

In a city like Delhi: urban spirituality, sustainability and women

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The link between spirituality and sustainability has long been recognised as essential to the way humans perceive and relate to one another, and to nature. In more recent debates, concerns about the limited supply of natural resources and preserving the physical environment for future generations have been juxtaposed to ever-increasing consumption and dependence on economic growth. This has generated calls for spiritual solutions that can help curb consumerism and resurrect compassion for nature, humans and other living beings. This paper examines the link between spirituality and sustainability in a case study of urban communities within a megacity of a developing country. It argues that well articulated spiritual approaches to community development in such a city would make for more sustainable urban communities. The paper uses women's roles and positions within this framework, as key indicators of community success. The case study used is that of communities in Delhi, from the perspective of women. It is based on recent interviews with 20 women in the capital city of India—an ancient country that is heading towards becoming the most populous nation and experiencing fast rates of economic development within a competitive globalised world resulting in an urban environment that is contributing to huge environmental and social challenges. The paper asks what could a spiritual focus contribute to a more sustainable future for Delhi.

The paper answers this question by exploring the links between spirituality and sustainability and argues for incorporating spiritual approaches to sustainable

development programmes. It then examines the context for spiritual approaches to community development, particularly in urban societies in India. It embraces the commonly held perspective that women are the keepers of community, and emphasises the importance of women's perspectives. It explores how women's lives shape, and in turn, are shaped by their spiritual experiences in the city of Delhi. The vivid and recurring themes from the interviews set the tone, direction and background of the argument, and contribute to our understanding of the role of spirituality as a binding force in the pursuit of a more sustainable way of living.

Spirituality and sustainability

It takes time, quite a long time, to make a healthy, strong, public opinion which will solve its own problems... the whole problem of social reform, therefore, resolves itself into this: where are those we want to reform? Make them first. Where are the people? (Vivekananda, 1918)

The Brundtland Commission (Brundtland 1987) defined sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present generation, without compromising the ability of future generations, to meet their own needs. This definition calls for simultaneously contending with the dynamics of economic growth, the limited capacity of the ecological systems to absorb the impact of human activities, and the need for social equity in the context of need for a stable human relationship, under which both growth and sustainability in growth will be possible (Environment Canada, n.d.).

The immediate spiritual question that arises when Vivekananda and Brundtland are considered together is: where lies the motivation to be sustainable? What twinge of conscience pushes us to think of the needs of future generations? Is it really purely an intellectual rationalisation of justice, or is it a deeper, moral urge to do the right thing? How powerful is the conscience? Do humanitarian values and spiritual ethics bring on the sense of empowerment necessary to create a more sustainable world? Any society and its people, unless they are, in some way, spiritually well disposed to humankind and the environment, run the risk of becoming overwhelmed by a call for such a complex response.

Chile and Simpson quote Ife (1995): 'Modern society is essentially secular, and has left little room for notions of the sacred or for spiritual values. There is a strong need for community development to incorporate notions of spiritual development' (2004: 319). They agree that there may be some sections of the world community that reject notions of spirituality, but believe that such a 'secular' society represents a relatively small global population.

Research reveals evidence of an overwhelming worldwide return to the spiritual realm (Underwood, Andler et al. 2005, Tacey 2003). This is not marked just by a resurgence of interest in the churches or temples or traditional religions—the fervent awareness of a diverse range of spirituality and philosophy is spread across the board. From India to America, Russia to Japan to Australia, the spiritual seeds seem to be flowering faster than Jack's beanstalk. And the ways of seeking spiritual enlightenment are as culturally varied as the world.

