

Date:06/01/2008 URL:

<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/op/2008/01/06/stories/2008010650021400.htm>

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Tamasha in Bali

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Bali, a small island paradise of Indonesia, has a population of 30 lakh people, of whom 93 per cent are Hindus. A few weeks ago, in the star hotels of this remote corner of the world were assembled around 10,000 important people, representing governments, scientific institutes, and NGOs from 192 countries, to discuss what should be done to counter dangerous global climate change.

The previous Kyoto conference on the same theme failed to achieve anything, mainly because the United States refused to accept enforceable international guidelines for curbing carbon dioxide emissions. This time as well, the United States agreed only at the very last minute to investigate the question further, buying itself time for two more years.

Following the recently published U.N. Inter-Governmental Climate Change report, which won the Nobel Peace Prize, it is abundantly clear that more than a 2° C rise in global temperature by 2050 can cause untold harm to the environment and human societies. It has been calculated that this temperature limit can be maintained if heat-trapping greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are kept to 450 parts per million of CO₂ equivalent.

To keep to this limit global emission of these gases should not exceed 1,700 gigatonnes in the first half of this century, and Western nations should reduce emissions by 80 per cent below the present levels by 2050. The European Union promises to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 30 per cent compared to 1990 levels, provided other industrial countries also act, though so far it has not kept even the modest commitments it made at Kyoto.

But many scientists are pleading that global temperatures should be lowered to pre-industrial, that is 1860, levels if we are to strive for security.

Changes in lifestyle

As the American Union of Concerned Scientists points out, the technologies are also available, or could be readily developed with moderate expense to greatly improve energy efficiencies, replace fossil fuel generated power with renewable energy, cut down needless waste, and reduce energy input per unit of output, but a major determiner of survival is going to be acceptance of changes in lifestyle. This last issue is precisely what American decision-makers are fighting against, and at Bali they are

trying to get the fast developing nations of China and India into their camp to resist everything except voluntary self-disciplining by industry.

Americans fight against government regulation of business with all the conviction of religious fundamentalism, and the freedom to drive their cars, which guzzle 10 million barrels of oil a day, is considered as sacred as any human right. However, the warnings of scientists about impending global disaster should be taken at face value, especially since the warnings have come after several decades of contentious research, carried out by conservatives who generally bow to business which pays for much of their research.

In this context, it is a pity that the Indian government has taken a casual attitude towards an issue that threatens the very existence of our agriculture, the source of livelihood for the great mass of rural India. In many bad monsoon years, over 100 districts are declared drought-hit. With rising temperatures, this area could expand at least by 20 per cent.

In the fiercely competitive, almost re-colonising, global economy, Asian, African and Latin American countries are not going to accept curbs on their energy consumption for development, faced as they are with dire poverty for the great masses of their people, unless and until the rich G8 nations set an example in cutting back energy consumption. If global climate change poses a major threat to all humanity, we must come up with equitable solutions for all humanity.

Equity does not constrain us to frugality, but only to balance, as the Balinese know, between the purusharthas, or purposes of life; for example, between artha, or economic well-being, and dharma, or social justice, to rephrase that concept in terms of our modern understanding. India cannot be shining, however many dollar billionaires we have, if lakhs of farmers are committing suicides. We cannot boast of five-star super-specialty hospitals if poor dalits have to become bonded labourers to pay for emergency medical expenses.

Equitable living

Balanced, beautiful, and socially equitable living requires the freeing of the creative capacities of all persons. Technology could play a crucial role in the service of humanity, as Gandhiji himself advocated when he offered a reward for improving the efficiency of the charkha. His concept of ahimsa was always more than a political instrument, and embraced the totality of our relationships within society, and between us and Nature and all life itself.

It is only by recollecting our ancient wisdom that we can meet the challenge of disastrous climate change, and not by mere tinkering with rules and contracts. That said, humanity still has to walk back step by step from the disaster of its own making, and all positive small measures should be welcomed if the vision of human dharma is held clearly in mind.

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