

Governance for Ecological Security

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May I begin by congratulating Amrita Patel, Samar Singh and all their colleagues for the initiative to set up this new Foundation for Ecological Security. There are few issues of greater importance to the future of our nation than the ones on which this institution plans to focus. These issues are complex and not widely understood but they are basic to many different aspects of our lives. In current discourse, they are largely treated in simplistic, one-dimensional and adversarial ways. If we are to assure our children and future generations of safe, productive and fulfilling lives, we will need a whole new way to deal with them. I wish, therefore, particularly to applaud the broad spectrum of optics through which the Foundation hopes to shine light on these crucial subjects, as exemplified by the present series of workshops.

Almost anything of any importance in the life of our country and in the lives of its people has its roots and its consequences in some form or another of ecological security. A very large part of the daily existence of some three out of four of our fellow citizens depends, day-to-day, directly on the processes of nature and the products they make possible. For the rest of us, even those living in the largest cities, the impacts may be more indirect, but there are many and they are pervasive. All of us face them, no less than villagers do, in our daily lives: from how much clean water we have to drink or how much dust there is in the air we breathe to the numbers of villagers that crowd our urban slums -- eco-refugees from a rapidly degenerating resource base -- and to the price we pay for onions.

While the resilience of ecological processes in certain types of biomes and climates might well be greater than in others, human impact on the environment and its resources is widely acknowledged to be reaching a stage where it is beginning to limit the opportunities for people everywhere. Left alone, nature has its own sources of resilience, but in the face of growing human intrusion into its processes, any ecosystem can become fragile and die. Nowhere is this more apparent than in many parts of our country.

While ecological security is, by its very nature, a holistic concept, the devil lies in the detail. And, of course, so do the angels. If we are to establish a secure ecological basis for our economy, as Amrita Patel showed in the lecture with which she inaugurated this series of workshops, we must get to the root causes and deal with the fundamental barriers to achieving it. It is crucial to keep in mind the whole picture and also to understand the little elements, the pixels, that combine together to make it what it is.

One of these elements, the importance of which is often not fully appreciated, is governance.

By governance, I mean the institutional frameworks by which we make decisions in society and how we allocate its resources among its different constituents. The term governance covers not only the agencies of formal government: it also includes all those policies, laws, rules, and institutions in government, civil society and other sectors that have an influence on the individual's access to the resources of a society. The nature of governance in any society has a deep and often quite direct impact on its natural resource base and on how sustainably it is managed.

Governance for ecological security is an area that very few people seem to have given thought to. My colleagues in People First, particularly Mr. SK Sharma, who is with us here, and I have spent a great deal of time over the last decade trying to see how the institutions of governance are impacted by ecological security and how, in turn, they impact it. I would like to share with you some of the lessons that we have learned.

But before I do so, it might help to look at some aspects of the current state of affairs in our country. Over the last 50 years India has undeniably made considerable progress on several fronts. Look at food production for example. Over these 50 years, we have increased grain production by a factor of four, from 50 million tonnes in 1950 to some 200 million tonnes today. This is truly a remarkable achievement. No country in the world -- not even the US -- has ever made such an enormous expansion in grain production in such a short period of time. Or, take energy production, which has grown by leaps and bounds since independence: electricity use is now more than a 100 times what it was in 1947. The employment in industry has doubled several times. The government will proudly tell you that the literacy rate in our country has grown from 17 percent then to some 55 percent now. Many of these achievements went hand in hand with a massive investment in not only in infrastructure but in science and higher education. We are well known to be one of the largest workforces of scientists and engineers.

Yes, we have made a lot progress. But one must also ask for whose benefit? It would be hard to deny that most of the benefits have gone to a very small number of people -- most of them living in the towns and cities of our country.

One must, further, ask at what cost? The cost of the pattern of development we have chosen has been huge: sprawling slums everywhere, squandered natural resources, devastation of our land and forests, half our population without clean drinking water and three quarters without proper sanitation. Some three quarters of our fellow citizens have, more or less, been left out of the so-called "mainstream" economy. Take a look at nutrition --

perhaps the saddest story of all. The average consumption of pulses, which provide the bulk of the protein for our poor, has steadily gone down. It is now some 15% below what it used to be at independence. Are we raising successive generations of under proteinised children? I am sure all of you know what the implications of this would be.

