

How Much Should a Person Consume?

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Executive Summary

Galbraith termed contemporary America as the 'Affluent Society' in which the single-minded pursuit of wealth led to the massive exploitation of resources and materials through the years. Contemporary India reflects the Western ethos while aggressively channelizing the natural resources of the countryside to meet the needs of the urban-industrial sector. From this biased resource-use arises the grave inequalities of consumption within the nation.

This paper addresses the dynamics of consumption in the backdrop of the global socio-ecological movement with special reference to the Indian context. It captures the asymmetries in the patterns of consumption in an analytical framework. Based on the culture and styles of consumption, the Indian population can be divided into three classes: omnivores, ecosystem people and ecological refugees. Omnivores have the capability to draw upon the natural resources of the whole of India to maintain their lifestyles. Ecosystem people, rely on resources in their vicinity. Ecological refugees are those ecosystem people who have been displaced from their homes and live in slums. It is argued that the process of development in independent India is characterized by a basic asymmetry between the omnivores and the ecosystem people. While omnivores consume too much, ecosystem people may be consuming much too little. Some of the consequences of this process are:

- Concentration of decision making in the hands of omnivores.
- Use of state machinery for diverting natural resources for omnivore prosperity, e.g., through subsidies.
- Indifference of omnivores to environmental degradation caused by them and passing on their costs to society.
- Protests by the victims of development.
- Creation of 'ecological refugees' as a result of permanent displacement of ecosystem people.

Three key ways to enhance the social power of ecological refugees and ecosystem people are: land reforms, literacy, and health care. These reforms would simultaneously force omnivores to internalize the costs of their profligate behaviour.

A retreat of the rich from overconsumption is the necessary first step towards improving the lives of an increasing number of people. One solution for the inequality in fuel consumption comes from the Spanish economist, Juan Martinez-Alier, who suggests taxation of oil consumption in rich countries while subsidizing LPG or kerosene in poor countries.

Thus, to allow the poor to ascend just one step up the hierarchies of resource consumption, what is required is a very moderate sacrifice by the rich. It echoes Gandhi's thoughts on environmental ethics: "World has enough for everybody's need, but not enough for everybody's greed." 

KEY WORDS

Resource Consumption

Omnivores

Ecosystem People

Ecological Refugees

Resource Catchment

This paper takes as its point of departure an old essay by John Kenneth Galbraith — an essay so ancient and obscure that it might very well have been forgotten even by its prolific author. The essay was written in 1958, the same year that Galbraith published *The Affluent Society*, a book that wryly anatomized the social consequences of the mass consumption age. In his book, Galbraith had highlighted the ‘preoccupation with productivity and production’ in post-war America and Western Europe. The population in these societies had for the most part been adequately housed, clothed, and fed; now they expressed a desire for ‘more elegant cars, more exotic food, more erotic clothing, more elaborate entertainment.’ When Galbraith termed America of the 1950s as the ‘Affluent Society,’ he not only meant that this was a society most of whose members were hugely prosperous when reckoned against other societies and other times, but also that this was a society so dedicated to affluence that the possession and consumption of material goods became the exclusive standard of individual and collective achievement. He quoted the anthropologist, Geoffrey Gorer, who remarked that this was a culture in which ‘any device or regulation which interfered or can be conceived as interfering with [the] supply of more and better things is resisted with unreasoning horror, as the religious resist blasphemy, or the warlike pacifism’ (Galbraith, 1958).

CONSUMPTION: THE UNASKED QUESTION

The Conservationist Approach

The essay I speak of was written months after the book which made Galbraith’s name and reputation. ‘How Much Should a Country Consume?’ is its provocative title and it can be read as a reflective footnote to *The Affluent Society*. In the book itself, Galbraith had noted the disjunction between ‘private affluence and public squalor,’ of how this single-minded pursuit of wealth had diverted attention and resources from the nurturing of true democracy which he defined as the provision of public infrastructure, the creation of decent schools, parks, and hospitals. Now the economist turned his attention, all too fleetingly, to the long-term and global consequences of this collective promotion of consumption, of the ‘gargantuan and growing appetite’ for resources in contemporary America. The American conservation movement, he remarks, had certainly noted the massive exploitation of resources and materials in the post-war period. However, its response

was to look for more efficient methods of extraction or the substitution of one material for another through technological innovation. There was, wrote Galbraith, a marked ‘selectivity in the conservationist’s approach to materials consumption.’ For,

if we are concerned about our great appetite for materials, it is plausible to seek to increase the supply, or decrease waste, to make better use of the stocks that are available, and to develop substitutes. But what of the appetite itself? Surely this is the ultimate source of the problem. If it continues its geometric course, will it not one day have to be restrained? Yet in the literature of the resource problem, this is the forbidden question. Over it hangs a nearly total silence. It is as though in the discussion of the chance for avoiding automobile accidents, we agree not to make any mention of speed! (Galbraith, 1958a).

