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On the brink

June 25, 2006 12:00 am | Updated March 26, 2012 01:09 pm IST

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Another Biodiversity Day has come and gone. And nothing has really changed.

INTERNATIONAL Biodiversity Day, May 22. A few politicians made speeches on the importance of conserving the diversity of life on earth. But come May 23, these statements were probably filed away along with myriad other meaningless speeches churned out on World Environment Day, Wildlife Week, and Earth Day. And in that one day, another two to 20 species, depending on which estimate you believe, would have become extinct. Everyone agrees that we are on the brink of a collapse of

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life on earth. Extinction, the process by which we lose a plant or animal or micro-organism species forever, is currently at its highest since humanity came on earth. Everyone also agrees that this is mainly due to human activities. Finally, we all agree that biodiversity loss is making us more vulnerable to unnatural disasters, climatic changes, and food insecurity.

Dismal performance

In 2002, leaders of all nations agreed to a target of slowing and halting biodiversity loss by 2010, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development. An ambitious target, but achievable with adequate political will. But it is clear now that, halfway to the 2010 mark, we are stuck almost at starting point. The world's largest ever ecological evaluation, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA), warned in 2005 of the continuing global loss of biodiversity and environmental security. The situation in India mirrors that of most of the world. In 2004, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) process concluded that India's biodiversity was in serious trouble. Over 50 per cent of its forests and 40 per cent of its mangroves were gone, 70 per cent of its water bodies polluted or drained dry, nearly 10 per cent of its wild animal and plant species on their way to extinction, all 18 poultry breeds threatened, and thousands of crop varieties lost from farmers' fields. A

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number of basic factors were identified: a faulty path of "development", which treated nature as raw material or as a dump, decision-making by a small number of powerful people who knew or cared little about ecological issues, cultural changes including a rise in wasteful consumerism, and the inability to value the true social and economic contribution of biodiversity.

Cost of development

Economic globalisation has, since the early 1990s, meant the further opening up of forests, wetlands, mountains, and marine areas, for destructive projects like mining, big dams, power plants, expressways, and ports. Take Orissa State, harbouring some of the country's most important biodiversity hotspots as also most sensitive tribal communities. The State government has embarked on a massive industrialisation phase, inviting global giants to invest money in such projects. Scant regard has been shown to environmental laws, or to constitutional safeguards of *adivasi* communities. Where people have resisted, they have been dealt with violently by the State or by private corporations. Tribals killed in Orissa and Manipur, fisherfolk killed in Andhra Pradesh, peaceful protests lathicharged and teargassed in Chhattisgarh and elsewhere... it is as if the "god" of development needs to be appeased at all costs. Cultural changes can also

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be devastating. In our parents' generation, a diversity of organically grown food grains was available and valued; today, we only want to eat highly processed rice or wheat. Gone are the highly nutritious millets, the red and brown rices. Go to a ration shop, and you will not get anything but off-white rice and wheat. Result? Cultivators no longer have the incentive to grow the diversity of crops they used to. Indian farmers once grew between 50,000 and 3,00,000 varieties of rice; most of these are lost or being lost as short-sighted agricultural development programmes reach remote areas in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and the north-eastern states. Dozens of indigenous livestock and poultry breeds face the same fate. This loss is not simply a matter of aesthetics or ethics. It is a matter of survival for farmers and fisher folk and forest-dwellers. Fishing villages along India's southeastern coast paid a heavy price for the cutting of mangrove forests, as there was nothing left to shield them from two cyclones and the tsunami. Villages across India's hill ranges report a drying up of water sources as upland forests are cut down. Garbage and carcasses pile up and the Parsi community is going through a crisis of how to bid farewell to their dead, with the vulture population crashing by a dizzy 99 per cent. The East Kolkata wetlands, a wonderful natural sponge for waste and producer of thousands of tonnes of fish and vegetables, are being gobbled up by urban construction. To replace these functions

would cost us thousands of crores of rupees... yet nowhere are these values reflected in our economic planning or budgets.

Scope for action

We have to fundamentally review our path of development, switching to modes of production and consumption that respect natural resource limits. Let's take a leaf from the bold decision by Sweden, to completely phase out its dependence on oil by 2015. Our environmental impact and clearance procedures, coastal regulations, and other laws that regulate developmental activities, must be strengthened rather than diluted as the Ministry of Environment and Forests is currently bent on doing. *Gram sabhas* and urban colonies must be empowered to care for the local environment, adding to the intent of the *panchayat raj* constitutional amendments of the 1990s. The true value of biodiversity to our economy, which a number of sensitive economists are beginning to calculate, must be factored into the planning and budgeting process. Planning itself needs to be much more long-term, to envision what we would like to see India like in, say, 2025. This would include a national land use plan that identifies critical biodiversity areas, origins of rivers, and other sites critical for our survival, and declares such sites forever off-limits to big "development" projects. And as citizens, we must cut down our wasteful lifestyles, and

demand for diverse organic food, industrial products that are friendlier to the earth, and much more responsible action by the corporate sector than it has displayed so far. Only such drastic action will actually take us anywhere near the 2010 target. *Ashish Kothari is a founder member of Kalpavriksh - Environmental Action Group.*

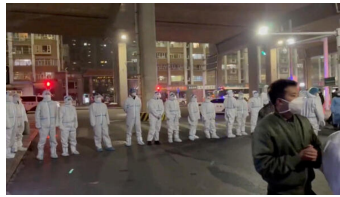
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