

FOCUS

Eco-Philosophy or Bust

The Case for an Immanent Ecologism

Following the earlier article "Why Current Environmental Trajectories are not Enough", Abdul Hannan argues for the need to synthesize professional environmental commitments with a personal value-oriented bound which could then lead inductively to the creation of an authentic cultural and institutional basis for a future ecological society.

THE ecological movement and its theorists have paid little attention to social and cultural phenomena generally and have been quite insensitive to any actual changes in sensibility within the cultural process except that which concerns a growing awareness that their message about environmental destruction is becoming more widely accepted. To put it another way, ecologists have so far failed to tackle the paradox that while environmental initiatives have expanded massively over the last twenty years, there has yet to occur a similar expansion in a necessary ecological ethic that is required to guarantee a complete sense of material and spiritual commitment to the environmental cause. We must be concerned to develop a much broader understanding of social and cultural processes, its wellsprings and motivations, and the place and potential function of ecological man within this process. Being sensitive to the mood and directedness of culture grows out of such knowledge and it also increase greatly its ability to take opportunities for change as they arise.

In a world dominated by competing vested interests, the future is inevitably contentious. In the context of democratic progressivism, the promise is one of secular transcendence where all people will be better off than in the present and it becomes quite legitimate to entertain deluded fantasies about changes in institutional arrangements such as between 'state' and 'civil society'. In this scenario, any serious consideration of changes in social and political arrangement that might alter the ranking of interests becomes problematic. Social analysis — including historiography, as well as sociology, anthropology and economics — is not merely concerned with enquiry into structures and content of past and present but also with who will inherit the future and how this will be organized in pursuit of a given configuration of values and interests.

Prevailing conservative, liberal and neo-mercantilist ideologies might differ in the degree of shifts in the distribution of benefits in the future between the various interests but not to the point of changing the general order. The failed struggle of socialism was precisely about changes in the rank order of society and now means that in these post-Cold War years it is improbable that any general call for a more conscious and open new political and economic project and social

environmental law, government and NGO programmes and so on can serve no ultimate purpose in the absence of widespread ethical and communitarian foundations for ecological action.

We need to be prepared to accept that there is no ultimate reason why it should intrinsically matter whether humanity, and through it our self-consciousness in its current aberrant form, is eliminated from the biosphere. The project of immanent ecologism to 'rescue humanity' is only concerned to rescue an enlightened humanity, not the humanity which persists in occupying parasitic economic and political structures, meeting out oppression upon its own and other species and in general the destruction of the creativity of human culture and nature alike.

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design of the future will find easy acceptance.

But if ecologists are to make a more rooted intervention into public life beyond the cynical, opportunistic or just banal professionalism of 'environmental specialists' and their institutions, then we must operate as though the ecological vision already exists, arguing and acting out the ultimate ecological settlement here and now, rather than waiting for the tortuous denouement of the enlightenment project and its coercive, hegemonic strategies. This requires 'internalizing' ecological principles as opposed to maintaining them as a transcendental end as does the enlightenment rationale of liberal democracy. The task is therefore to construct an immanent ecologism. Otherwise we will have to travel further down the road of falsehood by constructing environmental institutions that do not have environmental people to occupy them.

If opposition to this immanent ecologism persists from the present unsustainable globalized culture, then we can expect to be precipitated over the abyss simply by the sheer impetus and structure of this culture and its ecologically devastating insistence on increasing resource consumption worldwide in the pursuit of 'development'. Structured attempts to mitigate and reverse this prevalent destructive course in the form of international instruments of

trajectory out of the present. Secondly we need to develop ideas about what kind of future we would like and that can be deemed viable. We are not looking to establish a single replacement for the one coercive truth of the enlightenment project and the emerging WTO-World Bank-IMF-directed ideological superstate. Rather, we are looking to mark out a dialectic between probable futures resulting from inertia of a culture that is in essential dimensions not informed by ecological consciousness (the presently dominant economic one) and images and mechanisms of an eventual self-regulatory social system where we have learnt to internalize the ecological consequences of social decision-making.

Such a dialectic is not to be misconstrued as 'compromise'. This is not an exercise of horse-trading between interests but the development of a mutualistic social and cultural process that internalizes the stewardship of nature in accordance with the possible — read sustainable — and the need to maintain the coherence of the decision-making process and the processes of social and natural metabolism.

