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THE SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY: ROLE OF CULTURE AND LITERATURE

Amandeep Kaur

Assistant Professor

P.G. Department of English

Mata Gujri College (An Autonomous College)

Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab

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Abstract

Sustainability is one of the defining themes of the 21st century. It receives huge amount of attention, and is vital to the survival of humanity. Culture is an important foundation stone, not just for society's survival but for ensuring that it thrives and it is sustained. This is perhaps culture's most significant contribution to a sustainable society. The proposed paper while defining the terms '*culture*' and '*sustainability*' will focus on the idea that culture can enhance the sustainability of the society. The paper will deliberate over the role of an active cultural life for a well functioning and coherent welfare state. It will declaim a judgement on how changing cultural values can make or mar the sustainability of the concerned society. The paper will also deliberate over the role of education and literature in making the masses culturally sound while citing the examples of various literary works.

Key-Words

Sustainable Society, Culture, Sustainable Development, Literature, Environment, Climate.

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What is a Sustainable Society? The term sustainability does not focus merely on the 'ecological balance'. The definition of sustainable society embraces all the systems assisting all kinds of lives on the earth. Society is a dynamic phenomenon. It keeps on evolving. Development has been its inherent feature since ages. Thus, to make a society sustainable we need to make its development sustainable. The concept of sustainability and sustainable development was made popular by the publication of the book *Our Common Future* in 1987. Sustainability has become one of the defining themes of the 21st century keeping in view the degradation of the society in a number of ways. It is gaining huge amount of attention, and is vital for the survival of the humanity. Sustainability is not just about survival, it is also very much about being able to live a good life. Sustainable development has been defined in many ways but the most commonly accepted definition of sustainable development is:

Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs...A process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future potential to meet human needs and aspirations. (Brundtland 43)

Such a society acts to stop the activities that are threatening to human life and culture and nature's capital and to encourage those activities that serve to conserve what exists, restore what has been damaged, and prevent future harm. While recognising the primacy of the ecosystem, we must also recognise the special role that the human species occupy within that system and as a result the importance of human life and culture.

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Culture is an umbrella term. In the words of anthropologist E.B. Tylor, it is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (1) It is the culture which makes human beings to live life with something more than animal consciousness. The culture of peace, co-existence and contentment fosters development and sustainable development could only be achieved when there is the involvement of the local population at the centre of the development efforts. Culture is a dynamic reality and constantly shifting process that plays an important role in moving towards a sustainable and fulfilled global society. Hawkes defines culture as “a value system of some kind” (5). There is a strong link between a ‘good life’ and ‘culture.’ Here I would say culture is an important foundation stone, not just for society’s survival, but for ensuring that it thrives. This is perhaps culture’s most significant contribution to a sustainable society. In fact culture and sustainability walk hand in hand. In a sustainable society, art and culture enable individuals to take part in and help to develop society. On the other hand, active cultural life promotes democracy and generates the pre-conditions for a good life.

Culture must help to accelerate the pace of change towards a sustainable society. Culture builds bridges between different interest groups like economic development, natural resource management, education, agriculture, technology etc and contributes to social development. Culture brings to society the fundamental qualities that are just as important as the ecological, social and economic perspectives. These qualities are, for e.g. creativity, critical thinking, empathy, trust, mutual respect and willingness to take risks. Such qualities are considered to be absolutely fundamental to the existence of society and to social progress. As Hawken explains the culture as the fourth pillar of the sustainability model (Sustainable Development = Environment + Economy + Social + Culture) in his *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture’s Essential Role in Public Planning*. The works of art, music, lectures, films etc encourage critical questions and alternatives to the various crisis facing humanity and the biosphere. This model recognizes that a community’s vitality and quality of life is closely related to the vitality and quality of its cultural engagement, expression, dialogue, and celebration.

We believe climate change is a cultural, social and economic challenge, and we have to move beyond the scientific and rational debate to address it. Climate change is a by-product of our over stimulated complex societies. It is as much a cultural and social phenomena as it is an environmental phenomenon. A Ghosh remarks, “Climate crisis is also a crisis of culture” (12). The solution is not complex: replace our energy supply, currently dependent on burning coal, oil and gas, with something a little more sophisticated and environmentally friendly. So far we haven't figured out how to do this.