Tacey describes the present renewal of interest in spirituality as a spiritual revolution. He says:

It is a spontaneous movement in society, a new interest in the reality of the spirit and its healing effects on life, health, community and well-being. It is our secular society realising that it has been running on empty, and has to restore itself at a deep, primal source, a source which is beyond humanity and yet paradoxically at the very source of our experience. It is our recognition that we have outgrown the ideals and values of the early scientific era...science itself has experienced its own revolution of the spirit, and is no longer arraigned against spirituality in the old way. (Tacey 2003, 1)

Spirituality, in this context, becomes a foundation upon which sustainable development must build. According to the Brundtland definition, sustainability refers to a conscious decision on our part to use the planet's resources to meet our needs and not our greed, as Mahatma Gandhi would have it. Any such choice may require a grounding of universal and human values. Spiritual behaviour stresses human values such as humility, respect, compassion and responsibility. For sustainability to be based on the widely accepted Brundtland definition, it would seem necessary to build upon spiritual behaviour and humanitarian values in the community. Maurice F. Strong, the Secretary General of the Rio Summit in 1992 said, 'Actions that do not flow from our deepest spiritual, ethical,

and moral values cannot succeed in building the kind of secure, sustainable, and hopeful future to which Rio pointed and to which we all aspire.’

To this effect, Chile and Simpson write, ‘(t)he six dimensions of community development, namely, social, economical, political, cultural, spiritual, and environmental aspects are strongly informed by spiritual values of holism, sustainability, diversity, equilibrium and social justice’ (2004, 318). It is very important to note that sustainability has been defined as a spiritual value here.

Spirituality in sustainable development provides the framework for critical analysis for understanding the causes. It provides a context for addressing issues of social injustice and reform, safeguarding personal rights and freedoms, recognising and respecting personal values and ambitions, and providing a powerful catalyst for bringing about decisive and positive transformations in attitudes and values.

The very realisation that there is a need for sustainability leads to a spiritualistic contemplation. Can an ideal sustainable world exist, without a high level of spirituality amongst its citizens? There is significant evidence that it cannot. It has been variously suggested that with an ingrained sense of spirituality towards development, we will move even beyond the concept of sustainable development, towards ‘reciprocal responsibility’ (McNiff 2002; Tano, Reuben and Powaukee n.d.).

Abram (1996, ix) considers this ethic of reciprocal responsibility within the framework of human beings’ relation with the natural ecology. He believes that there should be ‘an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants, but from the human community back to the local earth’ (1996, 7). Our current artificial relationship with nature, where we place ourselves outside the boundaries of a free-flowing, respectful and intimate closeness, is the cause of a systematic imbalance that upsets the emotional and physical health of the human community, within itself and with the ecological context which encompasses it. He writes:

Human beings are tuned for relationship... (the) landscape of shadowed voices, these feathered bodies and antlers and tumbling streams—these breathing shapes are our family, the beings with whom we are engaged, with whom we struggle and suffer and celebrate... today we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our own human-made technologies. It is a precarious situation, given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape. (1996, 7)

Chile and Simpson remark, ‘Spirituality is a relationship between the individual, collective and the universe.’ (2004, 319) However, what are more important are the individual’s behaviour, beliefs and attitudes. The Dalai Lama agrees that religious and spiritual beliefs could be used to exploit others if ‘someone possesses certain intellectual knowledge of religious traditions and teachings, yet his or her consciousness and mental continuum remains totally uninfluenced by it’ (2001, 170). According to him, the first responsibility is to ‘watch ourselves’.

Whether it is perceived as letting go of destructive behaviours or embracing better behaviours, the point remains the same. Spiritual understanding alone is not enough. It must then become the reason and the foundation for actions that seek to better align society and individual, actions with an agreed spiritual sustainability purpose.

A focus on spirituality as the linking and leading element in sustainability would refine human consciousness and conscience. Peck’s treatise (1978) on love, traditional values and spiritual growth can be applied to this context—that in order for members of any community to truly care for each other, they must conduct themselves in a manner that will contribute to individual and communal spiritual growth. He says, ‘Discipline is the means of human spiritual evolution’, and believes that the motivation and the energy for this discipline can only be love, which he defines as ‘(t)he *will* to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth’ (1978, 69). By extension, such a spiritual growth will help restore respect and care for other human beings as well as for the natural environment on the planet Earth. Otherwise the link between the degradation of society and the ecology will never move from broad understanding to a collaborative purpose based on individual beliefs.