When we look at the flip side of the development coin, things are not so pretty. We may have multiplied the literacy *rate* by a factor of four, but the total number of *illiterates*, the absolute number of people who still cannot read or write, has actually doubled since 1947. While we have increased the workforce in our formal industrial sector to some ten million, the number of people unemployed has gone up to well over 200 million! 20 additional unemployed people for every job created. And few people, least among them our decision makers recognize this rapid downward slide. Government, official sources of information and thus the media continuously feed us the positive picture, ignoring how the other side of the coin is deteriorating.

Is there anyone in this room who knew that there are twice as many illiterate people today as there were when we became independent? But tell me, if those who govern us do not know such things, how can they possibly come up with the right policies?

The standard response to this deteriorating situation is that, over this period, the population has grown. And that is, of course, a good part of the reason why we have more illiterates, more people unemployed and more hungry people. Population growth, however, is not an independent variable that just happens on its own. It is the result of how well the benefits of development reach the poor – itself a result of our development policies. The population has not only grown but it has also built up a momentum for the future: the number of people under 15 years – the parents of tomorrow – is larger than it has ever been.

Look at the forests in India. From some 70 million hectares in 1947, we are now down to some 30-odd million hectares. If we continue to go on this way, the date for a completely tree-less India is somewhere between 2025 and 2030. Of course, by then we will have seen the light and changed our ways. But the present trends are not good. Wastelands, that euphemism for the deserts we have created, have nearly doubled during the same period from some 65 millions hectares to some 110 million hectares.

So after five decades of so called development what we have is more poverty, more pollution, more people and more marginalized people. There are many who find all this very inconvenient and will say that I am looking at the wrong side of the coin. After all the story of independent India is the story of progress. Yes, for the 25% or so of us who are rich enough to take advantage of this progress. But what about the other three quarters, more than 700 million of them? These are real people; each one of them has a name, a family, dreams,

loves, aspirations... Each one is a human being – though often not treated as one – totally left behind by the main stream economy.

And, to make matters worse, we have created a massive dependency all around – based on the promise that government will take care of everything. Some *sarkar* or some *mai-baap* will basically be responsible.

The Champagne glass on UNDP's Human Development Report describes very graphically the distribution of income in our country. The top 20 percent of India's people basically get 85% of the nation's income. The bottom 20% get about 1.5 percent. The richest fifth gets 60 or 70 times as much as the poorest. Economists hide behind statistics, which constantly change as they change the definition of the poverty line, but no matter how you look at it, the disparities in our country are unacceptably high. Whether the number of poor is 300 million, as defined in one way by some of our planners, or it is more than 500 million as defined by the World Bank, it is too many. They live in some half a million villages spread throughout the remotest parts of our country. This is a huge numbers game.

And it is also a matter of extreme emergency. We are taking about a country in which every year we lose some four million children unnecessarily because of hunger and disease. In the same year, about two million hectares of forests just disappear; hundreds, maybe thousands of plants and animal species vanish, never to come back and millions of eco-refugees migrate to city slums. These are major threats to our life support systems: our oxygen producing forests, our water regenerating rivers, our life giving soils. Any of you have been to the country side recently will have seen that our rivers are now almost gone. Sabarmati, the mighty river on whose banks Gandhiji built his ashram some 80 years ago is now a dry bed for much of the year. So are the myriads of rivers and streams which were the lifeblood of this proverbially rich land of ours. The genetic resources, the biogeochemical cycles, the local climate are all suffering massive perturbation, threatening the basis of life itself, the productivity of our ecosystems.

I believe that the development strategies we have been pursuing over the past 50 years will neither eliminate poverty nor bring us ecological security. There is a basic and urgent need for change and the change we need is now generally known by the term sustainable development. There are two simple prerequisites for sustainable development: first, we must meet the basic needs of all, of every single person in our country and second, we must maintain the resource base for future generations to be able to live on it.

Sustainable development means a more equitable development, a more socially just development, a more ecologically secure development; it is a form of development that uses its resources – whether human, natural or financial -- more efficiently. The driving force for such a development has necessarily to

come from within from within the genius of our people and their aspirations. It depends deeply on the understanding they have of their resource base and on the control they have over their own future. I believe all these four factors – equity, ecological security, efficiency and empowerment -- are very closely tied to each other. So when I refer to ecological security, I include the other three factors since we cannot have any one of them without the other three at the same time. To get ecological security, we must have equity and social justice, efficient use of resources and an empowered public. Greater ecological security then means that we must convert the Champagne glass of income distribution into something that looks more like an ordinary glass of Water. In any society, there will, of course, be some rich and some poor people, so the glass could possibly become more like a tall flower vase.

