

‘Seven Billion Dreams. One Planet. Consume with Care.’

Today we celebrate the World Environment Day, to raise global awareness about the importance of a clean, green and healthy environment for human well-being, and to encourage everyone for taking positive action in addressing challenging environmental issues. Celebrated each year on 5th June, the Day marks the opening of the United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972.

The theme this year, ‘Seven Billion Dreams. One Planet. Consume with Care.’ is very topical and relevant, as it reminds us of the enormous impact that our personal choices and decisions in day-to-day lives as consumers have on environment. It also emphasises the responsibility each one of us has in contributing to protecting the environment and reducing the rate of depletion of natural resources.

Changes in natural resource base due to human activities have taken place more rapidly in the past 50 years than at any time in human history, causing continued deterioration of environment. As a result, many of the Earth’s ecosystems are nearing critical tipping points of depletion or irreversible change. By 2050, with the current consumption and production patterns and with a rising population expected to reach 9.6 billion, it is estimated that we would need three planets to sustain our ways of living and consumption.

We simply cannot afford this, as we have but ‘Only one Earth.’ Ironically, this was the theme for the first World Environment Day 42 years ago in 1973. We still have some time to transform the challenges of limited and fast depleting resources into opportunities that will enhance the quality of life for all without increasing environmental degradation, and without compromising the resource needs of future generations.

This however calls for altering our consumption patterns in a manner that we do more and better with less; less of water, less of energy, and less of all other resources. ‘Business as usual’ is no longer an option for us. By becoming more conscious of the ecological impact of our actions, and environmental consequences of the personal choices we make, we can become agents of change.

Unsustainable patterns of consumption are one of the major causes of increasing environmental deterioration. That we can make a difference through our choices and decisions can be gauged from these facts relating to water, energy and food:

Less than 3% of the world’s water is drinkable, of which 2.5% is frozen. Water is being polluted faster than nature can recycle and purify. More than 1 billion people do not have access to fresh water. Excessive use/wastage of water is leading to global water stress.

- Energy consumption has grown most rapidly in transport sector followed by commercial and residential use. The cost of renewable energy is becoming increasingly competitive with that derived from fossil fuels. We can therefore shift our consumption patterns with lower energy and material intensity without compromising quality of life.
- Food sector, due to environmental impacts in its production phase, accounts for around 30% of the world’s total energy consumption and around 22% of total greenhouse gas emissions. 1.3 billion tonnes of food is wasted every year while almost 1 billion people go undernourished and another 1 billion hungry. Overconsumption of food is detrimental to our health as well as to the environment. Dietary choices and habits therefore affect environment.

India has had a long cultural tradition of frugality and simple living in harmony with nature. As a result, conservation ethos is deeply ingrained in our people. However, unfortunately the symbiotic relationship of man with nature gets debilitated as societies develop, risking the well-being of future generations.

In today’s times, when we look closely at the relationship between people and environment, though hard to see at first, we would be able to recognise unsustainable behaviours amongst most of us. Let us try asking ourselves some difficult questions.

Do I need everything I own?

- What if I did not own this?
- What are my real needs?
- Am I aware of what I eat, how it is produced and how far it has travelled?
- Is my house energy efficient?
- How do I commute daily?
- Do I know how to save on water, electricity, fuel etc.?
- What are the social and environmental impacts of my lifestyle?
- What can I do to be more sustainable?

Going by the likely answers that we may get to these questions, we would realise that we need to be much more frugal in the way we use natural resources, while also recognising that for us, inclusive growth and a rapid increase in per capita income levels are development imperatives. In this context, the Government's policy on 'Zero defect, zero effect'; the programme on '100 Smart cities'; the campaign on 'Swachh Bharat'; and the mission on 'Namami Gange' are very apt and relevant.

The challenge of production and consumption of environment friendly goods in India is huge. This would entail use of raw materials which are organic, locally produced or environment friendly; and green-energy based technology. Though there are indications that impressive changes are taking place, the outlined factors are yet to be embedded fully with the production processes in India. These create two main challenges: firstly, the problem of availability and acquisition of green raw material and technology, which is a critical challenge for the producers in developing countries such as India given the lower level of research and development (R&D) and issues arising from transfer of technology from other nations. Second, and a more important challenge is the high cost of production of green goods since the inputs (raw material and technology) invariably cost higher than the ones used for non-green variants.

India, like other developing and emerging economies, has the tremendous advantage of knowledge about the adverse impacts of earlier development paradigms and a vast array of new technologies. Significant reductions in environmental pressures can be achieved by appropriate private and public consumption patterns, to supplement gains achieved through better technology and improved production processes.

The 3Rs approach of Reduce, Reuse and Recycle should be the core of environmentally responsible practices that the industries and society at large should imbibe.

As we celebrate the 2015 World Environment Day, let us pledge to make at least one change in our lives towards a more responsible resource consumption behaviour or practice.

How apt was Mahatma Gandhi when he said 'Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not for every man's greed.'

Let us re-establish the link with nature, as did the ancients in India centuries ago, and take from Earth and the environment only so much as one puts back into them. The sages of Atharva Veda chanted in their hymn to Earth, I quote:

"What of thee I dig out, let that quickly grow over;

Let me not hit thy vitals, or thy heart".