A cultural explanation for this silence had been previously provided by the great Berkeley geographer, Carl Sauer. Writing in 1938, Sauer remarked that ‘the doctrine of a passing frontier of nature replaced by a permanent and sufficiently expanding frontier of technology is a contemporary and characteristic expression of occidental culture, itself a historical-geographical product.’ This frontier attitude, he went on, ‘has the recklessness of an optimism that has become habitual but which is residual from the brave days when north-European freebooters overran the world and put it under tribute.’ Warning that the surge of growth at the expense of nature would not last indefinitely, Sauer — speaking for his fellow Americans— noted wistfully that ‘we have not yet learned the difference between yield and loot. We do not like to be economic realists’ (Sauer, 1963).

Galbraith himself identified two major reasons for the silence as regards consumption. One was ideological, the worship of the Great God—Growth. The principle of Growth (always with the use of a capital G) was a cardinal belief of the American people, which necessarily implied a continuous increase in the production of consumer goods. The second reason was political, the widespread skepticism of the state. For, the America of the 50s had witnessed the ‘resurgence of a notably over-simplified view of economic life which [ascribed] a magical automatism to the price system...’ Now, Galbraith was himself an unreconstructed New Dealer, who would

tackle the problem of over-consumption as he would tackle the problem of under-employment, that is, through purposive state intervention. At the time he wrote, however, free-market economics ruled, and ‘since consumption could not be discussed without raising the question of an increased role for the state, it was not discussed’ (Galbraith, 1958a, p 97).

Four years later, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* and the modern American environmental movement gathered pace. Would not one have expected this new voice of civil society to undertake what the market could not? As it happened, consumption continued to be the great unasked question of the conservation movement. The movement principally focused on two things—the threats to human health posed by pollution and the threats to wild species and wild habitats posed by economic expansion. The latter concern, in fact, became the defining motif of the movement. The dominance of wilderness protection in American environmentalism has promoted an essentially negativist agenda—protection of the parks and their animals by freeing them of human habitation and productive activities. As the historian Samuel Hays (1982) points out, “natural environments which formerly had been looked upon as ‘useless’ waiting only to be developed, now came to be thought of as ‘useful’ for filling human wants and needs. They played no less a significant role in the advanced consumer society than did such material goods as hi-fi sets or indoor gardens.” While saving these islands of biodiversity, environmentalists paid scant attention to what was happening outside them. In the American economy as a whole, the consumption of energy and materials continued to rise.

The growing popular interest in the wild and the beautiful thus not merely accepted the parameters of the affluent society but was wont to see nature itself as merely one more good to be consumed. The uncertain commitment of most nature lovers to a more comprehensive environmental ideology is illustrated by the paradox that they were willing to drive thousands of miles, using up scarce oil and polluting the atmosphere, to visit national parks and sanctuaries thus using anti-ecological means to marvel in the beauty of forests, swamps or mountains protected as specimens of a ‘pristine’ and ‘untouched’ nature (Guha, 1989, 1996).

The Population Factor

The selectivity of the conservationist approach to

consumption was underlined in the works of biologists obsessed with the ‘population problem.’ Influential American scientists such as Paul Ehrlich and Garret Hardin identified human population growth as the single most important reason for environmental degradation. This is how Ehrlich (1969) began the first chapter of his best-selling book, *The Population Bomb*:

I have understood the population explosion intellectually for a long time. I came to understand it emotionally one stinking hot night in Delhi a couple of years ago. My wife and daughter and I were returning to our hotel in an ancient taxi. The seats were hopping with fleas. The only functional gear was third. As we crawled through the city, we entered a crowded slum area. The temperature was well over 100, and the air was a haze of dust and smoke. The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, people arguing and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to buses. People herding animals. People, people, people, people.

