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Book Review: Global Warming. There is Still Time to Act (2008)

BOOK REVIEW

by

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GLOBAL WARMING. THERE IS STILL TIME TO ACT (2008) BY ALOK BHATTACHARYA. RUPA &amp; CO., NEW DELHI. Pp. 150 (HB). Rs. 395/-

Alok Bhattacharya's work, "*Global Warming. There is still time to act*", is an insightful documentation of his personal observations augmented by the copious informations gathered over a period of over four decades, articulating his concerns about stratospheric ozone layer depletion resulting from the relentless march of civilisation over the years and is a wake-up call to the nations vis-à-vis their responsibilities regarding the course of action to be taken to mitigate the impact of the resultant phenomena of global warming, a menace that threatens the very survival of this planet.

In the First Chapter, the author talks about the genesis of the obnoxious phenomena of global warming. He lucidly illustrates the mechanism of increase in global temperatures attributing it to the accelerated pace of human developmental activities, increased burning of fossil fuels, leading to the increased emission of Green House Gases (GHGs). This is a result of our conspicuous consumption-oriented lifestyles, a skewed consumption pattern, wherein, the western nations are to be blamed more than the rest. On the other hand, in the Rio Conference, 1992, the developed countries like the USA, have not accepted the responsibilities rather they have solely blamed the poor nations. In this tug-of-war, the globe is becoming warmer with the passage of time. This revelation about the gradual increase in global temperatures was prompted by scientific evidence that emerged in the mid-seventies linking the release of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and other chlorine - based substances with the destruction of the stratospheric ozone layer, the layer that shields human beings and plant life from the harmful effects of solar radiation. CFCs are used in refrigeration, air conditioning, etc., among other applications and in view of the magnitude of the problem, Bhattacharya traces the path of the international environmental efforts which shifted radically from the rather parochial transboundary or regional air pollution concerns to the all-consuming threats to the global atmosphere.

In the Second Chapter, Bhattacharya takes the readers to the journey from China, USA, Australia, Africa, South Asia and to the Sunderbans. In this journey, he unfortunately did not touch the whole of Europe, England, North and South America, and down to New Zeland. These areas are also feeling concern about the climate change. Their experiences could have completed the global perspective. He gives



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manifest examples of the disastrous impact of global warming on the various ecosystems of the world. He further dilated upon the enormity of the situation and an urgency to act in that regard. Explosive population growth and the additional emissions generated along with the extensive deforestation in recent years compound the hazards posed by the rise in global temperatures, is what Bhattacharya brings

home. By lucid recounting of occurrences of abnormally hot years in succession, increased intensity of cyclonic storms and hurricanes, erratic rainfall patterns, heat waves in colder climes, shrinking glaciers in Himalayas, Alaska and the extensive melting of Arctic ice-caps, the author posits his serious concerns about the safety of our environment. The felling of the Brazilian Amazon is a notoriously glaring example of indiscriminate deforestation for industrial purposes. The author acquaints the reader with the fact that oceans, the natural sinks of carbon-dioxide have drastically lost their efficiency to absorb the gas, thus, bringing out the ominous nature of the scenario. It may be pointed out that the international environmental law authorities have time and again raised voice against the global warming. But the tragedy is that such concern is locked in conference rooms and treatise with hardly much positive response.

The earth, that the man has inherited the inception of the earth, the making of earth's atmosphere, the emergence of first life-forms, the evolution from simple to more complex organisms have been discussed with a rare insight of a man trained in chemistry. The complex chain of natural selection process and the series of checks and balances which led to create a stable ecosystem over a period of three billion years have been explained in a lay men's parlance with the objective to warn that man has not been on the planet long enough to know the intricacies of the dynamics of this diverse ecosystem. And any attempt, wittingly or unwittingly to tinker with the system might disturb the interdependent and very dynamic parameters ordained by nature. This is evident from the rising global temperatures to menacing levels due to indiscreet tampering and unwarranted forays by man into nature's scheme of things.

The Fourth Chapter takes the readers to the historical perspective from the ancient time to the present state of affairs. The author traces the march of the civilisation from nomadic hunters and food gatherers to cattle raisers, agricultural economies and finally to the churning of the Industrial era to better illustrate the tortuous course man has tread to land in the present dismal scenario. Bhattacharya's contention is that the west, which set the pace for this relentless industrialisation in pursuit of dizzying heights of production, has to take the greater part of the blame as it set the tone and tenor for replacing the old cultural inhibitions which maintained the pristine state of nature with callous self-serving



exploitation of Mother Earth. This is an expose of how the unabashed sanction of the west for a *laissez faire* brand of capitalist economy, how a no holds-barred approach in pursuit of profit, squeezed the very life from ecosystems all around us. Citing data from UNDP, ESCAP, UN Population Reference Bureau Tables, the author exposes how the quest for quick industrialisation has disintegrated the traditional agricultural economies of the developing nations with promises of higher standards of living and urbanisation.

