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Invited Article

Rethinking the Self in the Light of Conservation Crisis

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Any rethinking of the Self must begin with an awareness that billions of people who have a sense of their self, are interconnected.

“It took hundreds of thousands of years for the world population to grow to one billion – then in just another 200 years or so, it grew sevenfold. In 2011, the global population reached the seven billion mark, and in November 2022, it reached eight billion”.

Each individual requires time, space and material goods to define his self in relation to the world. But the question is how much does each one need? and how are these produced and made available?

Jared Diamond (2008) in his essay “What’s Your Consumption Factor” writes “The population in developing countries is growing, but since they consume so little, it’s not a burden on the world. The real burden lies in the consumption of the one billion people who live in developed countries, who consume and produce waste at 32 times higher than in the developing world. If the entire developing world were to catch up, world consumption would increase eleven-fold.... We can solve the ecological crisis when all countries agree to converge on consumption rates considerably below the current highest levels. A real-world problem is that each of the 300 million Americans consumes as much as 32 Kenyans. With ten times the population the United States consumes 320 times more resources than Kenya does”.

The fact on the ground is not “if the developing world were to catch up...” but rather the developing world is catching up, gradually and ‘progressively’ becoming like the developed world. The race for increasing GDPs and per capita incomes is now in its very advanced stage. The developing countries are mirroring the production of waste. Those who consume little are either engaged in the production of goods and services for the rich or they are unemployed.

World consumption is thus increasing on the one hand and on the other hand, lesser people are engaged in the production process, which is now undergoing a transformation with the use of advanced information technologies.

How could there be such convergence on consumption? -by reducing the consumption level of the high consumer? How is this reduction going to happen? Is it possible for all countries to agree to converge on consumption rates below the current highest? What would be ‘below the current highest? Who is going to decide this? Can consumption levels be reduced by agreement? Can international agreements, the principal polluter pays, taxation, and high prices bring down consumption levels?

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Also, on what basis does Jared Diamond expect high consumers to reduce? The third law of thermodynamics-high energy flows towards low energy levels-does not work for human societies. Further, does the reduction of consumption result in lesser extraction from nature and in a reduction in the generation of waste materials? The moot question is what will be an effective restraint on the consumption factor?

The only way anyone can consume 32 times more than Kenyans is by not producing anything. In fact, most high consumers live off other people's work and effort!! Unlike in the past where-in a few enjoyed the goods produced by the large majority of people, today increasing number of individuals and families enjoy the benefits of increased productivity of technology; they enjoy goods for the production of which they have contributed no effort. In other words, 'to make no effort' is the loss of productive capacity. This is to say that a lesser and lesser number of people are engaged in productive activity.

This progressive loss of productive capacity is the core of consumerism. A consumer is one whose productive capacities have been decommissioned. A consumer has very low productivity. It won't be an exaggeration to say that, a consumer today is an unproductive being. An individual's consumption factor is high because productive capacities have been decommissioned. People receive goods to consume and need not know how and where these were produced. There are several people today in different parts of the world who believe that milk comes from machines! When some of them see a cow being milked it is a revelation for them. This is true for almost all goods we consume, especially food.

An increase in GDP (defines the productivity of the nation) is inversely related to the productive capacity of individuals-as the GDP increases the mass of unemployment people also increases- which is a measure of the decrease in the productive capacity of an individual. This is the core of mechanisation and mass production. The neoliberal economy carries this to an unprecedented scale, its fetish for mass production and speed is pushing towards an absolute decommissioning of human productive capacity to replace it with technological productive capacity-the most advanced form of which is artificial intelligence robotics.

A good example in developed countries of mass production and decommissioning of productivity activity is mega farms worked by machines, where not only the productive capacity of farmers and cultivators but also other ways of knowing are being decommissioned. In developing countries (such as India) there is a strong move to promote mega-farms. In other sectors of production, there has been a drive for lean production which effectively means retrenchment-sending people to become consumers. Venture capital is let loose, it has pushed out capital earned by hard work. Reserves of nature (such as national parks, biodiversity reserves and wildlife sanctuaries), construction of big dams and mass production units displace people engaged in productive activity to become consumers. The health care system now relies more on machines, here also human productive work namely, the diagnostic touch that was healing as well, is being displaced.

This disconnect between production and consumption is also at the core of the ecological conservation crisis. The engagement with production effectively regulates and restrains consumption. This is an important aspect of bread labour proposed by Gandhi as the building block of economy and polity.

Jared Diamond's question "What is your consumption factor?" has a deeper dimension in production. The more important question is what is happening to the production factor?

The decommissioning of productive work has been opening time and space for an idleness-a mass of people with no work-unwanted educated people and more illiteracy- on the one hand,

and life in 'virtual reality on the other. This contributes to the generation of unmanageable waste –technological obsolescence.

This leads to another set of questions: What implications does this have for the way each individual acquires a sense of self? How does this determine a mode of being in the world? How are its requirements of time space material goods, and services provided for? How inclusive and illusive is the notion of plural selves? What remains of the self when the productive capacity is being decommissioned or has been decommissioned?

The self is not produced but consumed as well!!! The decommissioning of productive work has simultaneously decommissioned the paradigm for the production of the self.

'I am Samsung' says an advertisement showing a man holding a Samsung mobile phone! This man is a Bollywood star. The Bollywood star has decommissioned himself by surrendering the 'I' to Samsung.

