

Communities and societies have been turned on their head by a strange and addictive phenomenon. What might be this unwelcome development that is making this a topsy-turvy world? The problem is the over emphasis on economic success for the promoters of the new world order, which has resulted in a de-emphasis on profoundly important things such as our relationships with other human beings as well as with our natural environment.

This disease of global proportions has in turn led to an unsustainable living environment where everyone who has the means wants ever more; submitting to their greed at every turn, rather than exercising control and consideration of others. Such irresponsible attitudes and consequent behaviour is applauded and admired in the current world which values enterprise over welfare.

This new hierarchy of values which reverse the traditional order, has infiltrated our fundamental institutional structures (education, labour, politics, economy) through which destructive social norms are endorsed and crystallized. People tend to take great pride in conforming to this socially-constructed emerging hierarchy of values, defining themselves, their worth and success in terms of volume of money and extent of power, proceeding blindly in the vain search for happiness.

One must consider what the biggest ethical



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challenge facing us today is. The reality is that we have let personal economic success guide our lives, and in doing so, associated virtues of respect, cooperation, empathy, and compassion have been betrayed. The primacy that is allotted to materiality underlies and complicates daily challenges we face. In our globalized social environment, do the following – “stressed out and tired”, “exploited and vulnerable”, “juggling work and home”, “surrounded by selfish individuals and cut-throats”, “led by uncaring politicians”, “in strained relationships lacking trust”, “constantly pressed for time”, “never enough money and over-committed financially” sound familiar?

Put differently, we have been overwhelmed by the pragmatics of the “corporate bottom line” that dominate our life-stage decision-making, turning money, which is essentially a means, into an end in itself, while turning fellow humans, ethically understood as “ends in themselves” into mere means of self-gain. The virtuous concept that money is a resource that should be used in the service of our ethical ends such as ensuring that society functions in a way that addresses universal needs, is increasingly losing its relevance. Instead, due to our collective preoccupation with money, we have discarded our responsibility to individual and societal development and lost touch with our values, morals, and relationships with our community and the environment.

This move towards market-dominated paradigms that aims at transforming society into a “market society”, promoted by unscrupulous industrialists and their partners in exploitation has not only influenced the behaviour of individuals, government institutions, private organizations and multinational companies and domains of economic development, but



## RE-THINKING THE PARADIGMS OF MATERIALITY AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

also dampened intellectual diversity of ideas about what human progress actually means. Modern human “civilization” seems pre-occupied with money. We seem encouraged by parents, peers and societal norms to embrace wealth accumulation as our prime objective. One dares not revolt against such paradigms created by the market culture although social costs are ongoing and most palpable to all.

For example, these goals induce pressure on educational institutions to refocus their priorities in favour of the pragmatic goal of profiting by preparing young people for the workforce, as if technical knowledge and skills are more important than history, identity, meaning, purpose, values, creativity, and vision. In the corporate business world, investors do not see investing as anything but a financial one. Instead of viewing investment as an opportunity to use excess funds to support socially responsible corporate entities, investors are motivated simply to use undistributed profits to make even more money for themselves. Their blind and narrow purpose is to exploit venture opportunities most profitable, regardless of ethical considerations or their reputation for corporate social behaviour. The culture of greed and profits has reduced people to being mere consumers devoid of their humanity. Our addiction to consumerism is not only promoted, but also required by the capitalist economic process which is driven by the interminable desire for profits and consumption.

There now seem to be more than one third of the world population of the “consumer class” with half of them residing in the developing world. A lifestyle and culture that became common in Europe, North America and Japan in the twentieth century is going global in the twenty-first. Worldwide, the amount spent on goods and services at the household level saw a four-fold increase from the sixties; and in the last half century more goods and services were consumed than by all generations in human history!

Ironically though, individuals can live long and happy lives without using more than their “fair share” of common resources. Data shows that many residents of poor countries achieve levels of life satisfaction just as high as their

wealthier counterparts with a lower material component in the former, implying that above a minimum level, there is no apparent correlation between per capita income and perception of life satisfaction.

In traditional economic theory physical resources are finite while our needs and wants are infinite. As such, failure to install another paradigm to consumption is

a recipe for disaster. But again, this is not an inherent or necessary problem: it is socially constructed largely by how we have prioritized money above values and relationships. Individuals can and do transcend this constructed dichotomy, and collectively we can choose to dismantle it by changing how money and power function in society.

Development in every sense is about the well-being of a nation’s people, and so it is values, relationships, and ethics that should be the end while wealth and power are merely secondary kinds of means. It is not unrealistic to hold each other accountable to this standard and insist that our financial policies and social institutions uphold this ideal as well. It is imperative that we see this through the mist of television plays and bana programs.

There is no inherent reason why living true to our noble and altruistic ideals or doing what is best for society, the global community, or our planet should be economically impossible. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that our fundamental task is exactly to pool our resources, financial and otherwise, to solve these problems. Reintroducing the idea of moderation, equanimity and spiritual growth into this highly commoditized and materialistic world is a battle of severe adversity. Writing these thoughts and reading them might be a start.

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