Here, exploding numbers are blamed for increasing pollution, stinking hot air, and even technological obsolescence (that ancient taxi!). Through the 70s and 80s, Neo-Malthusian interpretations gained wide currency. Countries such as India, and, especially, Bangladesh, were commonly blamed for causing an environmental crisis. Not surprisingly, activists in these countries have been quick to take offence pointing out that the West, and especially the United States of America, consumes, per capita as well as in the aggregate, a far greater proportion of the world’s resources (Table 1 gives a partial evidence of this). For, apart from its over-use of

Table 1: United States’ Share of World Consumption of Key Materials, 1995

Material	World Production	US Consumption	3 as % of 2
1	2	3	4*
Minerals	7,641	2,410	31.54
Wood products	724	170	23.48
Metals	1,196	132	11.03
Synthetics	252	131	51.98
All materials	9,813	2,843	28.97

* US population is approximately 4.42 per cent of total world population.

Source: Computed from *State of the World 1999*, New York: Worldwatch Institute and W W Norton, 1999.

nature's stock (which Table 1 documents), the Western world has also placed an unbearable burden on nature's sink (which Table 1 ignores). Thus, the atmosphere and the oceans can absorb about 13 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide annually. This absorptive capacity, if distributed fairly amongst all the people of the world, would allow each human being to have the right to emit about 2.3 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year. At present, an American discharges an excess of 20 tonnes annually, a German 12 tonnes, a Japanese 9 tonnes, an Indian less than one tonne. If one looks at the process historically, the charges mount, for it is the industrialized countries, led by the United States, who have been principally responsible for the build-up of greenhouse gases over the past 100 years.

These figures explain why Third World scholars and activists like to argue that the real 'population problem' is in America, since the birth of a child there would have the impact on the global environment of the birth of (say) 70 Indonesian or Indian children. There was a Bangladeshi diplomat who made this case, whenever he could, in the United Nations and elsewhere. But, after a visit to an American supermarket, he was obliged to modify his argument to state instead that the birth of an American dog (or cat) was the equivalent, ecologically speaking, of the birth of a dozen Bangladeshi children (Singh, 1994).

As a long-time admirer of American scholarship, I might add my own words of complaint here. Consider the rich and growing academic field of environmental history, which is most highly developed in the United States. Scholars in other parts of the world have taken much inspiration from the works of American exemplars, from their methodological subtlety, and fruitful criss-crossing of disciplinary boundaries. For all this, there is a studied insularity among the historians of North America. There were, at last count, more than 300 professional environmental historians in the United States, and yet not one has seriously studied the global consequences of the consumer society, the impact on land, soil, forests, climate, etc. of the American way of life .

One striking example of this territorial blindness is the Gulf War. In his prescient essay, Galbraith (1958a) remarked that 'it remains a canon of modern diplomacy that any preoccupation with oil should be concealed by calling on our still ample reserves of sanctimony.' To be sure, there were Americans who tore the veil of this sanctimonious hypocrisy, who pointed out that it was the United States government that had carefully armed and consolidated the dictator it now wished to overthrow.

Yet, the essentially material imperatives of the war remained unexamined. It was the left-wing British newspaper, *The Guardian*, which claimed that the Gulf War was carried out to safeguard the American way of driving. No American historian, however, has taken to heart the wisdom in that throwaway remark, to reveal in all its starkness the ecological imperialism of the sole superpower in the world.

THE GERMAN MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

I would now like to contrast the American case with the German one. The environmentalists among the Germans have been more forthright in their criticisms of the consumer society. 'The key to a sustainable development model worldwide,' writes Lippelt (1992), 'is the question of whether West European societies really are able to reconstruct their industrial systems in order to permit an ecologically and socially viable way of production and consumption.' That Lippelt does not include the United States or Japan is noteworthy, an expression of his (and his movement's) willingness to take the burden upon themselves. West Europeans should reform themselves rather than transfer their existing 'patterns of high production and high consumption to Eastern Europe and the "Third World" [and thus] destroy the earth.'

For the German Greens, economic growth in Europe and North America has been made possible only through the economic and ecological exploitation of the Third World. Rudolf Bahro is characteristically blunt: 'the present way of life of the most industrially advanced nations,' he remarked in 1984, 'stands in a global and antagonistic contradiction to the natural conditions of human existence. We are eating up what other nations and future generations need to live on.' From this perspective, indeed,

The working class here (in the North) is the richest lower class in the world. And if I look at the problem from the point of view of the whole of humanity, not just from that of Europe, then I must say that the metropolitan working class is the worst exploiting class in history. . . What made poverty bearable in eighteenth or nineteenth-century Europe was the prospect of escaping it through exploitation of the periphery. But this is no longer a possibility and continued industrialism in the Third World will mean poverty for whole generations and hunger for

millions (Bahro, 1984).

