

The Earth, Our Home

Dr. Kamla Chowdhry

Key Note address at the Colloquium on Earth Charter

September 22, 2001

Do you remember the picture of the Earth that the astronauts took? It is beautiful and awe inspiring. For the first time we saw the living Earth in its wholeness. Looking at that beautiful blue ball out there was an experience of spirituality, of a connectedness with Truth and Beauty. For the first time in human history we had a God's eye view of our planet and saw the Earth in its wholeness and beauty.

Ancient cultures had a belief system and a spirituality which meant an intimate relationship with the Earth, a relationship of reverence, of worship, and also of protection. The Vedic man's attitude towards the Earth arose from mankind's primordial experience of being, on the one hand, a guest, and on the other hand, an off-spring of the Earth. The Vedic hymns speak of the Earth as an object of worship, of awe, of beauty, but not of exploitation. These hymns also speak about man's role on the Earth – that it is not one of despoiling the Earth of her possessions, it is one of enjoying the blessings of the Earth because the Earth is his home, his own family, and his body. The Vedic hymns have also emphasised man's role of protectiveness towards the Earth. Listen to this Vedic hymn:

*“Whatever I dig of thee, O' Earth,
may you of that have quick replenishment ,
O' purifying One, may my thrust never reach right unto your vital
parts, your heart.”*

These hymns to the Earth depict her as a universal mother dispenser of every sort of good.

In the native indigenous cultures too, which were brutally dealt with by colonial nations, there was a deep reverence for the Earth and for nature. The western nations on their way to industrialisation denigrated and used nature for accumulating power and wealth. Listen to the anguished cry of Chief Seattle when in 1854 Washington pressurised him to sell the Tribes land. How can I sell this land he cries with great anguish.

“How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. How do you own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?”

“Every part of this Earth is sacred to my people. Every shining needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.”

“Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the Earth. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does it to himself”.

The scientists and the ecologists today agree with Chief Seattle that whatever we do to the Earth we do it to ourselves as well.

The 20th century has been a century of great scientific and technological achievements, a century which increased physical comforts and living standards. A century in which we landed a man on the moon, a century of computers and communication technologies which has reduced the concept of space and time. But it has also been a century of two World Wars, of nuclear bombing, of land mines, and other technologies of mass destruction. The so called great achievements of science and technology have raised serious questions of the future of mankind and the future survival of the Earth.

Colonialism and the industrial civilization emerging from it has increased physical comforts and living standards but it has also greatly harmed the Earth and its ecosystems. The scientists are predicting that if we do not change our ways civilization as we know it may not survive. They are pointing to industrialisation, and the way modern economy has used Earth's material resources destroying the Earth's ecosystems. All over, the forests are vanishing, there is increased desertification, the seas and oceans are stained with death because of the industrial poisons we have poured in them. And we have even polluted the rain with the poisonous smoke from our industrial chimneys, so that acid rain has carried death from one country to another.

It is important that we realise our murderous ways in achieving industrialisation, and our life styles, and hopefully, one can move towards liberating the use and control of science from business, political and military interests. In the last two to three hundred years science and technology in the West has been extensively used by man for his greed, and acquiring power and in the process he has deeply damaged and poisoned the Earth – and also deeply damaged and spiritually contaminated himself as well.

With the growth and spread of industrialisation, we have also witnessed the decay of communities and the decay of our moral and ethical concerns. We have witnessed the savagery with which colonialism was established, and since then, we have witnessed two World Wars and several hundred smaller wars. With the rise of science and technology, there has been a phenomenal rise of violence everywhere. We have raped the soil and denigrated the ecosystems of the Earth because of our greed. And in the process we have lost touch with our inner self, and the sense of sacredness of the Earth, and all that which nourishes our spirituality and sustains us.

Everything we do to the Earth, we do it to ourselves as well.

With the growth of scientific and technological research we are constantly confronted with issues and choices which require supreme wisdom. The lengthened reach of our actions in space and time puts man's responsibility and his ethics into center stage.

The Earth Charter:

The Earth Charter is a document which attempts to deal with man's responsibility towards the Earth and towards each other and brings man's ethics into center stage.

The Earth Charter is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, a sustainable and a peaceful global society in the 21st century. It seeks to inspire in all peoples a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family and the larger living world. The Earth Charter is an expression of hope and a call to help create a global partnership at a critical juncture of our history.