The rapidly growing gap between the rich and poor in developing countries, and worldwide, between the first and third world nations, exacerbated by ecological deterioration is a forceful testimony to the failure of traditional practices of development. This failure has now given birth to a worldwide vision to create an alternative means of human progress as represented in the United Nations' Millennium Goals (UN 2000). Such development would be grounded in a commitment to harmonious, equitable and sustainable human societies. Negotiations have encountered numerous obstacles in its implementation because of a lack of a holistic theory and practice that considers the fourth and possibly the most important dimension of development, namely spirituality. Such a theory and practice needs to be grounded in the premise that the sustainability crisis is a direct consequence of development's contribution to modernisation: as a result of the mechanisation of daily life, human beings have become increasingly alienated from their spiritual connection to nature and community (Cohen 2005). A truly sustainable society must have means by which economic power and assets can be decentralised and distributed in ways that restore inter-human and the human-environment connections.

Thus it is a claim of this paper that sustainable development as action, and spirituality as belief are intertwined, and must be addressed together to achieve sustainability for individuals, and hence for society.

Spirituality and community development

The core philosophy of a community seems to be a motivation amongst its members to connect and interact with each other. A species capable of experiencing loneliness, human beings have established themselves within communities to ensure their physical and emotional welfare. Furthermore, the qualities and needs of communities are dynamic and constantly changing—this requires an approach that understands, respects, and values diversity. The paper asserts therefore, that the correct framework for achieving sustainability will embrace and articulate this diversity on an ongoing basis. In this way, spiritual sustainability becomes the foundation for individual and community sustainability and by extension, for sustainable development in general.

Spiritual sustainability focussed approaches to community development attempt to bring about a respectful harmony of cultures and races, which ‘looks upon the world as an organic whole, of which all peoples are parts’ (Ghanananda 1937, 160). Such attempts have been made, Ghanananda explains, first with the formation of the League of Nations, and subsequently with the establishment of the United Nations and the institutions under its charter such as the International Court of Justice, UNESCO, WHO, and FAO. However, according to Ghanananda (1937, 161), ‘(s)uch lofty aims cannot be achieved without the necessary preparations and disciplines leading to the establishment of a moral and ethical basis. The instinct of individualism cannot be suppressed by the mere foundation of theoretical conceptions of justice and self-determination.’ This lack of spiritual identity resulted in a United Nations without a mandate to intervene in developments such as the war in Iraq.

It would appear that spirit of individualism in a person, and of cooperation within an organisation is not mutually exclusive. The ‘instinct of individualism’ can be eminently nourished in situations where the impulse or inner desire is satisfied through communal means. Academic research on sustainable communities has created a neat phrase—‘intentional communities’. Such communities are essentially organised around a central value system and beliefs which all members of the community respect and continually inform. Vibrant intentional communities include farming, self-reliant communities, organic vegetable farms, Christian communities trying to live according to God’s vision, communities supporting innovative economic systems based on human values and community co-housing networks (Communities and Community-Building Links n.d.).

Communities are created to provide the senses of connectedness, fostering, nurturing and a sharing of joy and happiness that individuals of a society crave, and can achieve only through a harmonious communal system of living. A community is a deliberately created environment that affords the freedom and time, to live fully according to one’s deepest, strongest and most personal values, which will ultimately lead to liberating feelings of gratification, goodness and humility. This paper asserts that in effect, all communities, whether they consciously choose to label themselves as such or not, are ‘intentional’ in

nature. For example, when individuals select a place of residence, so to speak, their ‘intention’ reflects their judgements about the physical and spiritual characteristics of the community of which they have chosen to be a part. They also intentionally or unintentionally contribute to this community’s vision of the future (see Box 1). It follows therefore, that identifying and intentionalising universal community beliefs is a necessary step in achieving spiritual sustainability for individuals therein. This holds for both ‘intentional’ and ‘less intentional’ communities.