Bahro was a famous 'Fundist,' a leader of that section of the German Greens which stood in the most uncompromising antagonism to modern society. But, even the most hard-headed members of the 'Realo' faction acknowledge the unsustainability of industrial society on the global plane. The parliamentarian (and now Foreign Minister) Joschka Fischer, when asked by a reporter where he planned to spend his old age, replied: 'In the Frankfurt cemetery, although by that time we may pose an environmental hazard with all the poisons, heavy metals, and dioxin that we carry around in our bodies.' Or as a party document more matter-of-factly put it: 'The global spread of industrial economic policies and lifestyles is exhausting the basic ecological health of our planet faster than it can be replenished.' This global view, coupled with the stress on accountability, calls for 'far-reaching voluntary commitments to restraint by wealthy nations.' The industrialized countries, which consume three-fourths of the world's energy and resources, and which contribute the lion's share of 'climate-threatening gaseous emissions,' must curb their voracious appetite while allowing southern nations to grow out of poverty. The Greens ask for the cancellation of all international debt, the banning of trade in products that destroy vulnerable ecosystems, and most radical of all, for the freer migration of people from poor countries to rich ones (Hülsberg, 1988; Mayer and Ely, 1997; Sarkar, 1986).

These elements in the Green programme were, of course, forged as an alternative to the policies promoted by the two dominant political parties in Germany, themselves committed to the great God—Growth. As of October 1998, the Greens find themselves sharing power at the Federal level, as junior partners, but partners nevertheless, in a coalition dominated by the Social Democrat. Being in power will certainly tame them. They shall work only for incremental change, instead of the wholesale restructuring of the consumption and production system some of them have previously advocated.

GANDHI'S CODE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Fifty years before the founding of the German Green party, and 30 years before the article by Galbraith alluded to above, Mahatma Gandhi (1928) had pointed to the unsustainability of the Western model of economic development at the global level. 'God forbid,' he wrote,

'that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.'

Two years earlier, Gandhi (1926) had claimed that, to 'make India like England and America is to find some other races and places of the earth for exploitation.' As it appeared that the Western nations had already 'divided all the known races outside Europe for exploitation and there are no new worlds to discover,' he pointedly asked: 'What can be the fate of India trying to ape the West?'

Gandhi's (1927) critique of Western industrialization has, of course, profound implications for the way we live and relate to the environment today. For him, 'the distinguishing characteristic of modern civilization is an indefinite multiplicity of wants,' whereas ancient civilizations were marked by an 'imperative restriction upon, and a strict regulating of, these wants.' In uncharacteristically intemperate tones, he spoke of his 'wholeheartedly detest[ing] this mad desire to destroy distance and time, to increase animal appetites, and go to the ends of the earth in search of their satisfaction. If modern civilization stands for all this, and I have understood it to do so, I call it satanic' (1927a).

At the level of the individual, Gandhi's code of voluntary simplicity also offered a sustainable alternative to modern lifestyles. One of his best known aphorisms that the 'world has enough for everybody's need, but not enough for everybody's greed,' is, in effect, an exquisitely phrased one line environmental ethic. This was an ethic he himself practised; for, resource recycling and the minimization of wants were integral to his life.

Gandhi's arguments have been revived and elaborated by the present generation of Indian environmentalists. Their land is veritably an ecological disaster zone, marked by excessively high rates of deforestation, species loss, land degradation, air and water pollution. The consequences of this wholesale abuse of nature have been chiefly borne by the poor in the countryside—the peasants, tribals, fisherfolk, and pastoralists who have seen their resources snatched away or depleted by more powerful economic interests. For, in the last few decades, the men who rule India have attempted precisely to 'make India like England and America.' Without the access to resources and markets enjoyed by those two nations when they began to industrialize, India has had perforce to rely

on the exploitation of its own people and environment. The natural resources of the countryside have been increasingly channelized to meet the needs of the urban-industrial sector; the diversion of forests, water, etc. to the elite having accelerated processes of environmental degradation even as it has deprived rural and tribal communities of their traditional rights of access and use. Meanwhile, the modern sector has moved aggressively into the remaining resource frontiers of India, the North-East and the Andaman and Nicobar islands. This bias towards urban-industrial development has resulted only in one-sided exploitation of the hinterland, thus proving Gandhi's (1946) contention that 'the blood of the villages is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built.'

