

# MUSINGS: Are we getting confused again?

Author - Priyadarshini Karve, Published on - 27.10.2016

There was a time when I used to stress one point in any public talk on 'renewable energy'- how it is important not to confuse between 'renewable' and 'non-conventional'. I think a similar confusion is now arising about 'sustainable' and 'traditional'!

Typically, energy sources that have become feasible after the second world war are called 'non-conventional'. Whether an energy source is conventional or not, is a matter only of historic importance. It does not automatically follow that an energy source is 'renewable' just because it is relatively new. An example of this is nuclear energy. Nuclear energy is non-conventional, but it is not renewable - the Uranium atom that you break in order to harvest the energy from its nucleus, is not going to come back ever. A reverse example can also be given. Biomass energy is the most conventional energy source known to mankind, but it is renewable - a tree will continue to grow and produce more biomass even if you are cutting off its branches to use as fuel.

Why is making this distinction and using the right word important?

Not many supporters of renewable energy are in favour of nuclear energy for a variety of reasons. Also, every 'new' (and therefore non-conventional) source that we are coming up with (e.g. tar sands as a source of oil) is not necessarily good for the environment as renewable energy sources are supposed to be.

So what has this got to do with 'sustainability'?

Whether a lifestyle has traditional roots or not is a complete non-issue as far as definition of sustainability is concerned. Sustainability is all about finding the right balance between social equity, economic prosperity and environmental conservation. Some traditional lifestyle practices do come close to achieving sustainability goals (e.g., growing your own food using your organic waste and waste water in your backyard), but there are also bad traditions which violate one or more principles of sustainability. For example, discrimination on the basis of class, caste or gender, is a total violation of social equity, or the tradition of throwing temple waste into a river, pollutes the river.

Whether one wants to adopt a traditional lifestyle or not is a matter of personal choice. Whether one wants to live sustainably is also a matter of choice so far, but it is soon going to become a matter of survival. Neither route needs justification on the basis of the other. For example, everyone agrees that organic pesticides are more sustainable, and the scientific reasons for that are also well established. Why then do we need to add an aura of traditionalism around it? Is it because we don't have enough confidence in the sustainability argument?? But this too is not so bad. It is downright scary to see traditionalism getting glorified using sustainability arguments! It pains me when I read pseudo scientific arguments about the so-called benefits of cow dung cake smoke even in discussions that claim to be about 'sustainability'! The sustainability focused people should not be wasting time and energy on such nonsense!

Equating sustainability with traditionalism is just a step away from a rabid anti-technology attitude. Technologies have helped solve some of our sustainability challenges in the past, and the same will happen in the future. Burning cow dung cakes in three stone fire for cooking is traditional, but it is highly polluting and harmful to the cook's health. The technology of converting that same dung into a better fuel and using the right stove designed to burn that fuel addresses these problems and therefore helps us achieve sustainability. This involves abandoning the traditional practice, rather than glorifying it.



Not many people realise this but the early work on developing plastics was focused on substituting useful natural materials like ivory, whale bone, etc. which were getting extremely expensive and rare. The motivation though mostly economical was also focused on saving elephants and whales from extinction. Thus, shifting to the plastic counterparts was the sensible and sustainable thing to do. Now petroleum is getting scarce, and plastic waste has become a nuisance. Therefore we think of use of plastics as unsustainable.

This is an example of the other reason why the "traditional = sustainable" argument worries me. Sustainability of a lifestyle practice is a matter of context. When the entire population of humanity was just 5 million people, hunting-gathering was a sustainable lifestyle practice. But it became unsustainable as the population went up, and we had to shift to agriculture. Adapting to the demands of time, space, and numbers is important to ensure sustainability. The excessive focus on traditionalism goes totally against this fundamental principle.

We allowed ourselves to be blinded by the dreams of prosperity as projected by the so-called 'American way of life'. This blindness spread across the world and has brought us to the brinks of extinction today! We must shed the tendency to put 'blind faith' and embrace 'rationality' to get us out of this mess.

First published on

SUSTAINable Life

- A blog from Samuchit Enviro Tech