyone gets an opportunity to actualize one’s human potential. Amartya Sen 2400 years later, in taking up Aristotle’s insight on human functioning has presented a new perspective which has now come to be known as Human Development. Here not only is it necessary to provide opportunities of health, education, livelihoods but at the same time a whole range of entitlements related with democratic freedoms.¹⁶

One can suggest that an important dimension of human functioning which has not yet been recognized in the development literature is that of developing our sense of beauty and experiencing our humanness through a relationship of care and compassion with Nature. This involves a re-awareness that the mountains, the rivers, the trees, the soil and all living creatures on earth are part of a sacred unity that sustains our physical and spiritual life. This consciousness is common to many of the wisdom traditions of the world particularly South Asia.¹⁷

¹⁴ Akmal Hussain, A Perspective on Peace and Economic Cooperation in South Asia, chapter 1 in: Sadiq Ahmed, Saman Kelegama, Ejaz Ghani (eds.), *Promoting Economic Cooperation in South Asia, The World Bank* (New Delhi, California, UK and Singapore: Sage Publications, 2010), p. 7.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Section 5, W.D. Ross (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980. PDF Version), p. 7. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.1.i.html>

¹⁶ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 13 to 34.

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion of this point, see: Kapila Vatsyayan, “Pluralism and Diversity in South Asia”, in Akmal Hussain and Muchkund Dubey (eds.), *Democracy, Sustainable Development and Peace: New Perspectives on South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Islam, as indeed other religions, inculcates a sense of the sacred for nature. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues, “...the Quran does not regard the world of nature as its natural enemy to be conquered and subdued but as an integral part of its religious universe sharing in its earthly life and in a sense even its ultimate destiny”.¹⁸ Phenomena in nature are seen as manifestations or “signs” of the Creator.

As we contemplate for example the beauty of a brooding lake at sunset or a sparkling stream at sunrise they create through our sense of beauty the possibility of experiencing the transcendent. I have argued elsewhere that images of nature on the surface are so ephemeral, yet some of them resonate within our being a deepening significance to evoke a sense of the eternal.¹⁹ Apart from the eye that helps perceive phenomenal forms there is also what Martin Lings with reference to Sufi Hallaj, calls the “eye of the heart”.²⁰ In terms of this insight I have suggested in a forthcoming book that contemplation with love opens this eye of the heart, which apprehends human existence in harmony with the beauty of nature to experience eternal truths.²¹

Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues that, “according to the Islamic perspective God Himself *is* the ultimate environment which surrounds and encompasses humanity”. Nasr further suggests that according to the Quran God is said to be All-Encompassing (*Muhit*), and points out that the word *Muhit* also means the environment²². In this context, Nasr quotes the following lines of the Quran:

“But to God belong all things in the heavens and on the earth: And He it is who encompasseth (*muhit*) all things.”

(Qur’ān 4: 126)

¹⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Islam and the Environmental Crisis in Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder (eds.), *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a religious Issue* (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 88.

¹⁹ Akmal Hussain, *The Eternal in the Ephemeral*, Topical Printers, Lahore, 2014, p. 1.

²⁰ Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 49.

²¹ Akmal Hussain, op.cit., Page 1.

²² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, op. cit., p. 89.

Religion (from the Latin, *religio*) means re-establishment of the ligament with God. The Quran invites us to re-establish that ligament whereby in prayer or in beholding God's creation we become aware of His presence as loving mercy (*rahma*):

"...whithersoever
Ye turn, there is Allah's countenance."

(Qur'ān 2:115)

One can argue that the loving mercy of God is manifest in His creation both in the sense that nature enables the sustenance of physical life on earth and also in the sense that the beauty of nature nurtures our own spiritual being. Nature thus provides an opportunity for us to live on earth and yet experience the transcendent. We simultaneously inhabit the ephemeral and the eternal.²³

²³ Akmal Hussain, *The Eternal in the Ephemeral*, op. cit., Introduction.

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