By bringing together artists, scientists, communicators, educationists and cultural opinion formers, we need to endeavour to develop creative 'works' that act as a catalyst for

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change. Using creativity to innovate, we can engage artists, writers, poets, musicians and filmmakers for their ability to evolve and amplify a creative language, communicating – on an emotional level and on a human scale – the urgency of the global climate challenge. Creative arts not only provide income-generating opportunities, but also enable social development by providing a safe, creative space for new voices and ideas. These creative artists cannot be divorced from their environment, and therefore play a critical role in contributing to positive cultural, social and political development. Each of us, sometime and somewhere in our lives has been profoundly moved by a piece of art; a song, a poem, a book, a painting or a film. The values and desires inherent here become absorbed into our psyche, they inform our response, and are embedded to form the person we can be and the societies we construct.

If the literary works about the total way of life of ordinary citizens are given keen attention, the world will realise a cursory link between culture, literature and sustainable development. The Japanese and Chinese offer the best examples of embracing modernity whilst being firmly grounded in their traditions. We, Indians, associate modernity with discarding cultural values, norms and traditions even when these are beneficial to society. Most of the traditional medical and healing techniques have been lost as these have been branded as heathen. This contrasts with traditional Chinese healing techniques like acupuncture and herbal remedies, which have suddenly become widespread even in the west. Publications on Indian healing techniques and subsequent research based on these treatment methods, running alongside modern medicine and complimenting each other are more sustainable than otherwise. India went all out to adopt technologies from the west without having the capacity to maintain or service them, resulting in disastrous photocopying.

Western countries have often viewed India as inferior, lacking in self-governance and backward in every aspect of life. This is justified by the widely publicised notion of India as a land of snake charmers. Moreover the westerners have invented the theory of *Orientalism* for the portrayal of eastern nations in such light. The scramble for India was partly driven by the search for raw materials for the growing industrial base in Europe and the perception that Indians were incapable of self-governance. Colonisation was the tool through which a development paradigm for India was developed.

Guided by modernist ideas, the intention is to let the country move from tradition to modernity. Transfer of western technology is having its own underpinnings in Indian sub continent today. Vast areas of forests are being transformed into deserts, arable land is fast degrading because of abusive and inappropriate use of fertilizers, rivers are being polluted with industrial effluents and biodiversity is being lost. Recent calls for privatisation and globalisation are mere vehicles for importing the western capitalist culture of over-production and over-consumption. These attitudes may increase the Gross Domestic or

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National Product (GDP or DNP) of a country but these do not ensure Gross National Happiness, neither do they ensure that future generations can use the same resource base to meet their own development needs. There is ample evidence that the more affluent a society becomes, the more waste and environmental health hazards populations have to face. The economic growth model that has championed the development agenda imposed by westerners and which perceptibly destroys the life support system of the earth (land, air and water bodies) must be avoided. This should be accompanied by a development path that does not destroy the life support system of the earth. Key to this path is cross-cutting and broad based policies that guarantee inter-and intra-generational equity for resources, social acceptability, improved quality of life for the masses and their full participation in development policies, programmes and projects. This is known as the Sustainable Development path.

Inculcation of human values among the children from the very young age is must besides the spread of education to the masses. Education is an essential ingredient for a more sustainable future. It is through education that the next generation of citizens, voters, workers, professionals, and leaders are prepared for lifelong learning. At the core of a creating a sustainable society is the creation of values such as respect and care for self, others and the planet. Such values have to be nurtured, taught, and examined. Because most of the times the policies fail to reach a large section of the population. We can take example of Swachh Bharat Mission . Only the privileged population got to know about the goals of the Mission. The people dwelling in the slum areas have no access to the media declaiming judgements about such movements of the government. Thus we need to ensure education to each and every child in practice not in papers only. Without educating the masses, progress towards a more sustainable future will be compromised. Secondly, to inculcate such values the curriculum needs to be oriented as per the need of the hour. Classroom education can help to create a cultural response to climate change. We need to develop a society where sustainable behaviour is a culture of the people. To reorient a curriculum to address sustainability, educational communities need to identify the knowledge, issues, perspectives, skills, and values central to sustainable development in each of the four components of sustainability – environment, society, culture and economy – and integrate them into the curriculum. Instructional pedagogy needs to be moulded. Teacher orientation programmes must be held to make them understand that education is the essential ingredient for a more sustainable future. Ideally, efforts to reorient education should be based on national or local sustainability goals. A properly reoriented curriculum will address local environmental, social, and economic contexts to ensure that it is locally relevant and culturally appropriate. Not only our modernity in other spheres we are imitating westerners in educational system and policies. Thus local needs and problems remain unaddressed. Every community has different and varied sustainability issues.