As Amrita Patel said in her lecture, ecological security is the primary foundation on which the future of our country rests. She compared it in importance with the other kinds of security, whether it is defense security or security of the economy. And she suggested that ecology provides a kind of infrastructure that is at least as important as the physical infrastructure that we make. In fact, if either is neglected, loss of the one can undermine the other and make it more expensive to maintain. It is also meaningless, she said, to talk about economic development unless the future is assured through the foundations of an ecological health. The specific issues she identified as needing urgent attention included land use and how it affects the sustenance of nature's biological systems. She also called for simpler and better consumption patterns and food production systems that are much less wasteful than those that are being imposed on us by the processes of globalization and liberalization. So she was talking, basically, about the need for adopting sustainable life styles and sustainable livelihoods, though these were not the exact words she is used.

I believe that making India more efficient and livable is going to need a fuller understanding of our own aspirations, our own resource endowments and of how to innovate and how to develop our institutions, our technologies and our solutions through our own enterprise. Few people can doubt that Indians have enterprise. On the contrary, it seems to be in their very genes. They run a very large part of the rest of the world – from North America all the way across the Pacific, from East Africa, all the way through to the Caribbean; there are whole economies that are run by Indian entrepreneurs. Yet, at home we seem to have failed on so many fronts. If we are not genetically deficient in entrepreneurship, then what is it that holds us back? The only cause one can reasonably pin our lack of performance is the faulty system of governance we have adopted. What it has created is not a healthier, growing and self-reliant economy but a massive dependency of all its citizens on government, foreigners and established mindsets.

We now have to bring about a fundamental change in our society – to create a nation that is truly empowered, self-reliant and sustainable. But how do we get from here to there?

The type of technology we choose for our production systems is a major intervention that can help us on to the new path. It is one of the easier and more immediate instruments for change. Its impacts are visible quite quickly but do not necessarily last very long. The technology needed by India, because of the many different epochs in which our people live, side by side, and the many different geographies they inhabit, is a mix of very big technologies – big dams, big steel mills, big refineries – together with small and very small industries for creating jobs in villages. Appropriate technologies, which are technologies with a human face will continue to be necessary for a very large part of our country.

The second type of intervention is the set of fiscal policies, incentives and reward systems that mould our economy. The third group of interventions, the institutions of governance – making policies and allocating the benefits and costs of development – are even more important and have a deep and pervasive impact on our behaviour as well as on our surroundings. Planning systems are needed that are geared not simply to creating economic growth, but for equity and ecological harmony as well. New kinds of institutional systems are needed for innovation and for delivery of the goods and services people needed. These include, for example, little industries that can be set up with very small capital investment in villages which can provide not only goods and services that people need in the local villages, but jobs and the purchasing power to buy those goods and services. This was, in fact, the vision of Mahatma Gandhi who had understood many of the problems of ecological security almost a century back.

Then, more fundamental in scope but also getting harder to change are the knowledge structures by which we understand the world around us. In particular, it is the way we compartmentalize our knowledge– a factor that varies widely from society to society – that determines how well we can relate to nature. And finally there is the whole system of values that determines our relationships with each other, with machines, with the rest of creation. These values influence how we deal with waste and, more generally, our understanding of what is a good life.

All these interventions are important and necessary if we are to create a more sustainable India. As we progress from technology and economic policies through governance and knowledge structures to value systems, the potential for causing change grows bigger and bigger, becomes longer and longer lasting, but is more and more difficult to bring about. But each of us must work on the ones for which we have the skills. Religious leaders and statespersons like Gandhi are needed for changing value systems. Academics and philosophers normally bring about changes in knowledge structures. Technology and economic policies, being the easiest, are where Development Alternatives does most of its

work. But some of our attention, in collaboration with our sister advocacy organization People First, is devoted to the important issues of governance and the institutions of society.

Our work in the field of governance, carried out over the past ten years, shows that among all the interventions that impact our ecological security, governance may well be the most profound and yet the least understood.