As mentioned earlier, the dominant patterns of production and consumption have caused serious environmental destruction, and the devastation and depletion of Earth's resources. The 'benefits' of development have been hijacked by the rich nations and the rich people, widening injustice, poverty, ignorance and increasing violent conflict. We must reverse these trends if the Earth and humanity are to survive.

The Earth Charter is a document which hopes to halt these destructive trends of industrialisation and of consumerist societies, and thereby hopes to advance the building of a just, sustainable, peaceful, and a compassionate society. It recognises the value of cultural diversity and the importance of local concerns and commitment.

The Earth Charter also seeks to build a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of the Earth. Caring of people and caring for the Earth are inseparable. In a world of increasing poverty, injustice, inequity, and violence, caring and compassion are important. If we do not learn to care for the Earth, we also do not learn to care for its people.

Compassion and non-Violence are central themes in the Earth Charter. The Dalai Lama reciting an ancient verse conveys the caring and compassion needed “May I be a guard for those who are protector-less, a guide for those who journey on the road. For those who wish to go across the water, may I be a raft, a bridge”.

The world is at the crossroads. If the Earth is to survive, and if humanity is to survive, we will have to take serious cognizance of the Earth Charter.

The Earth Charter is a document that has emerged after much discussion with concerned people and communities all over the world. Different cultures, different countries, different religions, different age groups have discussed and contributed to it, and after many drafts and redrafts a final document has emerged. Like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is our hope that the Earth Charter will also be endorsed by the members of the UN, so that the Charter becomes a guide for human action towards sustainable societies.

The core principles of the Earth Charter are four and are embodied in Part I of the Earth Charter. These are:

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity;

2. Care for the Community of life with understanding, compassion and love;
3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable and peaceful;
4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

The rest of the Earth Charter spells out more fully both in scientific and spiritual terms the interconnections and the meaning of the above four core principles. We hope with the UN adoption of the Earth Charter, it will become our road map to peace and compassion, to sustainable development, and towards violence and non-violence. The Charter's final section is on The Way Forward, and it ends with the hope 'Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace and the joyful celebration of life'.

If we really wish to move forward and if we are serious about sustainable development, and about justice and peace, it will mean a change in the business and the corporate sector, where profits will not be the only measure of success; it will mean a change in government economic policies where an increase in GNP will not be the only measure of progress in a country; and it will mean simpler life styles and living in smaller communities.

Moving towards a simpler life style, towards sustainability will be very difficult. It is not more scientific studies nor more conferences that will lead us to change our life style. We will need Earth Charter's guidance, but even more so we will need an inner change, an inner conversion, an acceptance that you have to be the change you want others to be.

Where Shall We Begin?

If the Earth Charter is to become a reality, we must learn from Gandhi and other spiritual leaders how to change oneself before changing others. Gandhi had emphasised throughout his life that we must change ourselves before we can change others; that our real enemies are within, our greed and our fears. If we want the Earth Charter to become a reality, a mass movement, we must be able to say as Gandhi did 'My Life is my Message.

The Earth Charter will mean that we must modify our social, economic and political institutions. For too long we have been at the mercy of those selling dreams of progress without a whisper of where it is taking us. It is *dharma*, that we need to bring center stage if we wish real change and real transformation to take place.

The *Mahabharat* has laid down the foundations of *dharma*, of sane living, individual and social. The Earth Charter too is about sane living. Let us see what *dharma* has to say about sane living.

“All the sayings of *dharma* are with a view to nurturing, cherishing, providing more amply, endowing more richly, preparing, increasing, enhancing all living beings. Therefore whatever has the characteristic of bringing that about is *dharma*.”

Further “all the sayings of *dharma* are with a view to supporting, sustaining, bringing together, upholding all living beings. Therefore whatever has the characteristic of that is *dharma*”.

Further, “All the sayings of *dharma* are with a view to securing for all living beings freedom from violence. Therefore whatever has the characteristics of not doing violence is *dharma*”.

As we read the Earth Charter it too is promoting the '*dharma*' of man in the 21st century. '*Dharma*' in the 21st century means the healing of the humans, and the healing of the Earth. '*Dharma*' has been interpreted and reinterpreted in terms of '*desa*' and '*kala*', that is place and time, the two coordinates of history. In the 21st century, we need the *dharma* of healing the Earth, and healing humanity – and the Earth Charter is that *dharma*.

The Earth Charter heralds the world the United Nations wishes to create. It represents the future of development, and it represents the one-ness of the world and the survival of the Earth. And it represents the return of spirituality and the sacredness in our lives.