

Statement at United Nations General Assembly

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by Mr.Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister

The Miracles of modern science and the towering achievements of technology have given us a measure of mastery over nature. Economic progress has, however, engendered a callous disregard of the harmony within the ecological system. Therefore, we have to consciously remind ourselves; we are a part of nature; we are not apart from nature. We are a strand in the single fabric whose warp and weft link together all that is of the earth and the water, the air and the sky.

We have learned to our cost that development which destroys the environment eventually destroys development itself. We have learned to our benefit that development that conserves the environment conserves also the fruits of development. there is thus no fundamental dichotomy between conservation and growth.

Yet striking the right balance between the environmental imperative and the demands of development is not that simple. Conservation imposes an escalation in costs. When resources are limited, the increased cost of any one project necessarily means less investment for others. This appears to imply a curtailment of economic growth. When the environment is not protected, damage to the environment will extract its own price - from those living in the vicinity, from others at a distance, or even from a coming generation.

We do not know enough about the impact on the environment of developmental decisions. We also do not know enough about how best to offset damage to the environment. There are no easy solutions. Yet we cannot ignore environmental considerations. we have to strive for the optimum mix through increased knowledge and increased awareness.

In India, we are seeing a growing awareness of the symbiotic relationship between the protection of the environment and sustainable development. there is the renowned chipko movement in the Himalayas, where women prevent the wanton felling of trees by throwing themselves protectively around tree-trunks. Island communities join hands to stop the coral-mining which destroys their lagoons. Villagers band together to stop goats from grazing on the bramble planted to halt the advance of the desert. Environmental groups are active. In our parliament members are increasingly receptive to environmental concerns. they are beginning to demand that the conservation of the environment be guaranteed before major development projects are undertaken.

At one time, environmental issues related mainly to the quality of life of the affluent. Today, in developing countries like ours, we are primarily concerned with the lives of the poorest. When village ponds and wells go dry, it is the poor who trek to ever-more distant sources for water. When forests are destroyed, it is the poor who go farther and farther afield in the search of fuel wood. As lands are degraded and forests recede, it is the poor and their animals who, in the dry season, trudge hundreds of kilometers in search of grazing lands. It is the livelihood of the poor, and their hopes, the shrivel in the arid anguish of drought and are drowned in the raging fury of floods.

It is also the poor who suffer most from pollution. When water-borne epidemics strike the urban slums, it is the poor who are afflicted by disease and even death. When factories spew harmful gases into the air, it is the workers in the nearby housing colonies who suffer the contagion. When industrial units discharge their effluent into rivers, it is the poor fisher folk who are deprived of their incomes.

Although they bear the brunt of environmental damage, the poor are themselves little responsible for any of that damage. For centuries, they have lived in harmony with nature. The problem is caused by large-scale commercial exploitation, which garners the profits but escapes the environment, the burden falls of those who have gained the least and suffered the most. The people of

the forest cannot suddenly be cordoned off from its bounty. Fuel and building materials must be made readily available, at prices they can afford. Shepherds and cowherds must be found alternative pastures or provided fodder. To be effective, conservation must be humane. That is the challenge before us.

A large number of animal and plant species are seriously threatened. Apart from the ethical and aesthetic case for protecting these disappearing species, it is possible that answers to unsolved problems of health and survival might be found in the yet undiscovered secrets of these gene pool reserves.

We in India are now developing mechanisms to control pollution and check the deterioration of the environment. We assess the environmental impact of development work so as to harmonize development with the environment. We carry out research and take the results out to the field. We promote environmental awareness among the people. We hope this will lead to greater vision, concern and care in the planning, designing and implementation of development projects. We learn as we go along.

We are trying to integrate these complex environmental issues into our design of development. There are no easy or ready-made answers. In principle we could wish to give equal priority to development and conservation. In practice there are many gaps in knowledge, many intangibles and unknown quantities. Experts disagree and assessments vary.

