

Preface (Volume 52, Issue 3-4, 2022)

The Stockholm Moment

Time is the essence of everything. It waits for no one and keeps on ticking. After half a century, the historic ‘Stockholm Moment’ arrived on 2-3 June 2022. It was a poignant moment. It seemed only yesterday; the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) took place in the Swedish capital of Stockholm. After a long generational hiatus, the world again assembled in Stockholm to recall and reflect upon the Time went by, the Time we live in and ponder over the rapidly ‘depleting’ Time for remedial action to safeguard our future amidst warnings of impending environmental catastrophe. Time has ‘taught’ us that *Our Earth Matters* for the survival of all the life forms.

The looming question that cast its spell on the Stockholm gathering was: What went wrong? The sign of helplessness came to be reflected in the address of the worldly-wise UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres: “Earth’s natural systems cannot keep up with our demands . . . We haven’t kept our promises on the environment”. Hence, he pleaded before the delegations of the UN member states to “lead us out of this mess”. Taking a cue from the UNSG’s anguish, Inger Andersen, executive director of the UN General Assembly’s environmental subsidiary organ (UNEP), minced no words to remind the audience about our inability to find answers to: what went wrong? Recalling the presence of only two heads of government – India and Sweden – at the 1972 Stockholm Conference, she herself chose to pose a lingering question: “If Indira Gandhi or Olof Palme were here today, what excuses would we offer up for our inadequate action?” In turn, she gave the obvious answer: “They would tell us that further inaction is inexcusable”. It has been cathartic moment for the 50-years long journey of the marathon global environmental enterprise.

World Problematique: Time Stood Still

Time almost stood still in resolving the “world *problematique*” prophesized in the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* (1972). It continues to haunt the humankind. Hence, the Stockholm+50 Conference remained a low-key affair for a variety of reasons. Ironically, the moral *halo* that ushered the world onto the global environmental consciousness at Stockholm 1972 seemed to be missing at Stockholm 2022. It ended with a listless statement, issued by Sweden and Kenya as the joint host countries, as mandated *vide* the UNGA’s *enabling* (75/280 of 24 May 2021) and *modalities* (75/326 of 10 September 2021) resolutions. Instead of much-expected and uplifting Stockholm+50 *declaration*, it took the shape of a strange ten point “Presidents’ Final Remarks to Plenary”. Devoid of a clarion call to ‘Arise, awake and stop not, till the goal is reached’ (उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत- *Katha Upanishad*, 1.3.14 chapter; Swami Vivekanand), it didn’t cause any ripples. It could not shake the conscience of peoples and nations for averting the existential planetary crisis. Time, we live in, made the Stockholm 2022 at best a timid acknowledgement of things going wrong and yet lacked the courage for a decisive course correction for the survival of the planet.

The UN has put into practice the *global conferencing* technique. The Stockholm 1972 was followed by confabulations at Rio de Janeiro (1992), Johannesburg (2002), Rio de Janeiro (2012) and now Stockholm (2022). Notwithstanding all the global conferences, mega regulatory processes, creation of the policy, law and institutional maze, spending of staggering amounts of funds, the global environmental conditions have only worsened. Was it really worth it?

Envisioning Our Environmental Future

In the backdrop of the above simmering questions and the global environmental *problematique* that continues to haunt us, it was pertinent to assess the trajectory hitherto followed, probe as to what went wrong and what lies

ahead for us in the womb of Time? How do we move forward? An ideational process curated in EPL over more than sixteen months (2021-2022), audaciously sought to engage in and present a challenge to the thought leaders from around the world to *envision our environmental future* at the historic juncture of the ‘Stockholm Moment’ of 2022. It painstakingly brought together futuristic ideas of 22 contributions of 30 outstanding scholars from the five continents to look ahead into the Time (future). It has been a modest quest, within the limits of time, space, energy and resources, during unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic, to think aloud and ahead on pathways for extricating the world out of the global environmental morass. It became a sequel to another ideational work curated in EPL 50. 6 (2020) and 51.1-2 (2021) with cutting-edge ideas of 23 outstanding scholars from around the world: *Our Earth Matters* (IOS Press: Amsterdam, 2021) (Our Earth Matters | IOS Press).

EPL Special Section: Road to Stockholm+50

The above effort took the shape of the EPL Special Section. With this issue, the Special Section enters the last leg after publication of a series of articles in EPL issues 51.6. 2021 (Nicholas Robinson), 52.1. 2022 (Peter Haas, Yann Aguila) and 52.2. 2022 (Donald Kaniaru, Jonas Ebbesson, Jordi Jaria-Manzano, Krishna Oli, Eleanor Sharpston, Surya Subedi, Oliver Ruppel, Gregory Rose). This EPL Issue 52.3-4 comprises eleven articles.

The first three articles (Karan Singh, Elisabeth Dowdeswell and Anna Sundstrom) comprise reflections upon the roles played by the late Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, institutional structure (UNEP) and the late Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme. They remind us about the foundational efforts and values that set the stage for the global environmental regulatory enterprise. It is followed by three expositions and ideas (David Hunter, Klaus Bosselmann and Owen McIntyre) on the global legal and institutional processes marshalled, in a ‘state-centric’ system, to address the environmental *problematique*. The remaining five contributions (Bharat Desai, Chris Blakes, Kirk Junker, Shailesh Nayak and Philippe Cullet) look ahead into the future for prospects of addressing various components of the challenge through the instrumentalities such as the repurposed UN Trusteeship Council as a global supervisory organ, working out the nuts and bolts of the circular economy, a reparative regime for climate-induced migration, finding solution for climate change risk to the wetland ecosystem services and some dimensions of the planetary health challenges.

Time Running Out

The ‘Stockholm Moment’ of 2022 provided a unique opportunity for all the heads of government to ‘rise as one’ to go down in history. Ironically, no world leader stepped forward at Stockholm 2022 to don the mantle – unlike Olof Palme and Indira Gandhi at Stockholm 1972 – to lead us out of the planetary crisis of survival. As 2020-2022 grueling spell of Covid-19 pandemic showed, Time has own ways of drawing the ‘limits’ to our existence, if we ourselves cannot define our needs against greed. Maybe it was a wakeup call. One only hopes that peoples and nations take this seriously before the ‘depleting’ *Time* itself runs out.

– **Bharat H. Desai**