

THE ASIAN AGE

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:: OP-ED

Climate of Confusion

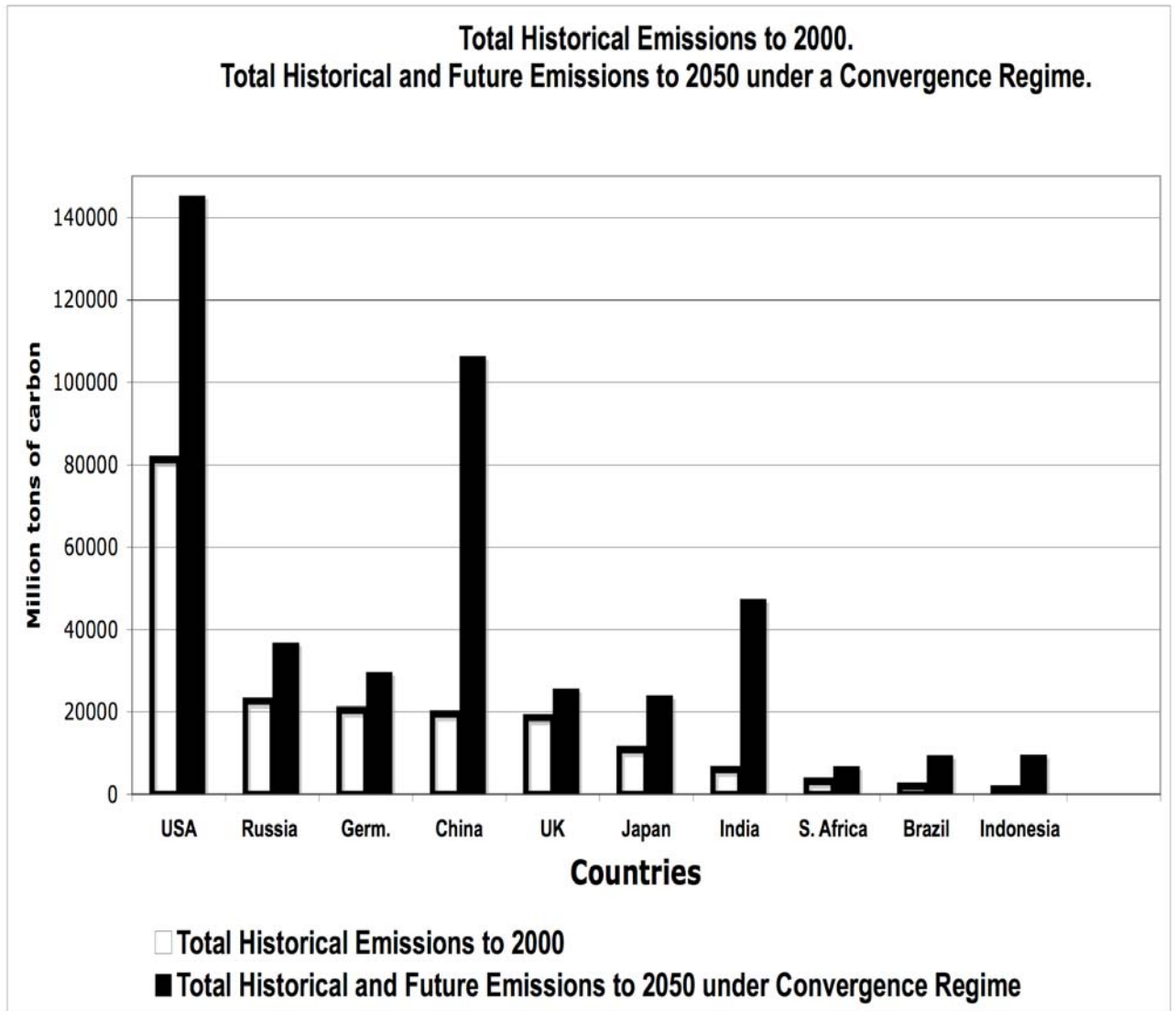
By Dr H.N. Sharan

Ever since the Rio conference, the environmental rhetoric has steadily escalated and today we are overwhelmed by PR gurus with mandates to get politicians re-elected on a soft environmental ticket and protect profits of multinationals without damaging their environmental credentials. In that process, pin-pointing over-consumption- undoubtedly, one of the primary drivers of climate crisis - continues to be taboo. Looking at per capita energy consumption, per capita GDP and per capita emission of greenhouse gases, one does not have to be an Einstein to see the linkage. Yet, not only politicians and business leaders, but the popular media too, continue to advocate consumption as the motor of growth, job protection and profits, as the entire industrialised world focuses on technology solutions, energy saving, fuel switch, renewable energy etc., as the panacea.

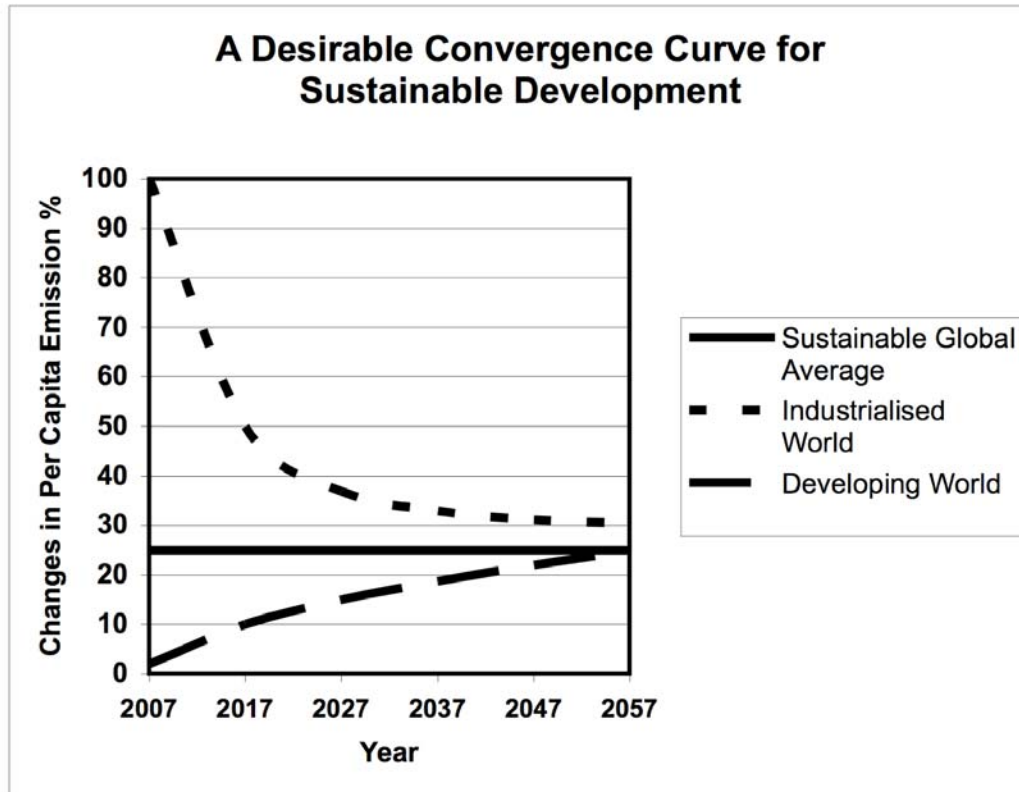
The problem, both real and in terms of the language of the debate, is exacerbated by the forces of globalisation, as millions of Indians and Chinese adopt westernised lifestyles and the ideologies of consumer-led growth. Recent changes in India and China clearly show that the problem is no longer between the industrialised North and the developing South, but between rich and poor wherever they are; between the millions driving SUVs and the billions who still have no access to sufficient food, energy, health services or clean drinking water.

To reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases, the attack from the industrialised countries seems to have shifted to future emissions. Even the Guardian recently led with a story about China overtaking the United States in total emissions, quietly ignoring per capita emissions which are still much lower in China, and more importantly, ignoring historical emissions for which the US and Europe are responsible; and the consequences of which we are already suffering today. In fact, if we assume that all countries reduce

emission equitably and converge towards nearly equal per capita emissions by 2050, then the US and Europe will still remain the leading emitters till 2050.