What is governance? As I understand it, governance is the whole fabric of decision making systems that affects our lives. Governance is not the responsibility of just the institutions of government alone, though they are very important parts of it. It also includes civil society, the family, the whole community, not to leave out business and of course religion and faith organizations. These are all bodies whose decisions impinge our lives very deeply in one way or another. And what they do is called governance. Government is, of course, one of the primary factors that determines the quality of the governance. But governance has to be seen as a much richer concept: it is the entire social environment that enables or prevents citizens and communities to fulfill their lives and destinies.

In its essence, governance is about leadership – leadership in every sector of society.

I believe that the best systems of governance are those that enable people to create sustainable livelihoods for themselves, that encourage adoption of sustainable lifestyles, that facilitate fulfillment of basic needs and that promote the attitude of self reliance. These are essentially the jobs of a good system of governance and if they are carried out well, they lead people and their communities to acquire a sense of “ownership” -- ownership of problems, of their solutions and of responsibility for one’s resources. This sense of ownership – which is not synonymous with formal private ownership of land or other assets, and can effectively exist where resources are owned collectively by villages or communities -- is crucial and possibly the most fundamental requirement for ecological security. Without it, people have no incentive to protect their natural heritage.

And what we need to do is to generate that sense of ownership as a way of mobilising the latent energy of our country. I have been to innumerable places in India where the local people say that the reason they allowed their hills to be denuded and their water resources to be depleted was simply that outsiders (often government agencies, sometimes private parties, always from far away, with no commitment to the local community) were responsible for them and why should the local people take the trouble to protect them? Everyone, particularly the women fully understand that the disappearance of their forests and drinking water supplies, and the gradual deterioration in their lives results from the massive destruction of the eco system around them. When you ask them why

did you let this happen, they say “well, we don’t own it. But if somebody else is going to come and do a hit and run on it, we might as well get there first”. So whether they do it themselves, or they let the forest department do it, or the Forest Department lets the contractor do it -- whoever does it, basically the root cause lies in this enormous sense of alienation, the feeling that if neither they nor their future generations will benefit from it, why take the trouble? Such thinking is a very large part of the reason why our communities have not been able to protect their resources.

Good governance is simply a matter of defining clearly who does what. And it has well formulated answers to the questions: What is the mandate of each actor in the society? What are their roles and responsibilities? What are the competencies and skills needed? How will they be held accountable?

How effective governance is depends on the ability of its leaders to make good decisions reflecting the interests of the community or society as a whole, their capacity to implement these decisions and to ensure compliance by those who have to abide by those decisions and the existence of appropriate systems of monitoring, accountability and rewards or punishment.

The key to effective governance lies in establishing institutional frameworks in which the different responsibilities are separate and distinct, particularly between the branches of government, the levels of government and the sectors of economy. And in doing so, the systems of accountability -- including legislative bodies, oversight agencies, watch dogs, ombudsmen or whoever is formally charged to audit performance on day to day basis -- must ultimately recognize that it is the people who have to be overall in-charge. They must, whenever necessary, be involved directly in monitoring the functioning of government.

To make the argument more specific, let us look at the branches of government. There are three branches of government: the legislature, to make laws; the executive branch, to implement them; and the judiciary to enforce them. Now, in any good management system these are three separate bodies that function independently and act as checks and balances on each other. Each has clearly defined functions and expected to focus entirely on its own mandate. Unfortunately, in our country every thing is mixed up. The judiciary is doing the work of the executive, the executive is doing the work of the legislature and the legislature is doing no work at all. They are just shouting at each other, or arguing about local issues or private interests, but hardly any making any laws at all. That is why we have all these ad hoc decisions and resulting crisis like sudden evacuation of industries or equally sudden prohibition of diesel fueled buses. We have the Supreme Court making decisions on issues that it has no business to be making but forced to do so because of the vacuum of decision-making in the government.

Everyone in our country, it would seem, wants to do other people's work – anyone else's except one's own. And this problem is not simply between the branches of government: it is even worse between the different levels – central, state and local. Prime Ministers and ministers often spend their time on the most trivial of issues and have little scope left for matters of state. Decisions on what kinds of houses are appropriate in the villages of Andhra Pradesh are decided in the exalted corridors of New Delhi instead of by those who should know best – the villagers of Andhra Pradesh. Grand programmes are designed at the Centre for eradicating poverty without any consultation with the people most affected – the poor. The central level, the state level and the local level should all be distinct and separate governments with their own domains for governing without interference from higher levels. In actual fact, they are all mixed up. With too many snouts and not enough troughs, nothing much can happen.