This is a typical example of living in 'virtual reality'. Consumers define the 'I' by what they consume -cars, watches, ethnic clothes, the jewellery they wear and everything that they have not produced. The 'I' is in a relation of identity with the material objects consumed.

To construct the 'I' aspect of self, requirements of time, space, place and material things of self runs into hundreds for low consumers and thousands for high consumers. This spurs mass production, amongst other things.

The 'I' of the self exists in 'virtual reality that has been constructed with the enhanced technological facility. What remains of the self and what happens to it? It confronts the waste on the ground.

The experience of buying materials over the counter for the construction of the 'I' is concerned with desire. The markets take care of money which is readily available-there are credit cards and a variety of loans that are returnable on seemingly affordable monthly instalments. The remaining aspects of the self constitute the 'other' of this 'I' and it is embedded in debts that have a strong propensity towards self-annihilation.

The paradigm for the construction of the 'I' is the same as the one deployed for the production of material objects. The 'I' for this reason acquires the attributes of these material objects. The life cycle of material objects defines the life cycle of the 'I'-that is to say a person is impelled to seek self-affirmation to keep up with the most recent from the market. In its absence, there is an overwhelming sense of obsolescence which manifest as boredom-a gnawing emptiness. This propels the desire to be hooked on to the deceptive newness which is intrinsic consumerism.

The making of each of these goods of virtual reality generates waste and the 'I' is not concerned with it. A large number of these goods become obsolete- the life cycle of each ends in the waste bin-some of these can be recycled only to produce more waste which in turn if recycled will create waste as well. Each of the six billion people and more, in the process of constructing their respective identities, their multiple selves contribute to huge amounts of waste, a large part of which is not recyclable.

However, when the 'I' confronts waste, dumping grounds bring on a metaphysical discomfort. This often becomes the beginning of the decommissioning of the 'I'. The flimsy bubble of virtual reality begins to dissolve.

The stench chokes, hits the head and sticks to the body and our perfumes fade out. Confronted with decay and purification, the perfumed aura evaporates. The disarray of entropic heterogeneous rubbish strewn indiscriminately across the landscape destabilises. It can shake our sense of being in the world out of slumber and from overconfidence about who we are. The dumping ground has all things that have been used to construct our virtual 'I'-but, not in any unity-decommissioned, scattered, thrown away uncared for-there are injection syringes, food cans, clothes, parts of refrigerators, books and paper, utensils etc. Standing on such ground, the sense of falling apart is overwhelming. There is an immediate sense of our spirits sinking, pulled down by the heaviness of time and space.

Those of us who have lived in slums or have been in their neighbourhood would affirm that sight of heaps of decaying plies of materials brings about a heaviness of the spirit-suggesting a very profound connection between them. Standing here each of the mass-produced materials ceases to stand for the successes and achievements of our world. Most of us do not ever go to these places- these are not visited and those who work in these places have to live with a sense of being in an unclean place, a low position in the social hierarchy.

This is contagious space and time.

It draws attention to our vulnerability and the loss of resilience which is a manifestation of alienation of the 'I' and the remaining aspects of the self, that is between the virtual reality and the indebted constituents of our being in the world. The flimsiness of the former and the self-annihilation of the latter together eat into the ground of our existence. Our waste is in the dumping yards and waste recycling sites located on the farther end of the towns and cities.

This distance shows the chasm between the two aspects of 'who we are'-the 'virtual I' and 'the indebted and impoverished other'. The virtual 'I' is unable to see and talk to the indebted and impoverished other as a consequence of which there is a disconnect between experience and reflection.

On account of this chasm, produce waste continues relentlessly and has accumulated over the years to undermine the ground of our existence in nature and culture. Our dependence on external support systems is increasing: our bodies are prone to illness; even though we are able to fight cancer and there are many more cases every year; and our spirit languishes for collective life which becomes increasingly difficult. Is not vulnerability and loss of resilience a direct consequence of the decommissioning of productivity capacities?

This is the basis of our conservation crisis. The chasm and the disconnect keep us far from taking care of all the problems we have created.

Our experience tells us that to deal with climate change measures more than economic deterrents is necessary.

What is the possibility of a moratorium on the manufacturing of cars and other greenhouse gas-producing agents?

What will it require of consumers to give their consent? What would determine the duration of the moratorium? Long enough to reduce their impact? What would this cost? What will people employed by the car manufacturing industry do during this period?

There are several related questions-what is the ratio between the number of cars manufactured and the number of cars that are decommissioned and sent to the dumping grounds? What happens to these dumped cars? Does their pile keep growing or are there effective ways of destroying them or recycling their parts?

How can this system of mass production be decommissioned? Is it possible to do away with the production of waste? Can the economy become debt free? Can the rate of extraction of natural resources come in symmetry with the rate at which nature can regenerate these resources?

What possibility is there for our survival and well-being without decommissioning the processes that generate our waste and is this possible without beginning with decommissioning the ways to construct the notion of self (selves) without productive capacity?

What is the possibility of reinstating labour that restores the connection between experience and thinking on the one hand and undo the chasm between both aspects of our self-virtual “I” and the impoverished other?

Are there other ways of knowing that are grounded in such labour and are also concerned with the recovery of resilience?

The costs of making the virtual ‘I’ and the impoverished other are huge billions of dollars, and millions of human resources have been mobilised. Such labour is concerned with the dismantling of this enormous establishment.

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