Movement in this direction has yet to produce a mentality or modality of social and cultural practice which may articulate how we are to set about combining the imma-

nent preconditions for sustainability at the level of private personal ethics and the institutional manifestations of this ethic in public life. Most of the environmental initiatives of the past two decades are burdened by the enlightenment ghost that created them. Consider the rationalistic, science-dependent forecasting and sundry modelling techniques undertaken by government and research institutes both here in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the world using tools such as GIS. They represent an evolution out of the enlightenment concern for human perfectibility and the 'predictability' of nature, leading to a Utopian improvement of the human spirit that embraces the material but which leaves the spirit increasingly behind. This has

now reached a point where human welfare is almost exclusively defined as coterminous with an increased supply in the quantity of material possessions and the facilities necessary to 'enjoy' these. Used in the service of developing an understanding of the future context, this materialist bias needs to be counteracted and augmented with techniques and approaches that assist in understanding social and cultural dynamics and solutions to environmental problems and beyond that recover more general notions of human desire and the spiritual dimension of life. In the absence of such a shift, we will continue to fashion a world that is more and more becoming humanly uninhabitable.

Moral as well as political

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These ideas remained with me and I was trying to find out any suitable job. I had little interest in sewing. I heard about RDRS's next training would be Tailoring for group members. I requested my mother to arrange it for me and she did," said Sandhya.

The duration of the training was three months. There was a provision for Tk 10 per day for lunch. Most of the trainees used to bring their lunch from home and saved that money. Sandhya did the same. Thus, by the end of the training she saved Tk 300. She took Tk 800 from her brother and Tk 600 from her mother. She paid Tk 1700 (300+800+600) as down payment for a sewing machine. Total cost of the ma-

commitment to ecologism will come into its own when environmental problems become increasingly intractable and when the faith in linear technocratic scientism gives way to a more holistic social project within which human and natural environments are understood to be symbiotic partners in an ecological unity. In the meantime, and despite the growing number of environmental activities worldwide, there is every possibility that the biosphere will be further damaged in the coming years by our unsustainable resource-use systems, by what we call human 'civilization'. This may extend to the point on the edge of survival where life becomes yet more untenable and dangerous for the remnant of humanity, creating in turn greater political instability and friction within and between countries.

The picture seems gloomy but the prospects need not be. The growth of environmental problems in 'manageable stages' will create the context for re-evaluating even more fundamentally the configuration of our social and cultural consciousness. This can be expected to impel the restructuring not only of the political settlement, but the whole configuration of our culture inclusive of social arrangements and attitudes and with this the relationship between human consciousness and the rest of God's creation on earth.

An ecological culture, if it comes to pass, will comprise a confederation of locally self-reliant regions based upon mutualistic and necessarily egalitarian relations in which the guiding spirit is an aesthetic self-consciousness that knits together local ecology with social metabolism. At times, this goal may appear to be ever-receding in the face of the dominant unsustainable culture with its hierarchical political and economic structures and continued defence towards a fading notion of technocratic and progressivist scientism.

Our first steps, therefore, must involve a realization that there will be no messianic or principal actors in the construction of an ecological future. The future offers transcendence out of our current predicament only on the basis of a realization that ecological values are immanent and that they must first emerge from within the hearts and minds of each and every one of us.

Computerization of Voter Registration EC's Tasks

THE computerization of the voter registration has been recently a much publicized topic in the daily newspapers. It should rightly be so. For a country like ours no conscious citizen can simply afford to hear about spending of hundreds of crores of taka and accept it without asking any question. The financial involvement in the ID card project has been speculated in different articles ranging from 150 crore to 1000 crore. So it is natural for any citizen of Bangladesh to be keen to know about the justifications of spending such huge amount of public money.

It is learnt that the Election Commission has been planning for computerization of the voter registration for the last four years. The output of the efforts made under the leadership of the previous Chief Election Commissioner does not look bright at all in spite of the fact that there are hardly any documents to analyze and establish degree of success and achievements. Prototype exercises at two different localities with sufficient lag times was done with little success. The R&D efforts, expected to be unexpectedly successful without the involvement of academicians or experts, did not pay off.

Possibly realizing the need of services of experts in the field the present Chief Election Commissioner has taken step of requesting them to come forward and help in sorting out the problems associated with computerization. With this end in view the Chief Election Commissioner and the Project Director have already requested among others a number of experts in the field from universities and research organizations. But the task is not easy since already there are at least two other committees for the task. So in order that these committees function properly and come to some help of the Election Commission it is necessary to combine them into a whole with a clear terms of reference.

One of the authors has been fortunate enough to have attended some of the meetings, where various aspects of the system to be implemented have been discussed. Since from these discussions, so far as one of the authors knows, no written document has been produced. Quite often already decided issues come up in a different context and are made null and void: This is what is expected since systems study

requires a systematic effort. A system has to be represented in an appropriate language in order to analyze it, criticize it, in order to discover its bottleneck. Surprisingly, for such huge a project, as the computerization of voter registration is, systematic study is totally absent. In such circumstances, one should not blame the spectators if they misidentify the 'elephant' as its different limbs. System representation tools are also meant for avoiding hazardous conclusions as can be obtained from necessarily incomplete representation.