The preceding paragraph brutally summarizes arguments and evidence provided in a whole array of Indian environmentalist tracts (*Citizens' Reports on the Indian Environment*, 1982 and 1985; Agarwal, 1986). Simplifying still further, one might say that the key contribution of the Indian environmental movement has been to point to inequalities of consumption *within* a society (or nation). In this respect, they have complemented the work of their German counterparts who have most effectively documented and criticized the inequalities of consumption *between* societies and nations.

THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF CONSUMPTION

The criticisms of these environmentalists are strongly flavoured by morality, by the sheer injustice of one group or country consuming more than its fair share of the earth's resources, by the political imperative of restoring some sense of equality in global or national consumption. I now present an analytical framework that might more dispassionately explain these asymmetries in patterns of consumption. The following paragraphs expand and elaborate on some ideas first presented in Gadgil and Guha (1995). Derived in the first instance from the Indian experience, this model rests on a fundamental opposition between two groups, termed *omnivores* and *ecosystem people* respectively. The two groups are distinguished above all by the size of their 'resource catchment.' Thus, omnivores who include industrialists, rich farmers, state officials, and the growing middle class based in the cities (estimated at in excess of 100 million), have the capability to draw upon the natural resources of the whole of India to maintain their lifestyles. Ecosystem people, on the other hand—who would include roughly two-thirds of the rural

population, say about 400 million people—rely, for the most part, on the resources of their own vicinity, from a catchment of a few dozen square miles at best. Such are the small and marginal farmers in rain-fed tracts, the landless labourers, and also the heavily resource-dependent communities of hunter-gatherers, swidden agriculturists, animal herders, and wood-working artisans, all stubborn 'pre-modern' survivals in an increasingly 'post-modern' landscape.

The process of development in independent India has been characterized by a basic asymmetry between the omnivores and the ecosystem people. A one-sentence definition of development, as it has unfolded over the last 50 years, would be: 'Development is the channelizing of an ever increasing volume of natural resources through the intervention of the state apparatus and at the cost of the state exchequer to subserve the interests of the rural and urban omnivores.' Some central features of this process are enumerated below:

- The concentration of political power/decision making in the hands of omnivores (Bardhan, 1984).
- The use of the state machinery to divert natural resources to islands of omnivore prosperity, especially through the use of subsidies. Wood for paper mills, fertilizers for rich farmers, water and power for urban dwellers are all supplied by the state to omnivores at well below market prices.
- The culture of subsidies has fostered an indifference of omnivores to environmental degradation caused by them, aided by their ability to pass on its costs to ecosystem people or to society at large.
- Projects based on the capture of wood, water or minerals—such as eucalyptus plantations, large dams or open-cast mining—have tended to dispossess the ecosystem people who previously enjoyed ready access to those resources. This has led to a rising tide of protests by the victims of development: Chipko, Narmada, and dozens of other protests that we know collectively as the 'Indian environmental movement.'
- But development has also *permanently* displaced large numbers of ecosystem people from their homes. Some 20 million Indians have been uprooted by steel mills, dams, and the like; countless others have been forced to move to the cities in search of a legitimate livelihood denied to them in the countryside (sometimes as a direct consequence of environmental degradation) (Thukral, 1992). Thus has been created

a third class of *ecological refugees*, living in slums and temporary shelters in the towns and cities of India.

This framework, which divides the Indian population into the three socio-ecological classes of omnivores, ecosystem people, and ecological refugees can help us understand why economic development since 1947 has destroyed nature but also failed to remove poverty. The framework synthesizes the insights of ecology with sociology in that it distinguishes social classes by their respective resource catchments, by their cultures and styles of consumption, and also by their widely varying powers to influence state policy.

The framework is analytical as well as value-laden, descriptive, and prescriptive. It helps us understand and interpret nature-based conflicts at various spatial scales: from the village community upward through the district and region on to the nation. Stemming from the study of the history of modern India, it might also throw light on the dynamics of socio-ecological change in other large, developing 'Third World' countries such as Brazil and Malaysia, where too have erupted conflicts between 'omnivores' and 'ecosystem people,' and whose cities are likewise marked by a growing population of 'ecological refugees.' At a pinch, it might explain asymmetries and inequalities at the global level too. More than a hundred years ago, a famous German radical proclaimed, 'Workers of the World, Unite!' But as another German radical, an environmentalist, and a social critic, Wolfgang Sachs, recently reminded this writer, the reality of our times is very nearly the reverse—the process of globalization whose motto might very well be 'Omnivores of the World, Unite!'