Box 1. Excerpts from interview with Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, Principal, Lady Shri Ram College, University of Delhi, 2 February 2005

My vision for community life in Delhi ten years from now is linked to what’s already happening now—little communities have begun to structure themselves around religious beliefs, because there is a reclaiming of roots and identities. You know, the Bengalis will have a small cultural get-together during their festivals and community celebrations.¹ During Dusshera, the pujas have become really huge, stupendous community affairs.² I don’t think they should be on the scale that they are now, they are huge and there is a lot of commercial activity going on, but it’s great for community connectivity. Then you have the chanting groups, the civic society groups, the community groups in Delhi, and they help life develop. The neighbourhood should provide community, create facilities for the children, some kind of spiritual training for children, either by way of yoga classes or music classes, something that’s organised by each neighbourhood.

But the community centres should really be revitalised, for the original purpose for which they were created, where the entire neighbourhood comes together, where there is bonding, there is a sense of sharing, people feel they have an extended family—we have to build around the issues of family, relationships—in India that’s what’s important. So we have to make up a less individualistic community feeling, something that’s inclusive, family-oriented, so that children, the grandparents, the parents, they can all come together outside of the family and into the community as well.

I also think that Delhi needs to protect and promote libraries. Suddenly there have been a lot of very interesting bookshops that have opened up. But the culture of reading—I think

¹ Bengalis form one of the largest migrant groups in Delhi. Originally from the eastern state of West Bengal, the community is one of the major contributors to the intellectual and cultural vibrancy of the city.

² The Hindu festival of Dusshera celebrates the victory of good over evil. During the 10-day celebrations, the story of Ramleela is enacted, which narrates how Lord Rama rescued his wife Sita from the demon king Ravana of Lanka, who abducted her from the forests. Traditionally in Bengal, the festival is also celebrated as Durga Puja, which glorifies the nine manifestations of the angry goddess Durga (who also stands for the triumph of right over wrong) for nine days. On the tenth day, she is immersed into Hooghly River, which runs through the Bengal capital of Calcutta. In Delhi, the image is floated into the Yamuna. The image of the goddess is erected in huge tents all across the city. Brahmins are fed, new clothes are bought and it is a time of family bonding, joy and devotion.

Delhi could do with a lot more book clubs, because that is the fount of spirituality. It could do with a lot more music clubs; it needs to borrow the idea of the *katcheri*, the music season from Chennai, during the Ganesh festival.³ It has started in Delhi, with a very interesting interpretation of Sufi music near the Nizamuddin area. Then we have the very interesting festival of plays here.

So there are these ideas—they must be worked upon. Above all, I think there must be a message to the new generation of people: do not just blindly adopt the corporate culture. Basically you should really provide for the creation, and reflection. The other thing we need is quiet places for meditation in Delhi. Solitude and silence—it is a very noisy city.

The Rig Vedas emphasise placing society over the self. Intentional communities work because the individual does not resent submitting his/her needs to societal obligations—rather the society reflects his or her particular characteristics and in fact, further nurtures and encourages these distinguishing traits. Thus, the process of articulating community spirit is ongoing and individuality as a source of vitality is preserved.

It might be argued that such communities are unnatural, built on artificial foundations, and therefore unsustainable. Critics might retort that the lifespan of such a community might only be as long as that of the generation that created and formed it; and that its unique character might not endure to meet the changing lifestyles and values of the next generation.

However, intentional communities typically overcome this objection because they have at their heart an ideology that draws people towards each other while allowing variety of expressions, beliefs, interests, approaches and practices. The argument for a spiritual approach is that this immensely values diversity. Chile and Simpson (2004) write that power and resources in such communities are typically distributed equitably, while honouring plurality in spirituality. Thus the second conclusion of the paper is that for any sort of community development programme, such an intentional spiritual approach is fundamental for the generation of immediate and long-term positive spiritual sustainability.

³ The *katcheri* or the music season in Chennai runs from December through January each year. National artistes in Carnatic classical music, both vocalists and instrumentalists perform to crowds of hundreds.

Is urban spiritual sustainability unnatural?

What constitutes appropriate spirituality within a contemporary urban culture? There is need for an articulated urban spirituality and its focus must be communal. The questions that this paper is looking to develop are: What kind of spirituality works in a public space within an urban context? What would be the benefits of such spirituality in relation to sustainable development, and how best might this be achieved?