Conservation is not a national task alone. Even as peace is indivisible, so is the world environment. The one world which Jawaharlal Nehru spoke of so often in this very forum is a world which exists in the physical laws governing the environment. The environment everywhere is jeopardized by the noxious fumes and the life-killing wastes of industrial pollution. The poisoning of the rivers and seas deprives and endangers all of us all over the world. The accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the threat to the ozone layer put the innocent as much at risk

as the polluters themselves.

Worst of all is the passing on of pollution and environmental hazards beyond one's boundaries. There is no political boundary which delimits the spread of poisonous gases, no line on a map which radiation cannot cross, no national frontier at which effluents can be turned back. All those affected by such transnational consequences of environmental damage must have an equal say in the resolution of problems. We must also keep the global commons and space free of environmental degradation. The conservation of the earth's environment has to be ensured through democratic discussions and decisions in international forums. It also requires concerted international action to reduce disparities between countries. The compulsions of development and limitations of financial resources tempt many developing countries to exploit their natural resources beyond endurance, ignoring environmental safeguards. If the world economy is to move to more sustainable paths of development, the crucial requirement is to widen the option available to developing countries for growth.

A world economic system which denies itself the benefits of interdependence is both unjust and inefficient. Growth in the developing countries is being hampered by protectionism, the deteriorating real terms of trade, the unfavourable conditions for the transfer of technology and the curtailment of the flow of development assistance.

Programmes of conservation must therefore be addressed to inequities in the international economic order. For example, the lion's share of the world's natural resources has been pre-empted by a few countries. The average citizen of the industrialized countries consumes 10 times more fossil fuels and minerals than the average citizen of the developing world. The world's resources just cannot sustain such profligate consumption of energy and materials.

The developing countries cannot be denied the right to develop; nor are the world's natural resources sufficient for all to follow the greedy path to growth. What, then, is the answer to

the conundrum? The answer lies in more rational patterns of consumption, more efficient utilization of depletable resources by the developed countries and more equitable access to those resources for the developing.

The international community must also address itself to safety measures in high-risk industries. Bhopal, Seveso and Chernobyl have shown how vulnerable we are. It is incumbent on the management of such industries to ensure the utmost vigilance in design, operation and maintenance. Valuable lives must not be lost to inefficiency, indifference, negligence, or worse.

All other environmental dangers pale in comparison to the ever accumulating stockpiles of nuclear weapons. We must remove the threat of a thermonuclear war's wiping out, in a wink of history, life as we know it from our common planet. All nuclear weapons must be dismantled.

The report "our common future" is both a document of high technical excellence and a call to concerted political action. The report reminds us that "the earth is one, but the world is not". We must recognize that, even as development which degrades the environment is self-defeating, so do impediments to development endanger the environment. We must also recognize that environmental issues are closely linked to the larger issues of peaceful coexistence and international co-operation, disarmament and development. Any multidimensional perspective on the environment would be gravely misplaced. The environment is an international issue, to be placed in the context of international co-operation, to be pursued through international institutions, to be linked to all aspects of international relations. Conservation is each nation's task, but it is a task which can be accomplished only in the setting of a co-operative world order.

In one of his most famous slokas, Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of the Sikh religion, sang

"Air is the vital force,  
Water the Progenitor;

The vast Earth is Mother of All"

The Verse sums up the Indian tradition of respect for nature, respect for all that gives us life, respect for the sources of our well-being on earth. In our tradition there is no arrogance towards nature, no desire to dominate it. Our ancient wisdom teaches us to seek harmony with all creation. All creation is interdependent.

The core of the Brundtland report is recognition of that interdependence. Everything in our experience, from the centuries-old teaching of our seers to our contemporary experiments in development, endorses the essence of the message given by us by Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland and her colleagues. We thank them in all sincerity for their deep insights and sage advice.

I should like also to express my appreciation to the Secretary-General for his constructive role in focusing the attention of the international community on this vital issue.

The report of the Commission is the culmination of an important phase of the task. The international community will have to carry forward that task. As experience grows and lacunae in knowledge are filled, answers will slowly be found to the complex questions of development and the environment. The search for the right answers must go on relentlessly. It is a world-wide endeavour to which India pledges unstinting support.

Thank you