FUTURE PROSPECTS

What then is the prospect for the future? Consider two well-known alternatives already prominent in the market place of ideas:

The Fallacy of the Romantic Economist

This alternative states that everyone can become an omnivore if only we allow the market full play. That is the hope, and the illusion, of globalization, which promises a universalization of American styles of consumption. But, this does not make sense, for (although the businessmen and economists will resolutely refuse to recognize it), there are clear ecological limits to a global consumer society, to all Indians or Mexicans attaining the lifestyle of an average middle-class North American. Can

there be a world with one billion cars, an India with 200 million cars?

The Fallacy of the Romantic Environmentalist

This alternative claims that ecosystem people want to remain ecosystem people. This is the anti-modern, anti-Western, anti-science position of some of India's best known, neo-Gandhian environmentalists (Nandy, 1989; Shiva, 1988). This position is also gaining currency among some sections of Western academia. Anthropologists, in particular, are almost falling over themselves in writing epitaphs to development, in works that seemingly dismiss the very prospects of directed social change in much of the Third World. It is implied that development is a nasty imposition on the innocent peasant and tribal, who, left to himself, would not willingly partake of enlightenment rationality, modern technology or modern consumer goods (Escobar, 1995; Scott, 1998; Sachs, 1992). This literature has become so abundant and so influential that it has even been anthologized in a volume called *The Post Development Reader* (Rahnema, 1998).

The editor of this volume is a retired Iranian diplomat now living in the South of France. The authors of those other demolitions of the development project are, without exception, tenured professors at well-established American universities. I rather suspect that the objects of their sympathy would cheerfully exchange their own social position with that of their chroniclers. For, it is equally a fallacy that ecosystem people want to remain as they are, that they do not want to enhance their own resource consumption. I think these tenured critics of 'development' and 'modernity' need to be reminded of these words of the late Raymond Williams (1958) here speaking of his boyhood in Wales:

At home we were glad of the Industrial Revolution, and of its consequent social and political changes. True, we lived in a very beautiful farming valley, and the valleys beyond the limestone we could all see were ugly. But there was one gift that was overriding, one gift which at any price we would take, the gift of power that is everything to men who have worked with their hands. It was slow in coming to us, in all its effects, but steam power, the petrol engine, electricity, these and their host of products in commodities and services, we took as quickly as we could get them, and were glad. I have seen all these things being used, and I

have seen the things they replaced. I will not listen with any patience to any acid listing of them—you know the sneer you can get into plumbing, baby Austins, aspirin, contraceptives, and canned food. But I say to these Pharisees: dirty water, headaches, broken women, hunger, and monotony of diet. The working people, in town and country alike, will not listen (and I support them) to any account of our society which supposes that these things are not progress: not just mechanical, external progress either, but a real service of life.

This point can be made as effectively by way of an anecdote. Some years ago, a group of Indian scholars and activists gathered in the southern town of Manipal for a national meeting in commemoration of Mahatma Gandhi's 125th birth anniversary. They spoke against a backdrop of a life-size portrait of Gandhi, clad in the loincloth he wore for the last 33 years of his life. Speaker after speaker invoked the mode of dress as symbolizing the message of the Mahatma. Why did we all not follow his example and give up everything to thus mingle more definitively with the masses?

Then, on the last evening of the conference, the Dalit (low-caste) poet Devanur Mahadeva got up to speak. He read out a short poem in Kannada, written not by him but by a Dalit woman of his acquaintance. The poem spoke reverentially of the great untouchable leader B R Ambedkar (1889-1956), and, especially, of the dark blue suit that Ambedkar invariably wore in the last three decades of his life. Why did the Dalit lady focus on Ambedkar's suit, asked Mahadeva? Why, indeed, did the countless statues of Ambedkar put up in Dalit hamlets always have him clad in suit and tie, he asked? His answer was deceptively and eloquently simple. If Gandhi wears a loincloth, said Mahadeva, we all marvel at his sacrifice. The scantiness of dress is, in this case, an indicator of what the man has given up. A high-caste, well born, English educated lawyer had voluntarily chosen to give up power and position and live the life of an Indian peasant. That is why we memorialize that loincloth.