A city's legacy is also enhanced by the way that the values, beliefs, obligations, rights and responsibilities of its citizens enrich the values of cities. Growth of developing megacities in particular is often unplanned and ad hoc—the legacy of such cities lies in their historical traditions, spiritual beliefs, and the diversity of their value systems (Storelli 2003, 8).

Such a perspective is particularly valuable for assessing the position of women in cities. Given that women form a vast heterogeneous group in themselves, and that in any megapolis, women also arrive as migrants for various reasons from different parts of the country, it can also be safely assumed that different parts of the city represent distinct values. So, while builders of cities might aim for an overarching value to represent a city, the reality might often be that the city represents a grand historical reality (or many such realities), while also speaking for a mosaic of values taken from a spectrum of cultures and communities that inhabit the city. It is significant for community and city related studies, that a 'man's city' might be considerably different from a 'woman's city', as might be 'feminine aspects' of cities from 'masculine aspects' of the same city. One might even question whether or not the diversity within genders might be greater than between them. What can be made of this cacophony of voices?

'The city may be regarded as a series of overlays of simultaneous visions that co-exist. In order to know where the city might be going, we must know from where it is coming. To know who the 'we' are, we must disaggregate the city into many 'sub-cities and we's'. People must deal with the many overlays simultaneously', writes Khan (2003, para 26). Storelli writes, 'Cities are an argument for shared and harmonious living of cultural

diversity and anonymity, and are an area or a district where human beings are happier and produce wealth, well-being and culture' (2003, 8). She continues, 'this analysis of society and this understanding of an area leads to a social perception of the kind of place we wish to live in' (2003, 8). The perception of the city as a habitat (see Box 2) helps bring issues of sustainability strongly to the forefront. Articulating urban spirituality can inform a way of life for the community. It can integrate the diverse urban populace (secular and non-secular, multi-ethnic groups etc) through involvement in social and shared activities.

Box 2. Excerpts from interview with Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, 2 February 2005

I think we should stop looking at a city as a city, and rather as a habitat. It changes the realisation from separateness to inter-connectedness. It makes us realise that for anything to be sustainable, the link of interconnectedness has to be respected. You cannot have power and dominance in your relationships. You have to bring in spiritual power to bear out interaction. See, whether you are in an office, or a bureaucratic set-up, you have to ensure that the power of the bureaucracy does not undermine or get suffocating, rather it is there as an enabling environment. If a city really has to reach its potential, it has to be an enabling environment for its citizens. It has to provide sustenance, it has to provide community.

Now what is happening by and large in urban environments is the breakdown of the sense of community, bringing with it alienation, isolation. Stability at the level of a caring environment, an ethical environment for the elderly, providing spaces and a supportive environment for the differently abled, and a sense of concern of my stretching my arm, my limits—it means a concern for all other human beings, above all a respect for the environment.

I think a city has several advantages, has energy of creativity, the energy of a lot of different people living together, energy of professional accomplishment. These energies can somehow be harnessed into expression, and be supportive, to create community, and then I think the city need not be so threatening, alienating. The other thing is also the architecture of urban cities. By and large, it seems like we equate concrete jungles with metropolises. We have to think about how to harmonise structure and space.

Alternative ways of viewing a city, and new ideas of negotiating with a city constantly emerge, and the renewed search for meaning in urban spaces has created a new word—metrospirituality. A comment on a theology website reads thus:

People use the term 'metrosexuality' to define the distinctive blend of sexual choices that are being made as part of an urban lifestyle. Analogous to that we see a distinctive blend of spiritual options emerging—if you like, a 'metro-spirituality'. Metrospirituality is not an exclusively Christian

spirituality: it is simply the way of being 'spiritual' that becomes possible within a complex, creative, pluralistic (postmodern) urban environment. (Metro-spirituality 2003)

Johnstone (2003) suggests that metrospirituality should be responsive to the variations of place—even within the same city—that is foreign to 'standardised generic evangelical spirituality'. Metrospirituality should be developed and applied *locally*, he says, taking into account the immediate social and spiritual environment. The principle of articulating and intentionalising spiritual plurality and commonality, is essential to creating sustainable cities.