Look, on the other hand, at the example of Washington, DC. There is a big man over there, who is, on any scale of measurement, quite powerful: the President of US. He is capable of pushing people around all over the world. But as far as what goes on in Washington is concerned, he has not the slightest say whatsoever – running that jurisdiction is the prerogative of the city's mayor. Democracy can only work if there is adequate discipline – in setting up systems where every job is assigned to someone and in insisting that every one sticks to the job that was assigned. Today, in our country every MP is now angling to run the town councils or local village bodies; that seems to be how our political leaders perceive the basis of power.

Under the principle of subsidiarity, every public decision or action should be made at the lowest level of government at which it can meaningfully be made. Subsidiarity has been made famous in the past decade by the highly centralized European Union which has been under tremendous pressure from member countries to devolve political powers to the lowest possible level. The interesting irony is that the word subsidiarity was actually invented in India some two hundred years ago by the British who needed to run their colony with the least possible people and realized that this could only be done by a thoroughgoing devolution of power. The British, in turn, learnt the concept from an age old system of governance that had prevailed for centuries in many parts of India. Regrettably, at independence the concept of subsidiarity simply vanished. We set up a highly centralized form of government that believes in making decisions at the *highest* possible level.

For the citizen, the most important interactions with the state are almost entirely with the local government. Perhaps 80 to 90% of the considerable time and effort they have to devote to dealing with government at one level or another is with local and district agencies, not the state or central ones. So, we need to set up a system of governance which is the exact opposite of the one we have: the bulk of the decision making would take place at the bottom and only those issues that require higher level attention (because they cross jurisdictions or

need to be standardized on a larger scale) would be passed on to higher levels. In particular, it would be the local governments which would have responsibility for maintaining the natural resource base and thus ecological security. I would call this bottom up approach to governance by the somewhat ungainly but more accurate term “supersidiarity”. At one level, supersidiarity and subsidiarity are very similar: the results are often the same. At another level, the two concepts are diametrically opposite: the process to devolve decision-making starts from the bottom in one case and from the top in the other; the results can sometimes be very different. Supersidiarity means that the real government is the government with which the citizen has the bulk of his or her contact: the local government. And it is this level, of course, at which the citizen can exert the fullest possible watchdog authority. Since it is the local government that is elected in a democracy to serve the citizen, the main functionaries – the people who have the responsibility to maintain law and order (police chief), protect and manage the forests, water sources and other public services (the forest officer, those in charge of water and sanitation, etc) must be answerable to the local community, not to some far away department at the state or central level.

Support to science is another way in which governance can impact ecological security. Since the days of Pandit Nehru, our country has made a commitment to science that is truly remarkable. For much of the period since independence India’s scientific research and development budget was running close to one percent. This is more than most countries other than Japan, the US and a few European nations devote to science. Today, our science budget is close to 0.65 percent of GNP, which still amounts to more than twelve thousand crores. That is a lot of money is going into science. But if you ask how much of that twelve thousand crores is going to science that has any relevance to the poorer half of our country, few people will be able to tell you. Based on information supplied by the science departments of the Government of India and its scientific agencies it comes to much less than 100 crores, i.e., not even 0.1 percent of the money spent on science that has relevance to those 700 million people. If science is so important in solving problems that it merits 2% of the GNP, as the Prime Minister recently promised, how is it that we as a nation see no role for it in the improving the lives of the poor?

As long as the decisions come from the top, it is unlikely that we will get the right answers. All we have to do is to look at any of the many large so called “development” projects that have been designed without consulting local people, and you can get a pretty good picture. We have innumerable housing programmes of thousands of crores which are used as cattle sheds because the so called “beneficiaries” are not prepared to live in them. And empty cattle stalls because the project designers forgot that highly bred cows could not survive on the only fodder that can grow locally.

So I think it would not be exaggeration to say that our economy is somewhat mismanaged. And the mismanagement has led to all these basic

issues, poverty, pollution, population, alienation, violence, corruption, destruction and this attitude of hit and run which has permeated our whole society. This short term, get rich quick mentality is the greatest threat to our ecological security because we treat nature as just another thing to be mined and left behind.