The industrialisation process and the alarming rise in population in developing countries is the cause for accelerated degradation of nature even as the gap between the rich and the poor in terms of global opportunities is widening. The author proffers a solution to the ever worsening environmental degradation which is a direct consequence of increased urbanisation as the transition from agriculture occurs — limiting the mass rural migration to the cities by providing good living conditions around the villages and towns, a dream of the Father of Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. The author makes a case for rethinking of the Gandhian concept of development — that the aim of development be not primarily a creation of material wealth and satisfaction

of insatiable wants but rather decentralisation and strengthening of villages. It may be pointed out that the Seventy-third and Seventy-fourth Amendment Acts, 1992 have now given vigour to this Gandhian Philosophy.

In the Fifth Chapter, Bhattacharya takes the readers to a different environment, an aspect which has yet to get a detailed handling by the environmental lawyers. The author exposes the readers to the physical, social, economic and humanised environments. The author talks of the impact of the accelerative trends visible all around-from distances travelled, minerals mined, power generated, consumption of energy, the destructive power of weaponry-all in man's pursuit of consumerist-centered lifestyles and material comfort, on not just the physical environment but the social environment as well. The underlying objective of such an expose being to expedite action to stem the rot if not reverse the processes that have brought us to such a pass. Quoting UN reports, the author reveals that technology oriented lifestyles is causing great income disparities especially across Asia. The unsustainable lifestyles of the rich are an ecological burden on the poor who ironically are least responsible for climate change. The quest for materialism has turned man oblivious to the environmental perspective; this excessive preoccupation with money and carnal pleasures cause dehumanisation of character of individuals in the long term. This is an aspect, it may be pointed out, was taken care of under the ancient Indian environmental law but it is hardly given a place in the present regime of the Indian



environment law. It is due to such dislinkage that the human beings and environment have landed on a miserable path.

The author in the subsequent Chapter makes a strong case for the revival of the villages by renewing the marginal and small farmers' interest in agriculture by making agriculture economically rewarding. Unless the villages are made green, the country cannot prosper. But the question remains: how far the village revival is possible for those who have deserted the villages and finally have been comfortably settled in the urban cities, many in the metros? He also suggests rehabilitation of the rural poor. This, in the author's opinion, is the most viable alternative to counter the problem of Global Warming. Despite the task before the humanity being of a Herculean nature, there is still time to act. The Ecosystem Services (ESS) like clean air, pure water, fertile soil and a healthy environment till now taken for granted should now entail a cost. The Ecosystem Services Fund the author proposes, should be raised from the section of the society which has been the maximum beneficiary of the industrialisation process, to be channelised by a few dedicated government agencies working at the grass-roots level to reach the poorest section of the society. It may be pointed out that to have dedicated and committed persons is a pious hope. An India-specific use of the said fund would entail the corpus being utilised for a massive afforestation programme to reduce its global warming share, simultaneously augmenting the agricultural production of the country decreasing the poverty-level — a two pronged approach aimed at environmental upgradation as well as poverty alleviation. In this long exercise, it may be pointed out the author misses the discussion of sustainable development which has been attracting attention of members of the family of nations. Since the problem that posed itself before us is of a gargantuan proportion, of a global scale, according to Bhattacharya, the solution would come from the concerted efforts of the humanity — that is devising of a global plan.

As a last resort to stabilise the Green House Gas emissions, the author proposes, a road map. The road map is an interesting study which includes five sectors: the

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energy use sector; other sources of energy sector; petroleum sector and railway sector. Bhattacharya has given his suggestions as to how best these sectors be made ecofriendly. Some of them include: a plan in which the countries must pay the extra cost for transforming everything from energy supply networks, to agriculture, to waste; a global exercise in which substantial changes by way of altering high consumption patterns are effected by the developed countries while substantial changes in transport, energy supply, housing and agricultural sectors besides afforestation on a large scale are effected by the developing countries like India. Besides, more comprehensive use of



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non-CHC generating renewable sources of energy, bio-fuel use, and drastic lifestyle changes would be measures to be adopted across the board. However the cutting edge, according to the author, lies in industrialisation in partnership with agriculture where the developed countries, the chief culprits responsible for global temperature rise pay the developing countries to preserve their forest cover. This of course would only be atonement on the part of developed countries for the sins of the past.

Sounding a grave note, the author recommends stringent measures like imposing a cut-off point beyond which industrialisation will not be allowed to grow, along with blending free enterprise with social commitments towards humanity — the eventual evolution of a new economic world order. These are the only courses open to the world to extricate itself from the catch twenty two situation that it now finds itself in. Along side this, better livestock management to reduce methane emissions are innovative solutions which Alok Bhattacharya proffers to counter the looming crisis and which probably is the objective of penning this work with the fervor of a missionary who appreciates the “brink of the precipice” scenario and wants nothing more than to turn the clock back.

The novelty of the work by Alok Bhattacharya lies in quantifying, in a most graphic fashion possible, the enormity of the on coming crisis and his emphasis on the urgency to bring a tectonic shift in solutions which, though apparently skewed in favour of the developing countries, are the only course open to avert the impending catastrophe. The research value of the present work could have been enhanced, had Bhattacharya included footnotes to the authorities and reports he had taken use in his work. But one thing is very clear that the Chemistry of the “Global Warming” has opened new vista for the researchers in multidiscipline including Law.

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