Is it difficult or even possible to incorporate spirituality in an urban culture? Most Eastern spiritual traditions have advocated detachment, renouncement of worldly comforts and immersing oneself in labour and service. The city on the other hand, stands for material benefits and ease of technology. Technology has been seen as a hindrance to spiritual paths, which is one reason Western societies are seen by the East as spiritually and morally less refined. However, Indian spiritual leaders like Sri Ramakrishna have believed that technology could give without taking away, that when viewed from the right perspective, technology could do nothing to dilute spiritual strength and on the contrary, could complement the values beautifully to promote an efficient, yet moral sustainability.

Megacities increasingly assume the shared nature and characteristics of world cities, with similar aspirations to development and wealth. For the transition to a sustainable melting pot of different communities at local and global levels, it is necessary that urban spaces that imitate global values at a micro-level share a vision of spiritual sustainability to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community. The preamble to the Earth Charter Community says, 'The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature' (The Earth Charter 2000, 2). Thus, while urban spiritual sustainability does require constant engagement to keep it dynamic, from human perspective, nothing could be more natural.

In a city like Delhi – spiritual approaches and the urban community

India is the land of supernatural beauty, superstitions, stately riches and unparalleled poverty, and the capital of this land of mysteries is Delhi. Delhi is a palimpsest, living the diversities, the contradictions and the magnificence of a city where at least three centuries exist together, sometimes peacefully, often in turbulence. Delhi has been reincarnated nine times, and the city's aura of grandeur, collapse, old wealth and vitality has charmed emperors, conquerors and refugees alike.

Modern Delhi stands at the western end of the Gangetic plains, with the once majestic but now impoverished state of Uttar Pradesh and the infant state of Uttarakhand on the eastern side. The state of Haryana envelops Delhi on the other three sides. The Himalayan River, Yamuna, the second holiest Hindu river, flows through the state, to converge with the Ganges a couple of hundred kilometres south of the city. Delhi is also the seat of the central government, and has an economy supported by agriculture, tourism, commerce and a growing multinational corporate outsourcing industry.

Urban community in Delhi is a potpourri of vibrant cultural colour and festivities, green movements, true historical splendour, growing young professional talents, migrant rural poverty, traffic and fumes, the seat of the government and bureaucracy, entertainment glamour, and high crime. All of this coexists with the simple village and green farms that large tracts of Delhi once were, not too long ago, just after the country's independence.

Today, Delhi's community spirit is under threat with high crime rates in the city, especially against women. Community practices and a lack of neighbourhood watch programmes (organised by the community, and administered by the Delhi Police, to reduce crime rates in the locality) fail to capture women's experiences of the city that are negotiated through acts of violence. While it is imperative to address the inadequacies of physical infrastructure in the city, and pay close attention to improving law and order and planning agencies for the city, it is also true that the high and shockingly gruesome crime and violence against *all* sections of women in the city—housewives, professionals, old women, young girls, foreign tourists—are a result of almost no form of a cohesive,

dynamic, harmonious and supportive community in the city. Any urban spiritual sustainability programme must address the reasons for this if Delhi is ever to become a sustainable city.

Uma Ranganathan's description of Mumbai's urban environment might as well have been written for Delhi:

Not for the first time, I began to feel the walls closing in around me. Walls of noise, walls of disrespect, walls of thoughtlessness. Cities, in fact, are nothing but huge fortresses, aren't they, with millions of padlocked doors. Some with double and triple locks too. All in the name of safety and protection. And you hardly notice the way the locks and walls shrink your world, eat into your free space and limit the scope of your movements, eventually giving birth to a mad monster within you. (Ranganathan 2004, 14)

It is a vicious circle: high crime in the city can kill the spirit, and a dead spirit, devoid of empathy, love, care and respect can foster a high crime rate. A Delhi citizen has at least a couple of chances of confronting death *everyday*, either directly or indirectly. Newspaper reports detailing the reported crimes of the previous day, continued investigations into missing persons, terrorism, and once out in the city itself, automobile crashes, stabbings in wealthy neighbourhoods and rape incidents.