The politics of climate change today is as it always was: The US and Europe and the rest of the industrialised world must reduce their per capita consumption and their emissions in order to leave billions of poor people in the developing world including China and India the emission space to come up to a minimally acceptable level of development.



As the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Convention began negotiating the post-2012 commitments in Bali, the question was whether the industrialised countries could commit to introducing those much needed policies to reduce their energy consumption. This they have not yet done.

The new UNDP Human Development Report 2007 prescribes many of the policies already described in detail in the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report. Ecological tax reform is a prerequisite to natural resource conservation, sustainable systems and equal rights. As UNDP and IPCC make it clear, the framework for these changes is a commitment to an overall contraction of emissions by 80% and a convergence of per capita emissions, ideally by 2050. A modified cap and trade system like the current clean development mechanism forces any country that emits more than what it is permitted under its cap for that year, to buy its emission space from those who are below their limit.

Emission trading can continue to help all countries become sustainable faster within these tight targets and timetables.

Bringing about major changes in lifestyles while at the same time maintaining jobs and profits will undoubtedly be a painful process and will take a few generations to achieve. Unless a start is made now, however, to create a framework of legal and fiscal ground rules which can force a reduction of consumption, climate catastrophe cannot be avoided.

Politicians who introduce these fiscal and other reforms will need a great deal of courage. This they have hitherto conspicuously lacked. In a democratic set-up dominated by lobbies and interest groups, it takes conviction, courage and perseverance to reach a national consensus across party lines.

The first who are again being called upon to show such courage were the decision makers in Bali. We know that most of them would have gone to Bali with the limits of their mandate already spelled out. But the momentum of the negotiations if entered into in a spirit of cooperation could have nonetheless thrown up surprising and progressive results, which has unfortunately not happened.

The problems of managing the change in developing countries is equally complex, but different. The mantra of all politicians is improving living conditions, but the lure of money and power that has always corrupted the hearts of politicians, is massively escalated by the process of globalisation. Creating jobs, promoting equitable and sustainable development, maintaining a low carbon economy and reducing population growth is a tall order for any country. Most politicians in developing countries are just happy that the economy is growing. They want to see the US, Europe, Australia and others change their priorities and politics around before they too are convinced it is doable.

More tomorrow on the Indian case.

To be continued

Dr H.N. Sharan, Chairman of DESI Power, Bangalore, is an energy expert and a sustainable development activist building EmPower Partnership Projects in Indian villages

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Climate change: India's policy hotchpotch

By Dr H.N. Sharan It will not be easy for industrialised countries to manage the very difficult psychological process of "giving up," i.e., to reduce their per capita emissions down to the sustainable convergence target discussed yesterday. [Full story](#)

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Climate change: India's policy hotchpotch

By Dr H.N. Sharan

It will not be easy for industrialised countries to manage the very difficult psychological process of "giving up," i.e., to reduce their per capita emissions down to the sustainable convergence target discussed yesterday. For developing countries, especially India, the task of managing a switch to a sustainable development path will be even more complex and difficult. Providing a minimum level of food, drinking water, health and education to hundreds of millions of poor people requires an enormous growth in infrastructure, especially energy supply and services.

When these requirements are added to the demands of liberalisation and globalisation which are pushing millions of Indians and Chinese towards western lifestyles of over-consumption and wastage, the problem becomes truly gigantic.

The adrenalin of growth generates dreams of becoming a superpower, and politicians, financiers, industrialists, scientists and technocrats lose sight of the national goal of reducing poverty, let alone the task of mitigating climate change, both of which are problems that are harming India immensely. It seems that politicians and policymakers are either unaware of, or are knowingly ignoring, the strong linkage that exists between the problems of

poverty reduction, energy supply and prevention of climate change. Otherwise, how does one explain the current hotchpotch of policies, priorities and actions of the governments at the Central and state levels?

