

## HEALING THE EARTH

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*"Civil disobedience is not our problem. Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that numbers of people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of the leaders of their government and have gone to war, and millions have been killed because of this obedience. Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war, and cruelty. Our problem is that people are obedient while the jails are full of petty thieves, and all the while the grand thieves are running and robbing the country. That's our problem." - Howard Zinn*

All the colorful TV spots, all the glitzy ads in fancy magazines have one single message: CONSUME MORE, THROW MORE. In their attempt to widen their markets companies want to sell us more products – many of the things we don't need at all. They brainwash us into believing that we need computers with more RAM, TV sets which look sleek. They fool us into believing that without a string of these gas guzzling, electricity eating gadgets we will be left behind in the rat race. Prof. Madhav Gadgil uses the word “omnivores” to describe the ecological profligacy of the Indian elite.

First they pollute all our rivers and lakes and then they sell us bottled water. They build tall skyscrapers and blot every patch of sunshine and then sell us sunny beach resorts. They poison our crops with venomous pesticides and chemicals and then open “organic” stores to make more money!

It is a matter of no small consequence that the only people who have ever lived sustainably on earth have been the indigenous people – the adivasis who make no fetish about their ability to read or write. Education gives us a paper degree to fit into an industrial-military empire, but it is no guarantee to decency, prudence or wisdom.

Look at the Satyam saga. Why single out its Chairman R. Ramalinga Raju alone and a few of his cohorts for siphoning thousands of crores. The company employed over fifty thousand qualified personal with a string of college degrees. How can so many bright, IT professionals not smell the “dead” rat rotting for years! Big MNC auditing firms like M/s Pricewaterhouse Coopers actively abetted the crime. The company had highly credible independent directors on its board, to ensure best practices. Not surprisingly, the company received the prestigious Golden Peacock Award for corporate governance. How could so many people collectively sell their souls?

This was not the work of ignorant people. It was the result of highly qualified people – people with MBA's, B.Tech's, PhD's etc. Noble laureate Elie Wiesel author of the classic “Night” on the holocaust makes a similar point. According to him the perpetrators of the holocaust were the heirs of Kant and Goethe. In most respects the Germans were highly educated. But their splendid education and degrees did not prevent them from

shoving 6 million Jews into the gas chambers. What was wrong with their education? In Wiesel's words: "It emphasized theories instead of values, concepts rather than human beings, abstractions rather than consciousness, answers instead of questions, ideology and efficiency rather than conscience."

Today's educational curriculum has fragmented the world into bits and pieces called disciplines and sub-disciplines. This results in students spending many years in school / college without any broad integrated sense of the unity of things. The consequences of this on their personality and on the planet are large. For instance, we produce technologists with no appreciation for the arts. We produce economists who lack the most rudimentary knowledge of ecology. That is why our budgets are less taxing on polluting cars or electric geysers and heavy on buses and solar heaters. As a result of this incomplete education we've fooled ourselves into thinking that we are much richer than we are.

The devastation of the natural world, the pollution of our cities can be traced to the rising expectations of the middle class and its consumption patterns. The major air pollution in most of our cities is caused by the inefficient two-wheelers which constitute a whopping 70% of all the vehicles on the road. If only 10% of the population owns cars they should democratically use only 10% of the road, but the reality is just the opposite. A few years back an International school in New Delhi introduced a series of air-conditioned buses to ferry children from home to school and back. The school catered to NRI children who could afford to pay a hefty sum for these facilities. What frightens one is this splurging is now becoming a norm.

If education is to be measured against the standards of sustainability, what can be done? Progressive schools and institutions can certainly contribute their bit. First they need to do a stock-taking of how they conduct their business as educators. Does the education make the students better planetary citizens or "professional vandals"? Does education contribute to the development of a sustainable local, regional economy, or does it favor processes of destruction? One progressive school in Pune now compulsorily ferries all its students to school in buses. No one can use a car. The children have a simple breakfast and lunch in the school.

It is imperative for every school and college to map out the "resource-flow" patterns on the campus - food, energy, water and waste. Faculty and students must study energy use and try and minimize it. Is rainwater being harvested? Is solar energy being used? What is the campus waste and how it is recycled? A field visit to the city dump to experience the stench and flies will instill a deep-ecological message. Institutions can use their "buying power" to support alternatives more environmental friendly alternatives, reduce their carbon emissions, promote energy efficiency and in the process provide an example to other institutions. The Pune University spread over 411 acres could easily implement a bicycle pool or a string of electric vehicles to ferry thousand of students from its main gate to the study campus 2-kms away. This facility would prevent the students from using their two-wheelers. The results of these studies should be woven into the curriculum as interdisciplinary courses. No student should graduate without understanding to analyze

resource-flows and without the opportunity to participate in the creation of real solutions to real problems.

The fact is that we have too many “successful” people. We desperately need more peacemakers, singers, healers, storytellers, theatre artists, painters, dreamers of all shapes and forms. We need more non-corporate people who wish to sing their own song and live their own dreams. We need people of moral courage willing to fight to make our world more humane and habitable.