In addition, a citizen's spirit is weakened everyday. For instance, a leper tapping the windows of my car has never shocked me, and only occasionally repulsed me. The spirit lies protected, if dormant, in the safe confines of a car, but for about 60 per cent of the city's 14 million inhabitants, life is a daily battle with the city, in all its ugliness, potency and poignancy. What chance does community spirit have of surviving then? What is the impact of such a city on the future generations (see box 3), a question which provides the main impetus for the sustainability concept?

In Delhi, there is an infusion of wealth in the city and an excess of consumption as never seen before. At the same time, the grinding stresses of poverty, violence, environmental pollution, repressed sexuality and unemployment continue, the contradictions making life both a struggle and a relief. This is when people want and need meaning in their lives.

Box 3. 'Where are the children in Delhi?', Excerpts from Interview with Dr. Indu Seth, 21 January 2005.

I think community life will diminish further in ten years. Children are the glue of a strong community but you don't see them around any more! When we were kids, we used to have so much time on our hands. Children these days don't have that much time, their syllabus is so heavy. The competition is so fierce; it's getting more and more hard to keep up. And if kids play these days, it's only cricket, I have never seen them play anything else. Or video games. That's it. We used to play a variety of games.

Playing the same thing, for the same reasons, is not good if you want your imagination to grow, if you want yourself to develop further. The more variety you see, the more games you play, and the more values you develop. The kids play on the roads, blocking traffic, and they develop a sense of a) breaking rules, and b) the sense of being constantly on guard. Neither is good for children who need to grow into responsible adults. The other thing that is happening to children because of this is that they are growing irresponsible, devil-may-care and selfish. We used to take more care; we were more considerate.

According to an ORG-MARG poll in 2001, 94 per cent of young adults below the age of 30 in Delhi believe in God, 62 per cent pray regularly and 35 per cent make a weekly temple pilgrimage (Holistic Living n.d.). The Art of Living (2004) organisers in Delhi say that over 16,000 people have taken their course in the past year alone, as compared to about 2000 people a year in preceding years. Women spiritual leaders like Mata Nirmala Devi and Mata Amritanandamayi, the 'mother who heals with a hug' routinely draw crowds of thousands each year. The Sri Sathya Sai Baba Trust organises development and charity works in the city, like blood donation camps, adult literacy classes, and mid-day meals for poor and homeless children. If these statistics are representative, people are desperately seeking a way through the chaos. How can this desire be harnessed to solve the problems that cause it?

The search for meaning automatically draws one to seek and understand other communities, and try to recreate what makes them vibrant and sustainable. Sensing that the time was ripe for a new series of experiments on community development in the city, the Delhi state government is now more involved in many innovative forms of community initiatives. The Chief Minister Shiela Dikshit's favourite community development project is the Bhagidari, inaugurated in January 2000, which is a broad partnership between the residents' welfare associations of all neighbourhoods with the

state government. This citizen-government alliance is meant to further empower citizens groups, where they can directly appeal to the state for assistance in community development.

As Chile and Simpson point out, a diverse range of associations covers a spectrum of spiritual beliefs and understandings. ‘Finding the commonalities and the links within these beliefs may be the key to discovering the role of spirituality in community development’, they write (2004, 321). They explain that these liaisons call for a comprehensive method of considering diverse and yet related issues such as justice, economic fairness, equality, rights, health and nutrition, governance and environmental protection, all of which are aspects of sustainability. Indeed, partnerships are proving globally to be integral to capturing the many voices that make sustainable development possible.

The central government’s Ministry of Urban Affairs and Employment started the UBSP (Urban Basic Services for the Poor) as a way of improving lifestyles for the city’s poor in their communities, their neighbourhoods, with an aim of ultimately developing a spirit of community and interconnectedness within the city itself. An important aspect of UBSP is its participatory process of planning and implementation, working with poor women from impoverished neighbourhoods to improve health and education facilities, the local environment, access to credit and fairer incomes, and other basic rights. Over 130,000 poor women serve voluntarily and willingly, working together with the governments and the NGOs (UNESCO Best Practices for Human Settlements n.d.).

