

Environment – Think, and Act Locally

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It was a sunny morning, but out in the open, it was not too hot. A Group of children were gathered in a class room. They were visibly uncomfortable because the sun shone on them over the unprotected half-wall. Gusts of wind, otherwise only too welcome, blew clouds of dust into the room. The roof made of asbestos, without the shade of a leaf, had begun to radiate uninterrupted heat on the young heads, covered barely with their short hair.

One would have liked to give time for the sun to rise high, avoiding the glance into the room; but overhead, it would have heated the asbestos furthermore. On descent, from the west, the sun would have been beaten in again, this time over the opposite half-wall.

A belching bus blew a veil of black fume into the room. Yet it could not mask the stench from the stagnant drain. A crow, victoriously pecking at some muck picked up from a heap of refuse in the vicinity showed no concern over the din created by the riotous kids in the adjoining playground.

With exemplary methodological appropriateness, the speaker standing before the group of children began with a question.

“Can you name”, he asked, two environmental problems we are faced with.

There was not a moment’s silence. A studious looking adolescent got up in the front row.

“The ozone hole, Sir” he said. “Brought about by jet aircraft. It causes skin cancer.”

The speaker had hardly any time to decide whether to feel happy or dejected, when another young man, not to be outbeaten, got up.

“The green-house effect, Sir” he said. “It is more dangerous. That is what makes it so hot down here.”

What was described above is certainly not an isolated instance. Such correct but inappropriate and irrelevant responses are repeated all too often, and not just by school children either. Adults who surely should know better are equally at guilt.

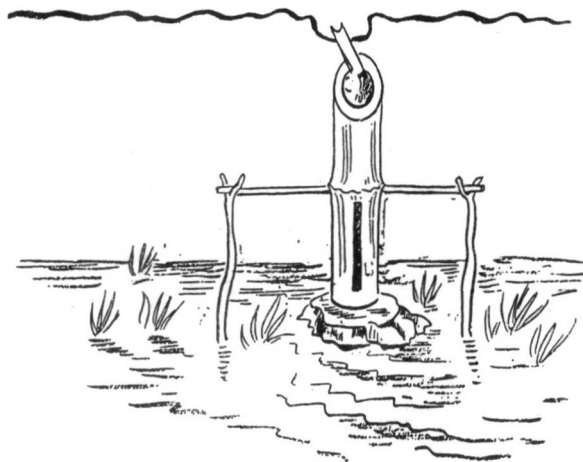
On a superficial scrutiny of the state of knowledge on environmental matters, done in situations such as this, one is cosily tempted to feel content. After all, even school children are knowledgeable. Not only are they knowledgeable; they are also “globally oriented.”

There are two fallacies in this argument; and so long as these are not recognised, we may not go far in either saving, or improving our environment. The first is the assumption that profundity in knowledge necessarily leads to awareness of practicalities. Second is the oft-held notion that knowledge necessarily leads to action.

It is not only in environmental matters that we have to adopt a more pragmatic approach; but it is paramount in this field. We need to give the ability to young people, to perceive the realities around us. The belching buses; the stagnant drain; the uncovered heap of rotting refuse; the clouds of dust; the uncontrolled voice; and so much else around. They should be made to realise the effect of such polluting circumstances: firstly, because these affect us right HERE and NOW; and, secondly because much can be done to correct such simple situations, gaining so much as a result.

There is yet another aspect. All too often do we imagine that increase of knowledge by itself would modify behaviour. Nothing is further from the truth. In fact, in certain fields, there is evidence which proves the contrary. It is therefore incumbent upon us to ascertain ways and means whereby the attitudes and behaviour of people could be changed in such a manner as to lead to action that would result in an improved environment.

“Thinking globally and acting locally” is all very fine. Equally important, however, is to think locally, and also act locally in accordance with the local thinking.



Water Ghost

Our rural farmer did not use insecticide or destructive methods to protect crops and increase the yield of his chena and the paddy field.

Since he considered killing as a sin, he employed various protective devices, which did not upset the ecological balance. The 'Kema' is one such long-standing device. It is a magical practice which has a scientific basis.

'Kurulu Paaluwa' is another preventive method. It is meant to reduce the damage done to crops by birds. 'Kurulu Paaluwa' is a strip of land set apart for birds at each end of the paddy field.

'Takaya' is the common device of the rural folk to scare away birds from fruit trees when they are in season. The 'takaya' is made with a fairly large tin, where small stones are hung inside. This is tied to the branch of the fruit tree and pulled by a cord attached to it to produce a sound which would frighten the birds.

'Diya Holmana' - Water Ghost

The village farmer sets up a device called the 'Diya Holmana', a kind of scarecrow to scare away birds and rats from attacking paddy crops. This simple device displays the technological ingenuity of the local farmer. A plain wooden frame is fixed over the water drain in the paddy field at its edge. It is set at the place where the flowing water drops from one level to another. The frame has a horizontal bar at the middle. In the middle of the bar is fixed a piece of bamboo about 2 feet in length, vertically. The point of the piece of bamboo is pierced so that the water could flow through. The two ends of the bamboo are cut to allow the water to pass through the hollow. Below the lower end is placed a flat stone. When the water enters the piece of bamboo, it starts moving up and down hitting the flat stone to produce a sound to scare the birds and animals.