World Environment Day – 2011: Some Food for Thought!

5th June is the World Environment Day; I believe most of us know. I also believe that many of us know that India is the host country this year and the theme for the year is 'Forests: Nature At Your Service'.

Presented here are some personal views and beliefs which I believe are quite accurate.

Whether Copenhagen became Hopenagen or not, whether Cancum was successful or not, whether IPCCC made some mistakes or not, as an individual – a common man, I am seeing some changes that I had not seen in the past, and in my close atmosphere:

- Delhi had not seen floods for about twenty years, and the last year monsoon was bad. This year, May doesn't appear to be May – it rains every week or so. The temperature has not stayed at 40+ degrees for long.
- Some great minds had predicted 21st May to be the 'Judgement Day' – that judgement perhaps didn't happen, but Delhi saw bad winds on two nights that it had never seen in the past. A plane crash near Delhi perhaps also was due to bad winds around those days.
- Haryana and Punjab had to shut some of their power stations due to reduced requirements – this happened around the so called 'judgement day' – and is unbelievable happening in the month of May!

If we go far, we find many wakeup calls – I tend to go back to 2001 or so – the first Tsunami, Katrina etc., snowfall in the deserts, Mumbai rains, the cloud burst in Leh Laddakh and the latest Tsunami in Japan. While some of these could easily be termed as the natural phenomena, I believe the frequency and the magnitude of the events has not been natural or normal. And that should be the cause of worries.

The Paris based International Energy Agency (IEA) recently published a report showing "Energy-related carbon-dioxide (CO2) emission had reached a record high in 2010, up by five% from the last record in 2008". This makes me feel uncomfortable. Does this mean all that we all did in our personal and professional capacities didn't work? That will be a shock! So, I take it this way that all that we all did in our personal and official capacities was not enough. So, we need to do more and we need to do differently! Certainly not stopping the path of change that we have adopted!

Coming back to Environment and Forests – what comes to mind easily is pollution. Pollution to me is not dust and smoke. My definition of pollution is the load that we put on mother nature. This load can be in any form – dust, smoke, noise, or even extracting/ using any natural resource. I will attempt to explain this with an example.

IT (information technology) for decades was assumed to be non-polluting – most likely because there were no visible chimneys and smokes. But look at my definition of pollution – 'the load on mother nature' – the total load of IT is huge. In the past we would have thought this to be just the energy consumed during its usage, but today we understand the 'cradle to grave' story (some people call it 'womb to tomb' story). The moment we expand our scope of IT from its design to destruction (which doesn't happen very well – that is another challenge in itself, and I will comment upon that little later) – we see a lot of 'load' (some material is extracted from the mines – no material is forever, water and energy is used from that stage itself going up to refining, manufacturing, transportation, usage and destruction (or disposal). This is huge-huge load on mother nature, and hence I believe IT is a big polluter (according to my definition).

Similarly, we need to consider the full canvas of all human activities and see the negative impact these are creating on environment.

Waste management is a big challenge – directly pollutes even when not being managed! Reducing my focus, I would like to talk about e-waste management and specifically in India.

Case1: UNFCCC has approved few CDM projects in India that are around usage of CFL bulbs. CFL bulbs were promoted as 'low power consumption-longer life' products. While power consumption cannot be questioned, I have serious doubts about the life. Anyway, due to the mercury content, the disposal of CFLs needs to be different. To my knowledge only one state (Himachal Pradesh) in the country has the capability of recycling/ disposal of CFLs – whether it has the capacity to process the whole country's used CFLs is not known. In such scenario, how have these CDM projects been approved by the UNFCCC is creating ripples in my mind.

Case2:   Government of India has finalised its 'e-waste Handling and Management Rules' that become effective start of 2012. There has been a big debate (world over, I believe) about 'who is responsible'. These rules, like many other countries, put a lot of responsibility to the manufacturers – there are three broadly
   a) The equipment must have a high percentage of recyclable components
   b) There should be collection facilities for the used/ discarded equipment
   c) There should be recycling facilities to recycle the recyclable equipment collected this way

While a) is being done, I believe b) and c) are currently missing from the country.

Case3: We all (people of my age and elders to us) would recollect that the refrigerators, televisions, radios and washing machines used to run for good 20-30 years (no jokes! this is reality!). Today, the equipment struggles to complete the warranty period 1/ 2 or 3 years (as the case may be). So, once again, there is a lot to be put to the manufacturers – they must adopt 'design to last' approach.

Changing the gear again, and getting my focus to the Renewable Energy. There is no doubt that this is the way forward (but only one of the options – I do have a better option and I will spell it out next)

and we must adopt this. But, the challenge is that RE is too costly compared to conventional sources of energy. So, adoption will be slow and full benefits will not be reaped.

Now my solution to all these challenges – we need to reduce our needs. And the best way is by controlling the population. One who comes to this world is generally going to need to more and more, the one who has not come to this world yet – doesn't need. This is how we take control and charge in our own hands. This is not true only for India and for the world as a whole!

While closing my discussion, I would like to re-iterate that the solution to this great challenge is in 'reducing our needs'. Producing energy efficient equipment using energy efficient technology and methodology is not good. So, we all in our individually/ collectively and personally/ officially can do a lot – this reduces our dependency on the manufacturers for doing their bit.

On this WED, I re-commit to do my bit (I change my mobile phone only when it stops working not with new models and new features, and my desktop at home is in its 10th year – minor upgrades have been done for disk and memory – the speed is not too good, but its not too bad! I know there can be questions around its efficiency as its too old – once again I believe by replacing it I will be putting more load on mother nature so I am not replacing it. Not Yet.), and I request all IEEE members and those who are not IEEE members (yet) to do their bit. Together we can make this world a better place – I have no doubts.

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Continuity and Resilience

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