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Reorienting education includes selecting issues that are relevant to the local community. Here are a few of many possible issues: Agriculture, Atmosphere, Biodiversity, Changing consumption patterns, Climate Change, Deforestation, Fresh water, Gender equity, Human settlement, Population growth, Poverty, Protecting and promoting human health, Solid and hazardous wastes and sewage etc.

Our educational culture should be such that the sustainable behaviour becomes a culture among students from any stream, viz. arts, science, or commerce. For example, students of Literature are not meant to be indifferent towards the environmental sustainability. They are very much part of the society as the students of general science or environmental science. They do need to know about the physical, social, political and economical environment of the state. The Infusion Approach can make the teaching of literature in the classroom helpful in the fulfilment of above said goal. To infuse ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) into the curriculum means to integrate, to weave into the existing curriculum, the knowledge, perspectives, values, skills/actions needed to transform society and to sustain the planet. The infusion approach allows us to address sustainability, not by adding another course, but through the teaching of our subject area. Teachers will find that there are the topics in the syllabus itself that can serve the purpose. The teacher of literature just needs to match the objectives of literature to the objectives of Education for Sustainable Development. He needs to find if ESD content is missing in the syllabus. More texts dealing with such subjects can be incorporated in the syllabus.

Let us take the example of the writings of Amitav Ghosh. He hints at facts about change in climate from time to time in his writings. In his first major book of nonfiction *In an Antique Land* (1992), Ghosh examines our inability—at the level of literature, history, and politics—to grasp the scale and violence of climate change. In his latest work *The Great Derangement* (2016) he explicitly focuses on the physical environment while hinting at how imagination of a literary artist is shaped by changes in atmosphere. He says, “That climate change casts a much smaller shadow within the landscape of literary fiction than it does even in the public arena is not hard to” (10). Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is set in the Sundarbans, an immense labyrinth of tiny islands and mangroves in the Bay of Bengal and a fragile ecosystem under siege. This is Ghosh’s one work of fiction set directly in an area where climate change is having a massive impact. The novel brings to life one of the most dynamic ecological systems of the world and its fragile relationship with the people that live there. Woven through with both history and mythology, this novel showcases the distance between arrogant, detached urban elite and the people who live in such regions. *Don’t Cry Lake Tai* (2012), by Qiu Xiaolong deals with a murder mystery based on environmental issues. The novel is set around the once beautiful Lake Tai, renowned for its clear waters, is now covered by fetid algae, its waters polluted by toxic runoff from local manufacturing plants.

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Literary writers are very much aware of the issues like Changing consumption patterns, Climate Change, Deforestation, Fresh water, Gender equity etc. Hence these subjects are becoming important themes in literary works though some challenges are there on their way to surmount. Arundhati Roy, a celebrated Indian novelist, has shown some concern about environmental issues but in various forms of non-fiction. In her latest work *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014) she examines the dark side of democracy in contemporary India, and shows how the demands of globalized capitalism has subjugated billions of people to the highest and most intense forms of racism and exploitation.

A teacher of literature can teach literature with an ESD focus. He can teach with the objective of developing students' knowledge and awareness of the physical environment. He can help students understand the relation between the physical and social environment. While teaching poems or stories he can develop students' knowledge and understanding of society (e.g key social issues such as justice, equity, peace, poverty eradication). Where there is no explicit exploration of the physical environment, the teacher needs to analyse how the physical environment is represented and its relation to the society/community/characters in the text. In literature class students can be engaged in critical reading of various texts on sustainability issues. Videos or films focusing on climate change or general environmental changes in our country or at global level can be shown. The teacher can follow this with a discussion on the material presented and what needs to be done collectively and individually. Films that are likely to inspire the inner environmentalist can be part of the curriculum. Literature builds empathy. Through literature we learn how to 'walk in another's shoes', how to see the world from another person's perspective and how to feel how others feel. Literature provides a space in which we can become the 'other' for a while. Literature also focuses on moral and ethical issues, attitudes and values. These are the important values that Literature has to offer. Students studying literature can be often engaged in the reading and performance of plays dealing with the sustainable development issues. The tenants of Green Theatre can be incorporated to the curriculum.

Thus, to combat the problems such as climate change, global warming, depletion of resources, deforestation, variety of pollutions we need to pay attention towards the inculcation of human values before turning towards technical or political assistance. We are human beings first so we must not shed our humanity. We should not be selfish enough that we cannot think of our future generations. We need to walk hand in hand to fight such common crisis. To protect the human race and its habitat we must make it our culture to be responsible for every action on this planet. Otherwise, we shall lose our fundamental right to live.

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Vol. 3 Issue 3 (June 2017)

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