But it is even worse than that. These are actually the symptoms and not the causes of our problem. This is actually the end result and not the source of the predicament. The roots of mismanaging our nation lie in the priorities that we have chosen. The nation's priorities are set by the few who control the systems of governance, with very little regard for their impact on the majority. It starts with the simple premise that the majority are ignorant and live not much better than animals. Therefore it is the job of the *mai-baap* of government, which is all-knowing and beneficent, to take care of them and decide for them. With such an attitude, it is only natural that we end up by creating the dependencies and results that we have got. Particularly, we have set up huge, centralised systems for planning and administration that bring forth many promises but very little performance. The overbearing bureaucracy, subject to virtually no real accountability, is quite possibly the greatest threat to ecological security.

Digging even further, we come to the ultimate root causes, but they are very deeply embedded in our systems and culture. It is hard to recognize or understand them because they are unfamiliar and often very inconvenient. Most of us would rather brush them under the rug and not deal with them at all. They are very difficult to sort and most of the time we don't even try, which is why we have been called a "soft state". But the term soft has several meanings, and, unfortunately they all apply.

The first meaning is soft, as opposed to hard in the sense of difficult. Our decision-makers have rarely been prepared to do the difficult things that are needed to build a nation. Allocate sufficient funds to ensure high quality education for all our children, for example. Or introduce the land reform that everyone agrees is necessary.

The second meaning of soft is as the opposite of hard in the sense of solid, as in a pillow. This implies that decisions must be implemented and we as a nation are notoriously bad at doing that. To everything there are numerous exceptions.

Soft is also the opposite of hard as in harsh or cruel. Our country is notoriously harsh to its underprivileged sections and cruel to its animals. But when it comes to making and implementing decisions that require firmness in the face of resistance from vested interests which deserve a harsh treatment, we rarely have the nerve to make them stick

The opposite of the fourth meaning of soft is hard as in hard science, for example physics or chemistry. It implies lack of rigour or deep analysis. In that

sense, our planning systems are certainly soft, heavily weighted towards simplistic economic concepts without looking adequately at the issues of technology or physical planning. One part of the bureaucracy frequently negates the work of another for lack of concern of the bigger picture. High level government committees spend their entire time deliberating the cause of one failure or another and finding that lack of coordination among agencies and lack of the bigger picture in each one is the primary cause.

Soft is also the opposite of hard meaning firm or durable. There is no policy in India that seems to stick for long. After a few years, it disappears, to be replaced by one formulated to respond to another emergency. Establishing ecological security needs long term commitments.

And, finally, soft is the opposite of powerful and intense, as in a soft light. Our nation's leadership is definitely soft in this sense.

So we lose out on all fronts because it is true: we are, today, a soft nation – in all the senses of soft -- and as long as we are, there can be no hope for our forests, our soils, our waters or any of the other resources that form the basis of our ecological security. We need to take much harder, more rigorous and firmer decisions to hold the line on our ecological security. These solutions will need a different kind of leadership, a very genuine and selfless leadership and a leadership that is capable of taking hard decisions. We need a leadership that does not have to keep watching and looking back over its shoulders to see whether it might lose an election in UP because it does the right thing. We need a leadership that says “this is our country and we have got to make it work for everyone”. Since we cannot afford to wait for the next Mahatma Gandhi to come along, we also need to support that leadership with a citizens' movement. Community organizations, civil societies, religion, schools all these essentially have to play a role in being able to create and support that leadership and make it work.

It is becoming clear that no small tinkering with our systems of governance, a tweaking here a fine-tuning there, is going to produce the results we need. Poverty is growing, corruption is galloping and nature is rapidly dying. Change is needed urgently and that change must be quite fundamental. The issue right now is how can we bring about such change? For normal people like us, it is very difficult to question certain basic assumptions and institutions that make up our society. Just as it is hard for a Hindu to question the Bagavat Gita or for a Muslim to question the Koran or for a Christian to question Bible, it is no less easy for a citizen to question his or her nation's constitution. However, after more than a decade of initial denial and subsequent deep analysis my colleagues and I do not see any alternative, but to recognize that the present constitution – which admittedly was a truly remarkable document for its time and purpose – can no longer serves the needs of our country. I refer not to the profoundly important directive principles which guarantee the rights of citizens and the integrity of the

country but to the systems of governance it has established: centralized, top-down decision-making, lack of proper checks and balances implied in the Westminster model of government and the marginalization of the citizen in the decision process.