However, if Ambedkar had worn a loincloth, that would not occasion wonder or surprise. He is a Dalit, we would say—what else should he wear? Millions of his caste fellows wear nothing else. It is the fact that he has escaped this fate, the fact that his extraordinary personal achievements—a law degree from Lincoln's Inn, a Ph D from Columbia University, the drafting of the Constitution

of India—have allowed him to escape the fate that society and history had allotted to him that is so effectively symbolized in that blue suit. Modernity, not tradition, development, not stagnation, is responsible for this inversion, for this successful and all-too-infrequent storming of the upper caste citadel.

HIERARCHIES OF RESOURCE CONSUMPTION

Let me now attempt to represent the story of Dr B R Ambedkar's suit in more material terms. Consider these simple hierarchies of fuel, housing, and transportation as indicated in Table 2.

To go down any of these lists is to move towards a more reliable, more efficient, more long-lasting and generally safer mode of consumption. Why then would one abjure cheap and safe cooking fuel, for example, or quick and reliable transport, or stable houses that can outlive one monsoon? To prefer gas to dung for your stove, a car to a bullock-cart for your mobility, a wood home to a straw hut for your family is to move towards more comfort, more well being, and more freedom. These are choices that, despite specious talk of cultural difference, must be made available to all humans.

At the same time, to move down these lists is generally to move towards a more intensive and possibly unsustainable use of resources. Unsustainable at the global level, for, while a car expands freedom there is no possibility whatsoever of every human on earth being able to possess a car. As things stand, some people consume too much, while others consume much too little. It is these asymmetries that a responsible politics would seek to address. Restricting ourselves to India, for instance, one would work to enhance the social power of ecological refugees and ecosystem people, their ability to govern their lives, and to gain from the transformation of nature into artifact. This policy would simultaneously force omnivores to internalize the costs of their profligate behaviour. A new, 'left-green' development strategy would have five central elements:

- A move towards a genuinely participatory democracy with a strengthening of the institutions of local

Table 2: Hierarchies of Resource Consumption

Fuel Used	Mode of Housing	Mode of Transport
Grass	Cave	Feet
Wood	Thatched hut	Bullock cart
Coal	Wooden house	Bicycle
Gas	Stone house	Motor scooter
Electricity	Cement house	Car

governance (at village, town or district levels) mandated by the Constitution of India but aborted by successive central governments in New Delhi. The experience of the odd states, such as West Bengal and Karnataka, which have experimented successfully with the panchayat or self-government system suggests that local control is conducive to the successful management of forests, water, etc.

- Creation of a process of natural resource use which is open, accessible, and accountable. This would include a Freedom of Information Act, so that citizens are fully informed about the design of the state and better able to challenge or welcome it, thus making public officials more responsive to their public.
- The use of decentralization to stop the widespread undervaluing of natural resources. The removing of subsidies and the putting of a proper price tag will make resource use more efficient and less destructive of the environment.
- The encouragement of a shift to private enterprise for producing goods and services while making sure that there are no hidden subsidies and that firms properly internalize externalities. There is, at present, an unfortunate distaste for the market among Indian radicals whether Gandhian or Marxist. But, one cannot turn one's back on the market; the task rather is to tame it. The people and environment of India have already paid an enormous price for allowing state monopolies in sectors such as steel, energy, transport, and communications.
- This kind of development can, however, only succeed if India is a far more equitable society than is the case at present. Three key ways of enhancing the social power of ecological refugees and ecosystem people (in all of which India has conspicuously failed) are land reform, literacy—especially female literacy—and proper health care. These measures would also help bring population growth under control. In the provision of health and education, the state might be aided by the voluntary sector, paid for by communities out of public funds.

The charter of sustainable development outlined here and elaborated in more detail in Gadgil and Guha (1995) applies, of course, only to one country, albeit a large and representative one. Its *raison d'être* is the persistent and grave inequalities of consumption within the nation. What then of inequalities of consumption within nations? This question has been authoritatively addressed in a recent

study of the prospects for a 'Sustainable Germany' sponsored by the Wuppertal Institute for Climate and Ecology (Sachs *et al.*, 1998; Schmidt-Beek, 1994). Its fundamental premise is that the North lays excessive claim to the 'environmental space' of the South. The way the global economy is currently structured,

The North gains cheap access to cheap raw materials and hinders access to markets for processed products from those countries; it imposes a system (World Trade Organization) that favours the strong; it makes use of large areas of land in the South, tolerating soil degradation, damage to regional eco-systems, and disruption of local self-reliance; it exports toxic waste; it claims patent rights to utilization of biodiversity in tropical regions, etc.