However, whatever sincere effort is being rendered by the experts, output does not appear to turn into an organized whole. In fact, it is not supposed to be so, since the Election Commission has yet to come up with a proposal to the team of experts containing a clear terms of reference. So meetings are being held, hours after hours are being spent on discussion with no

by Dr M Kaykobad

document/report in preparation which could justify Election Commission's decisions of handling the project in a specific way. Team of experts is also possibly tentative since no written responsibility has been bestowed on them, and since there are some other committees for the same task, and since parallel activities, such as appointing consultants, request for proposal for enlistment, designing different forms for voter information, are also taking place apparently without their participation. Qualifications of the consultants do not appear to match with the high emoluments that have been set. It should have been done in consultation with the specialists in the field.

This is at the least not a desirable state of affairs. From the discussions of the experts it is clear that there has not been any consensus on even the requirements of the Election Commission. So naturally we are quite far away from being able to float a tender for procuring necessary (which has yet to be decided through a vigorous analysis) hardware and software. The voter ID number as published by the Election Commission does not appear to be well-thought not to speak of the organization of other information, if they are at all thought over. Experts found it quite difficult to start data entry from the forms that the Election Commission has already designed and ad-

vised the enumerators to fill up.

Considering the shortage of time before the coming election the experts opined that it would be impossible to computerize voter registration of the whole country before the coming election. This will also mean that the Election Commission will have to go for the amendment of the relevant sections of the law. It was opined that only through a vigorous effort can there be an appreciable success in computerizing the voter registration only for the city corporations.

In this case we should involve more than one vendor so that efforts of most of the computer professionals can be utilized simultaneously thus increasing the probability of success.

With the coming election knocking at the door and everything in disarray if any computerization effort has to be made successful the Election Commission should immediately start doing things systematically. To concretize the whole thing an organized effort should be made in the following areas:

1. Planning the Computerization of Voter Registration (CVR);
2. Software Requirements Definition for CVR;
3. Preliminary System Design for CVR;
4. Detailed System Design for CVR;
5. Implementation Plan;
6. Verification and Validation Techniques;
7. Maintenance;
8. Personnel Training.

In order to complete the project with any acceptable degree of success the whole project must pass through the above mentioned steps. The Election Commission should request the experts to help them with planning, software requirement specification, preliminary system design and guidelines for detailed design, implementation scheme, validation/verification techniques and maintenance, leaving details of it for the consultants should there be such a decision for recruiting them.

This is the normal practice to staff any project on computerization. If a systematic approach like this one is not followed one should not even think of achieving any success from the project. For the greater interest of the nation a deep thought on the subject addressed should be given by the appropriate authorities.

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Girls Entering the Market: The Spirit of Adolescence

by Selina Shelley

ACCORDING to our socio-religious code, the market is a prohibited place for women in rural Bangladesh. Women are not encouraged to sit in the market and engage directly in business. This is an age old custom. The status of women is inextricably tied with the status of the male member in the family. Thus, the women who work in the market and in other public places, are often disrespected by the society and to some extent by themselves, because they are also confined by the same values. However, the women are forced by poverty to undertake 'male jobs' in public places.

But, Sandhya, a 17 year old girl, does not fit in to this 'formula'. Sandhya has been running a tailoring shop at Nekmarda market of Ranisankail Thana for last two and half year. She is from a poor family. Her father Suren Chandra (50) owns 5 bighas of land. If the harvest is good, the family gets enough food for the year. Sandhya's elder sister Laksmi Bala and brother Pramath Chandra are married. His sister lives in her in-laws house and her brother is engaged in agricultural work with his father. The two other family members are, her mother, Samata Bala and youngest brother, Ranajit (12).

I met Sandhya, sometime in April of this year at her working place. The place is a bus-stop-cum-roadside market with varieties of shops, such as, restaurant, tea-stall, saloon, grocery shop, betel-leaf store, cycle repairing shop etc. Hindi film songs from the restaurant always keep the place rather noisy. 'Samata Tailors' is opposite the restaurant and in between the tea-stall and grocery shop.

I asked Sandhya deliberately whether a young girl like her, running a shop in a public place, was giving her a bad name.

It's alright. Most things go smoothly.

"How did you plan for such job", I asked her. Sandhya ordered for tea, sat properly, took two seconds to think and started talking. "It was in 1991, I was studying in class seven in Nekmarda girls' high school. My final exam was over. I was eagerly waiting for results and to attend the new class. I passed the exams, but my family stopped my study as they thought it was an additional expenditure."

"My days were idle with little household work. One day my mother told to me that RDRS was going to arrange training for adolescent girls. Instead of sitting idle at home, she advised me to join the training. My mother is a member of RDRS Parkunda women group. So, I went for that training," she added.