Can this system of government which has been established under the constitution take us where we want to go? The 1950 Constitution of India is basically anti people. It is largely a replica of a colonial instrument (the Government of India Act of Westminster) whose purpose was basically to enable a colonial power to run a large, sprawling, remote colony in the most efficient manner possible. Many of its institutions are based on exploitative colonial requirements, and at independence these were adopted, often without any change, lock stock and barrel. As a result, the government of independent India simply continued the colonial tradition of being a Ruler that is highly centralized, top down, insensitive, non-participative and non-transparent. Such a system of governance simply cannot deliver equity or ecological security.

While the Westminster system has certain flaws in it from a management theory perspective, it has evolved over a period of almost a thousand years to suit the particular genius and circumstances of its country of origin, Britain. It is not working in India which has yet to build up the institutions of accountability and the systems of checks and balances needed to ensure that government functions in the best interest of everybody. The mixing up of powers between the branches of government, the centralization of decision structures at the federal and state level and the peripheralization of the citizen lie at the heart of the political, economic and ecological problems of our country.

Gandhiji seems to have understood all this and suggested a totally different form of government, in which local communities would have been autonomous and where the executive and legislature at each level would have been completely distinct and separate. With transparency, citizen's rights to information, and an administrative system that would nurture professional excellence and responsibility, such a system would have produced a very different outcome for our country. I believe that it is an excellent model for universal democracy. Gandhiji had a fairly detailed idea of how such a government should work, which for lack of time I will not try to get into. However, a few examples might help. The upper house, which was supposed to protect the interests of the States but today has become an appendage with little independent meaning could more appropriately have been a forum for all the major stakeholders to be represented. The Rajya Sabha or the State Legislative Councils need housewives (as housewives), scientists, jhuggi dwellers, business persons and others to represent their interests as stakeholders of society. Such a second chamber would enable stakeholders to bring their professional and personal insights into the legislative as well as audit process, as distinct from elected representatives who have a separate and distinct point of view and responsibility.

How can the constitution be changed? Not very easily. As a nation, we have too much of our national ego invested in it. It can probably only be changed by the will of the people, as expressed through a referendum. Referendum is not allowed for in the constitution, but it is an intrinsic right to any democracy. The sovereign people should be able to express their will at any time – in elections or between elections. And we believe that, we would need a mechanism to administer it because referendums can run away with themselves, as they sometimes have in such places as California or Switzerland. To ensure that referendums are held only for significant issues and are properly formulated, and that they do not touch the issues of fundamental rights or national integrity, People First has proposed the setting up of a “Sovereign Rights Commission” which would act as the conscience keeper of the country.

And how will such changes be brought about? Clearly, we cannot expect our politicians or parliamentarians or even bureaucrats to initiate such changes. They have their fingers in the current pie. There is no way that any of them would be prepared to lose all the great things they have been getting out of the system over the last fifty years by changing it. So it would seem to be an impossible situation. That is where all of us come in. It becomes the individual responsibility of everyone who believes that this country needs a change – and some of us feel it is needed rather urgently and fundamentally – to take that responsibility. The time has now come when we need to prioritize, we need to talk a lot less and act a lot more in our country.

I can suggest a three point agenda for India. The first priority simply has to be to eradicate poverty in our country. And that does not have to take anywhere near as long as we have been taking since independence – since when poverty has grown, not reduced, in any case. Second, in parallel with that, to empower people to stand on their own feet. And third, to regenerate the environment and to bring about the ecological security that we are talking about.

Those are the three essential things that this country needs immediately. We have, collectively, to find ways to do it. There are probably no short cuts and no soft solutions that can get us there. But if you ask for the most effective intervention that could take us a long way towards a more effective system of governance and higher ecological security, I believe that it is eliminating the three most egregious perpetrators of poverty: government schemes for alleviating poverty, non-accountable bureaucracies and development economics. :

If, as individuals we believe that this country is not heading in the right direction, a large part of our work is cut out for us. Each one of us has the responsibility to pitch in and work to re-orient the direction our country is taking. People First is one such effort and the Foundation for Ecological Security is another. We need many more.