Energy policies are at the centre of it all, but they are not everything. Coal is the backbone of India's electricity grid, and at the same time, the most intensive polluter and carbon emitter of all sources of energy. And yet, India's efforts to introduce cleaner coal technologies and reduced carbon intensity of the economy are minuscule, compared to the time, effort and energy spent by top politicians, bureaucrats and scientists on securing nuclear energy for civilian use. Even accepting the less than transparent assumptions about nuclear electricity's economic viability and the long term management of highly hazardous wastes, it is doubtful that nuclear electricity's contribution to the national energy mix will exceed that of the lowly cow dung and other rural residues during the next few decades.

The case for achieving energy security and reducing the emission of greenhouse gases by replacing one's own dirty coal with imported, politically charged, hazardous uranium, over whose supplies and prices India will have no control, appears dubious. Nuclear energy should stay on as a source of strategic power, rather than electric power, and the focus should shift to integrated and doable energy solutions for solving the three most critical problems facing the country.

And this is the problem: The inability of the policymakers to see that current centralised solutions advocated by Central planners and multinational free-marketers alike are propelling India into dangerous dead-ends. The fact is that the cost of creating new jobs in these mega-projects is simply unaffordable, and their huge ecological footprint too dangerous. Everyone accepts that poverty can only be reduced by creating rural jobs, but it cannot be done on the required scale without electricity.

So what does the government do? It starts handing out "fish" in the form of subsidies, rather than "fishing rods" in the form of investments which can create sustainable livelihoods. It simply does not want to choose, or put its money where its mouth is, or help the rural and agricultural classes in the same way as it helps capital. In theory, the previous and present Central governments talk about village energy security schemes, but in practice they hand over land, tax-breaks and subsidies to mega projects rather than to small village projects which can create millions of jobs at lakhs rather than crores per job. It overlooks the big opportunity for entering a new era of a sustainable global politics:

There are today new alliances at all levels of society lobbying for global emission reductions simultaneously with action for poverty reduction. These

are not just dreamers or feminists or environmentalists. These are serious leaders across the whole spectrum of parties, pressure groups and successful activists. Do the government of India and politicians not realise that there is an opportunity here for leadership? CDM funds and equity at home and from abroad are available to build rural infrastructure and create jobs based on decentralised power and process energy plants using renewable energy. For once, let the government of India believe its own rhetoric: There are win-win solutions which can reduce poverty and the carbon intensity of the Indian economy simultaneously.

In transportation too, old mind-sets are wreaking havoc. The Indian government seems to have unconditionally accepted the role of automobiles, trucks and airlines as the major motors of economic growth. There are no limits on size, consumption or emissions of the vehicles: On the contrary, an incentive in the form of reduced taxes is again planned for promoting larger vehicles. That there are no roads for the vehicles appears not to be of major concern. The railways are being upgraded, but low pollution urban public transportation systems are being built at a snail's pace in only a few large cities. Their role is not being seen for what it is: the solution to excessive emissions from road and air transport.

Clogging of airports and increasing greenhouse gas emissions from numerous cheap flights are accepted as a part of the process of globalisation and the new lifestyle of the rich. In short, even though there is still time for a major change, there is no coherent plan for creating a sustainable transportation sector in India which can cater to the rich and the poor with the minimum impact on the climate.

Many more examples of our hotchpotch policies that propel India on the path of unsustainable growth can be cited. Why are China and India striding along this discredited path just when the industrialised countries are being forced to stop and change direction by the forces of nature? Fortunately, India is still only at the beginning of this unsustainable journey, and has time to pause and listen to its agricultural labourers, its workers, its environmentalists, feminists and activists, and to its own history of detachment and abstinence; to build a liveable country which is also equitable and fair to rich and poor.

But where are the politicians who have the courage of their convictions to introduce such major changes and the perseverance to work for bringing about a national consensus across party lines in a democratic set up? Where are the business leaders who have the patience and lack of greed to wait for profits from economically, socially and ecologically viable projects? Where are the thinkers, scientists and engineers who forcefully present alternate

solutions for creating jobs, promoting equitable and sustainable development, maintaining a low carbon economy and reducing population growth without worrying about their own status and positions?

It will be a hard job even for a new Gandhi.

Concluded

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