Seen 'against the backdrop of a divided world,' says the report, 'the excessive use of nature and its resources in the North is a principal block to greater justice in the world.... A retreat of the rich from overconsumption is thus a necessary first step towards allowing space for improvement of the lives of an increasing number of people.' The problem thus identified, the report goes on to itemize, in meticulous detail, how Germany can take the lead in reorienting its economy and society towards a more sustainable path. It begins with an extended treatment of overconsumption, of the excessive use of the global commons by the West over the past 200 years, of the terrestrial consequences of profligate lifestyles—soil erosion, forest depletion, biodiversity loss, air and water pollution. It then outlines a long-range plan for reducing the 'throughput' of nature in the economy and cutting down on emissions. Table 3 summarizes some of its targets.

The targets set, the policy and technical changes to achieve them are then identified. These include the elimination of subsidies to chemical farming, the levying of ecological taxes (on gasoline, for example), and the move towards slower and fuel-efficient cars while shifting the movement of goods from road to rail. Some concrete examples of resource-conservation in practice are identified—such as the replacement of concrete girders by those made with steel, innovative examples of water-conservation and recycling within the city, and a novel contract between the Munich municipal authorities and organic farmers in the countryside. Thus, Germany would transform itself from a nature-abusing society to a nature-saving one.

Table 3: Some Environmental Objectives for a Sustainable Germany

Environmental Indicator	Target Set for the Year 2010
Energy	
Energy consumption (overall)	At least -30%
Fossil fuels	- 25%
Nuclear power	- 100%
Renewables	+ 3 to 5% per year
Energy efficiency	+ 3 to 5% per year
Materials	
Non-renewable raw materials	- 25%
Material productivity	+ 4 to 6% per year
Substance release	
Carbon dioxide	- 35%
Sulphur dioxide	- 80 to 90%
Nitrogen oxides	- 80% by 2005
Ammonia	- 80 to 90%
Volatile organic compounds	- 80% by 2005
Synthetic nitrogen fertilizers	- 100%
Agricultural biocides	- 100%
Soil erosion	
Land use	
Agriculture	Extensive conversion to organic farming methods
Forestry	Extensive conversion to ecologically adapted silviculture

Source: Sachs; Loske, and Linz (1998).

The Wuppertal Institute study is notable for its mix of moral ends with material means as well as its judicious blending of economic and technical options. More striking still has been its reception. The original German book sold 40, 000 copies, with an additional 100, 000 copies of an abbreviated version. It was made into an award-winning television film and discussed by trade unions, political parties, consumer groups, scholars, church congregations, and countless lay citizens. In several German towns and regions, the attempts have begun to put some of these proposals in practice.

EQUALIZING CONSUMPTION: THE POSSIBLE SOLUTION

The inequalities of consumption thus need to be addressed at both national and international levels. Indeed, the two are interconnected. The Spanish economist, Juan Martinez-Alier, provides one telling example. In the poorer countries of Asia and Africa, firewood and animal dung are often the only source of cooking fuel. These are inefficient and polluting, and their collection involves much drudgery. The provision of oil or LPG for the cooking stoves of the Somalian or Nepali peasant woman would greatly improve the quality of their lives. This could be done very easily, says Martinez-Alier, if one moderately taxed the rich. He calculates that, to replace the fuel used by the 3,000 million poor people in the world, we require about 200 million of oil a year. Now, this is only a quarter

of the United States' annual consumption. But, the bitter irony is that 'oil at \$15 a barrel is so cheap that it can be wasted by rich countries but too expensive to be used as domestic fuel by the poor.' The solution is simple, namely, that oil consumption in the rich countries should be taxed, while the use of LPG or kerosene for fuel in the poor countries should be subsidized (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997; Martinez-Alier, 1997).

Thus, to allow the poor to ascend but one step up the hierarchies of resource consumption requires a very moderate sacrifice by the rich. In the present climate, however, any proposal with even the slightest hint of redistribution would be shot down as smacking of 'socialism.' But this might change, as (and when) conflicts over consumption begin to sharpen, as they assuredly shall. Within countries, access to water, land, forest, and mineral resources will be fiercely fought over between contending groups. Between countries, there will be bitter arguments about the 'environmental space' occupied by the richer nations (Agarwal and Narain, 1992). As these divisions become more manifest, the global replicability of Western styles of living shall be more directly and persistently challenged. Sometime in the middle decades of the 21st century, Galbraith's great unasked question—'How Much Should a Country Consume?'—with its corollary—'How Much Should a Person Consume?'—will come, finally, to dominate the intellectual and political debates of the time. 

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