Environment vs. Development - An Ethical Debate

Today, with rising population, developmental needs, consumerism culture and disasters we confront a critical challenge of our era, which is maintaining the delicate balance between environmental conservation and economic development. This debate is not merely an intellectual exercise but an introspection of our responsibilities towards the planet and future generation.

What is the Importance of Development?

Economic Development

- **Economic growth** is indispensable for human progress, lifting societies out of poverty, providing essential services, and fostering innovation.
- Economic growth ensures **job creation, human capital development, enhanced tax revenue and improved infrastructure,** which in turn spurs the **cycle of development.**
- **Infrastructure development** in social sectors like healthcare, education, as well as the industrial sector is crucial for societal well-being and productivity.
- It also ensures better connectivity, inclusive development, and equitable distribution of resources.

Technological Advancements

- Development leads to technological innovation that facilitates human development and social progress.
- **Eg**. India's advancements in renewable energy technology, particularly through the **National Solar Mission**, underscore its commitment to sustainable development.

Inclusive Growth

- **Inclusive growth** means economic growth that creates equitable opportunities and helps in reducing poverty which can be achieved by holistic developmental projects all around the world.
- Without **social, economical and technological development** inclusive development is not possible.

What is the Importance of the Environment?

- **Biodiversity:** A diverse range of species ensures ecosystem resilience and stability. It supports ecosystem functions like pollination, pest control, and nutrient cycling, which are vital for sustaining food production and natural habitats.
- **Climate Regulation**: Natural environments like forests, oceans, and wetlands play a critical role in regulating global climate patterns. They absorb greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, helping to mitigate climate change impacts and stabilise the Earth's climate system.
- **Cultural and Recreational Value:** Natural landscapes and biodiversity contribute to cultural identities, traditions, and spiritual practices worldwide. They provide opportunities for recreation, tourism, and aesthetic enjoyment, enriching human lives and promoting mental well-being.
- **Economic Benefits:** Industries like agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and tourism rely heavily on healthy ecosystems for their economic activities. Environmental degradation can lead to reduced productivity, increased costs, and economic losses, emphasising the importance of sustainable resource management.

- **Ethical Considerations:** Many cultures and ethical frameworks recognize the intrinsic value of nature and advocate for its conservation based on principles of stewardship, respect for biodiversity, and intergenerational equity. Protecting the environment is seen as a moral obligation to ensure the well-being of all living beings and future generations.

How is Reckless Development Affecting the Environment?

- **Frequent Disasters:**
    - **Developmental projects** like infrastructure developments involving earth mining, mountain crackling and bridling of rivers have increased the intensity of damage caused by natural as well as man made disasters.
    - **Eg**. Extreme rainfall events have increased in recent years that is showing its fury in the form of Himachal Pradesh floods in 2023 and urban flooding in cities like Hyderabad and Chennai in the last few years.
- **Increasing in Pollution:**
    - One of the major concerns associated with the development is the cause of all kinds of pollution that damages our environment.
    - **Eg**. As per data of the Air Quality Life Index (AQLI) report for 2023 by the University of Chicago's Energy Policy Institute, air pollution shortens the lives of the residents of Delhi by around 11.9 years.
- **Environment Degradation:**
    - Because nature is free, we often take it for granted and overexploit it.
    - Development activities have caused habitat loss and degradation due to which issues like deforestation, human-animal conflict and zoonotic diseases have increased.
- **Global Warming:**
    - One of the prominent issues the world is facing today is climate change triggered by global warming.
    - Rapid industrialisation supplemented by excessive greenhouse gases' emission has contributed to global warming.

What are the Ethical Considerations Associated with Reckless Development?

- **Ecological values,** which are based on our understanding of nature and biodiversity, are elemental to the health, conservation and sustainability of our natural world.
    - **Rackless developmen**t is detrimental to these values as in the name of development we cause damage to nature by activities like deforestation and intrusion in deep forest areas.
    - **Eg**. Metro project in Mumbai involved felling of trees for car shed construction in the core of **Aary forest area** which was prevented only after the interference of courts.
- Also, in the name of sustainability, we go to the extent of **greenwashing** - a deceptive practice where companies or even governments exaggerate their actions and their impact on mitigating climate change, often providing misleading information or making unverifiable claims.
- **Consumerism** is another challenge that ignores sustainability and the harm we are causing to the environment in order to meet our greed.

Philosophical Perspectives on Environment vs. Development Debate

Utilitarianism vs. Deontology:

- **Utilitarianism**: It assesses actions based on their consequences, aiming to maximise overall happiness or utility. Utilitarianism might justify development over strict environmental conservation under certain conditions:
    - **Cost-Benefit Analysis:** Utilitarianism would evaluate development projects based on their net benefits to society. For instance, constructing a dam might provide clean energy, water for irrigation, and economic growth, outweighing the environmental costs like habitat loss.
    - **Promotion of Welfare:** In the case of urban expansion, it might support building infrastructure to alleviate poverty and improve living conditions, even if it means some environmental degradation.
    - **Trade-offs and Mitigation**: Utilitarianism recognizes trade-offs but seeks to minimise

negative impacts. It might advocate for regulations and technologies that mitigate environmental damage, such as Carbon Credit Certificate and afforestation at alternative sites.
- **Deontology**: Deontological ethics focuses on duties, rights, and moral principles regardless of consequences.
  - **Rights and Duties**: It argues in favour of ethical responsibilities towards future generations and the rights of ecosystems and species to exist and flourish.
  - **Intrinsic Value**: Deontology asserts that nature has inherent value independent of human utility, emphasising a duty to protect the environment for its own sake.
  - **Justice and Fairness**: It advocates for equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, critiquing actions that disproportionately harm vulnerable communities.

