

The Earth Charter: Voice of the Age to Come

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In the preparation of the Earth Charter there was wide-spread consultations with people from all over the Earth – black, white, brown and red people; men, women and young people, people from different parts of the globe; and people from different social, economic and religious backgrounds. The Earth Charter carries the voice of the millions, and it does represent a globalised view of the future of humanity and the future survival of the Earth.

We inherited an Earth, which earlier civilizations had treated it as sacred. Rivers and mountains, the oceans and the sky, the birds and animals were all treated as manifestations of the divine. It is only in the last 300 years or so, that with colonialism and the Industrial Revolution, that we began to treat the Earth as a 'slave' something to be used without concern for its well-being, something that would cater to 'our' needs endlessly. Science and technology was used to 'rape' the Earth. The forests are vanishing, there is increased desertification, the seas and oceans are stained with death with the industrial wastes and poisons we have poured in them, and acid rain has carried death and destruction from one country to another.

Many have hailed the 20th century as a century of great scientific and technological achievements, a century which increased physical comforts, living standards, and our life spans. But it has also been a century of world wars, of conflicts, of violence and crime, and the uprootedness of communities, and it has been a century where men used material resources and the biosphere without concern for their recovery and their sustainability.

There is grave concern about what is happening to humanity and what is happening to the Earth. Many scientific studies and global conferences have been held in the hope of reversing the damaging trends but nothing much has happened, in fact, things have gone from bad to worse. It is clear that scientific studies and conferences have not and cannot lead us to action.

Unlike scientific studies and global conference the Earth Charter is a document which tries to lead us to action – it points us the road to sustainable development, and shows that sustainable development also includes compassion, peace and non-violence, the wisdom of the world's religions, and the importance and practice of spirituality. It is this totality, this togetherness of science and spirituality, the balance of needs and greed, and the absolute need for compassion that distinguishes the Earth Charter from other and earlier documents.

Looking back in history, it is clear that the great progress in the West has been based on the philosophy of the 'survival of the fittest', and therefore the use of violent means for acquiring power, wealth and resources. As Paul Hawken points out “Given current corporate practices not one wildlife reserve, wilderness, indigenous culture will survive

the global market economy. We know that every living natural system on the planet is disintegrating before our eyes. The land, water, air, and sea have been transformed from life giving systems into repositories of waste” – and if I may add – death. The sacred relationship with the Earth has been replaced with a new and a barbaric control of nature.

Arnold Toynbee, the historian of the rise and fall of civilizations pointed out that 'most civilizations died 200 years before they knew they had died'. Is the western civilization in that phase? Is it dying because of its roots in violence, because of its emphasis on 'having' more and more rather than on 'being' which is an inner quest for truth and peace?

If the world is to survive, the 21st century must become a turning point in the history of modern civilization, for if we do not change, this civilization as we know it will cease to exist. We ignore the Earth Charter at our own risk.

Almost a century ago Gandhi had warned that western civilization was heading towards violence and destruction. His arguments were largely based on his concern for the poor, his emphasis on Truth and Non-Violence and his concept of what constitutes a good life and a good society. The production and consumption of more and more goods – considered as a sign of progress and development was evil according to Gandhi “Real development”, he said, “is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty”.

History has shown that a single emancipated person can change the world, as Gandhi did, as Martin Luther King did, as Nelson Mandela did, as Mother Theresa did. All of these and many others changed the world because of the moral force they exercised. If you want the Earth Charter to be a living reality, then you, and you, and you too must act.

The future of survival is not in more and more studies, but in selfless moral action, in rediscovering a sense of the sacred in the Earth and in acting according to moral and ethical principles – and this is what the Earth Charter is about.

The Earth Charter heralds the world the UN wishes to create.

The greatest fact in the story of man on Earth is not his material achievements, the empires he built and ruined, but the growth of his soul from age to age in search of truth and goodness. Those who take part in this adventure of searching for Truth secure an enduring place in the history of human culture. Time has discredited heroes as easily as it has forgotten everyone else; but the saints remain.

The Earth Charter is the voice of the age to come and not that which is fading away.