"In fact, it was an eye-opener to me," she said. Though she didn't understand all the issues were discussed in the training, Sandhya informed that the trainer lamented that the girls were reluctant to earn, they know that they have to go to their in-laws house and they just wait for that. They make themselves a burden to their family members. They should try to earn and contribute to the family, then parents would feel the importance of girls.

These ideas remained with me and I was trying to find out any suitable job. I had little interest in sewing. I heard about RDRS's next training would be Tailoring for group members. I requested my mother to arrange it for me and she did," said Sandhya.

The duration of the training was three months. There was a provision for Tk 10 per day for lunch. Most of the trainees used to bring their lunch from home and saved that money. Sandhya did the same. Thus, by the end of the training she saved Tk 300. She took Tk 800 from her brother and Tk 600 from her mother. She paid Tk 1700 (300+800+600) as down payment for a sewing machine. Total cost of the ma-



chine was Tk 3,000. Rest she paid from her income by instalment of Tk 100 per month.

Initially, the shop was not there. This market is comparatively new and a growing one. For first six months, Sandhya shared a cloth shop at Kacha bazar (the original old market place). For this she had to pay Tk 50 per month as rent. That place was rather backward in attracting sufficient customers. Sandhya planned to move to this newly growing roadside market. Her brother gave money to get possession of the shop but didn't help physically. Sandhya with her younger brother made the shop usable by putting a wall and other necessary arrangements. It

took one year to settle down. By that time Sandhya had started to go to the school again.

Sandhya opens the shop at 8 o'clock in the morning. Her home is in village 'Parkunda', two miles away from the market. Often she comes walking. If the weather is unfavourable, she takes a bus or rickshaw-van. At 10.30 am, she attends the school. It continues up to 2 pm Sandhya brings lunch from home. Up to 6 pm she keeps the shop open. Ranajit (her younger brother, who also goes to school from 9 am to 12 noon) and Khattija (12), a village girl work with her as apprentice. As soon as she reaches home, she has to rush to her private tutor.

Sandhya stitches only selected ladies garments, such as, blouse for Tk 8, selwar for Tk 10, kamiz for Tk 10, frock for Tk 15 and petticoat for Tk 8. Her average monthly income is Tk 1,800. Her present monthly expenditure is as follows:

1. Family support Tk 200
2. Tuition fee for Ranajit Tk 100
3. Tuition fee for herself Tk 100
4. Others Tk 200

Her net monthly savings are Tk 1,200. This contribution helps her to influence family decisions. As I asked Sandhya, what does she do with the money.

"I give it to my mother", she replied.

"What does your mother do with it," I asked.

Sandhya smiled and replied, "She is getting prepared for my marriage."

"Are you ready for marriage," I asked her.

"No," she replied.

Then, what was her plan, I wanted to know.

"I have plans to buy one more machine just after this irri-boro season, and after my exam I will look for further training on gents' garments. There is a demand for gents' pyjamas, panjabi and shirt. If I can adopt this my income will shoot up," Sandhya narrated.

"Will your family listen to you," I asked her.

"They will. The time has changed, obviously they will listen to me," she replied.

Sandhya is full of self-confidence. Her eyes are bright and far-sighted. I wanted to know, does she feel any problem being a working girl in the market.

"Yes. Sometime back buses used to stop just in front of my shop and the passenger used to throw ill-remarks. It was painful, but no way, I had to overlook it. Recently the place has been shifted a few yards ahead. The other problem is, if I wish I can't work at night. In spite of the workload, I have to close the shop before dark. If some more girls would work in the market, jointly we could have taken the risk. But alone I don't

have that courage," Sandhya said.

Sandhya's story is rather an exceptional one. But, there are thousands of potential adolescent girls like Sandhya in this country who are mostly neglected. The spirit of adolescence is still unexplored. Recently NGOs have turned their attention to develop the skills of adolescents. But most of their programmes are aimed at the promotion of traditional role of women through health and hygiene, MCH, food and nutrition, family planning and so on. Some have legal education on family rights, inheritance law, divorce, dowry etc. Obviously, these are all integral part of women's life and these help girls to achieve some amount of knowledge and awareness. However, education on these issues alone to some extent reinforce their psychology to perform household based traditional role most effectively.

From the '60s onward, women have been targeted for developmental activities, specially by the government for family planning programmes. Gradually NGOs have initiated a lot of efforts to improve the overall situation of women. Traditional and non-traditional income generating activities have been undertaken by the women under the supervision of different NGOs. Of course, meaningful change has taken place in various areas of women's life. But, women are yet to penetrate the market. Absence of women's role in the market implies that they have no control over their products and income. They are still largely dependent on the male intermediaries, in some cases, on the NGOs.

Sandhya could be an example for us. Adolescent girls can play the vital role of bringing women in the mainstream activities. If NGOs could device appropriate mechanism to explore their potential, adolescent girls could be the most effective agents for challenging this social stagnation.