Anthropocentrism vs. Ecocentrism:

- **Anthropocentrism:** It places humans at the centre of ethical considerations, viewing human interests and well-being as the primary moral concern. This perspective often prioritises economic growth and human development over environmental conservation:
  - **Human Welfare:** Anthropocentrism emphasises the importance of improving human quality of life through economic development. It argues that resources should be used to benefit humans, including through industrialization, infrastructure projects, and urban expansion.
  - **Instrumental Value of Nature**: Nature is valued primarily for its utility to humans. For example, forests are seen as sources of timber, biodiversity as potential resources for medicine or agriculture, and ecosystems as providers of ecosystem services like clean water and air.
  - **Cost-Benefit Analysis:** Decisions are often based on cost-benefit analysis, weighing economic gains against environmental impacts. Anthropocentric approaches might justify environmental degradation if the economic benefits (e.g., jobs, economic growth) outweigh the costs.
- **Ecocentrism:** It puts the ecosystem into the centre of ethical consideration and challenges anthropocentrism. This perspective views nature as having inherent worth, independent of its usefulness to humans, and advocates for environmental protection and conservation:
  - **Intrinsic Value of Nature:** Ecocentrism recognizes the inherent rights of ecosystems, species, and individual organisms to exist and flourish. It prioritises preserving biodiversity, ecosystems, and natural processes for their own sake.
  - **Holistic Perspective**: Ecocentrism considers the interconnectedness of ecological systems and the importance of maintaining ecological balance and resilience. It emphasises the long-term sustainability of natural resources and ecosystems.
  - **Precautionary Principle**: Decisions are guided by caution and the principle of minimising harm to nature. Ecocentric approaches prioritise preventing environmental damage rather than mitigating it after it occurs.

What are the Committee Recommendations Associated with Balancing Environment and Development?

- The **UN Brundtland Commission** articulated the idea of close association between the environment and economic activities in **1987**, which was followed up by environmental accounting by spurring debate in sustainable development and the **Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992.**
- **Mishra Committee (1976)**: The committee reported that **Joshimath** in Uttarakhand lies on a deposit of sand and stone, not on the main rock, so no new construction should be undertaken in this zone.
- **Dr. Kasturirangan Committee (2012)**: It recommended conserving and protecting the biodiversity of Western Ghats while allowing for sustainable and inclusive development of the region. The Committee recommended bringing just **37%** of the **Western Ghats under the Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) zones.**

- **T.S.R. Subramanian Committee (2014)**: Appointed to review and suggest amendments to existing **environmental laws**, the committee recommended streamlining regulatory processes, enhancing transparency, and strengthening enforcement mechanisms to ensure effective environmental governance.
- **Justice K.S. Radhakrishnan Committee (2018):** Formed to address the issue of **solid waste management** in India, the committee focused on strategies to improve waste management practices, promote recycling, and reduce environmental pollution caused by improper waste disposal. The recommendations promoted sustainable living practices.

Finding Common Ground

- **Balancing Development and Conservation**
  - **Sustainability** as defined in **1987** by the **UN Brundtland Commission** means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
  - **Sustainable development** requires an integrated approach that takes into consideration environmental concerns along with economic development that is development and conservation should go hand in hand.
- **Policy and Governance**
  - Effective environmental policies, governance and environmental clearance are crucial for achieving sustainable development goals.
  - Eg. **Char Dham project** has been called into question in courts of law for being environment damaging projects rather than development projects as it involved large scale tree felling, cutting of mountains and dumping under.
  - So, policies thus framed for development need consultation with all stakeholders and keep environmental concerns at centre of development especially in eco sensitive zones.
- **Community Engagement and Awareness**
  - Public awareness and community participation are essential for sustainable development practices.
  - Grassroots initiatives promote renewable energy adoption and environmental conservation at the local level.
- **Climate Change Concerns**
  - **Climate change** poses significant challenges such as extreme weather events and rising sea levels, requiring urgent mitigation and adaptation measures.
  - For **mitigation and adaptation** to the vagaries of extreme climate change events there is need for holistic approach at all levels so that development and environment conservation should go hand in hand.

Conclusion

The debate on environment versus development in India reflects a **critical juncture** where decisions today will shape tomorrow's realities. By adopting a **holistic approach** that prioritises **sustainable development**, India and the world can achieve economic prosperity while safeguarding its natural heritage and ensuring a resilient future for generations to come. The key lies in inclusive **decision-making, innovative solutions, and collaborative efforts** to resolve this confrontation of environment and development.