It is said that Delhi is for the “dilwallas” or for “people of the heart”. How? In addition to horror and suffering, there is exuberance and joy in equal abundance. It is a city of passion, both good and bad, and passion is the stuff of the heart. For Delhi, any attempt at invigorating spiritual sustainability will have to take this as a starting point.

Spirituality, communities and women

How do women experience this city? What shapes women's lives in an urban environment? What are the specific contemporary status and the traditional role of women in urban societies? Contemporary urban communities in any city can be variously described in terms of lifestyle choices, cultural diversity, social, political and religious values, wealth and poverty, and community spirit. Which of these aspects in particular shapes women's lives in urban communities? What personal and gender-specific values of women in turn, shape community, and thereby, the city? What does urban spiritual sustainability for women look like?

Social sustainability, through addressing the elements of spirituality in communities taps into valuable but neglected human resources like cooperation, respect, compassion and responsibility. Chile and Simpson write, 'The underpinning philosophy of community development and spirituality is the connection of the individual to the collective, acknowledging that the well-being of the individual influences and is influenced by the well-being of the community' (2004, 325). The sense of connectivity is the source of greater respect, compassion and responsibility for other living and non-living things, which is the essence of a sustainable lifestyle.

Urban communities are culturally, socially and economically so diverse and rich, and there are sections within sections that form exclusive social networks. These invisible boundaries are generally not divisive and add to the vibrancy, colour and energy of the cities. Young and Miranne explain (2004, 1), 'Boundaries establish differences and commonalities between individuals and groups...they may be maintained, crossed, resisted, reconfigured...(and they) may be permeable and inclusive.' The imagery of the urban environment gets further enriched through the actions that women take within these geographical spaces and the lives they live there. They write, '(s)ocially constructed gender relations and the visible and invisible boundaries affect how women use urban space' (2004, 1). Young and Miranne particularly consider the important point that women are active mostly at the periphery of urban communities and that this has thus far

been the primary way in which they have been able to access urban spaces for themselves.

Race, class and ethnicity determine the social and cultural characteristics of urban communities. Women significantly enhance, alter or determine in some way, this nature of city societies. Women thus shape urban identities and, in turn, are affected by them. Women thus negotiate with the urban environment through their multiple identities. Communities in the cities, particularly in the developing world, need to create spaces that are physically safe, provide an environment that addresses the needs of women and children, allow for an 'expansive and inclusive' definition of the family and create policies that consider women's lives 'holistically'.

According to the Dalai Lama (2001, 15), women have the potential not only to create happy lives for themselves, but also help other human beings, and have a natural, creative quality. Importantly, women play a fundamental role in passing on communal traditions to generations. The experiences of women volunteers and NGO workers in New Delhi confirm this (see box 4). Women are more likely to attach social and emotional importance to rituals, symbols and traditions representing community customs. An active and involved role of women in urban community development and neighbourhood programmes will result in strong communal and social values that will be inherent in every succeeding generation, as they perpetuate the traditions that sustain community spirit through time.

Box 4. Excerpts from Interview with Latika Dikshit, Congress party and social worker, daughter and Personal Secretary to Chief Minister Shiela Dikshit, 4 February 2005

I think women have a different understanding of spirituality to men. I have been a grassroots worker now for over 15 years, and I find women are far more liberal, far more inclusive, far more broadminded, they discriminate much less, because they themselves have been victims of discrimination so they understand discrimination very well. I think Indian women are extremely liberal. For example, you go to a small village meeting where only the women come, and the purdah is off. And you see how animated the discussions are, how lively and they come from different backgrounds. And the boundaries just vanish, though they may not be allowed to speak to each other normally.

If spirituality means growing into an evolved human being, I think women are far more evolved, and they evolve after their experiences and what they have gone through. And rural women especially are very evolved, even if she comes to the city. Whatever hardship a community might have, it is harder for the woman—she has to keep the family together. Whether it's poverty—it's the woman who nurtures the family; her husband, children, parents, in-laws, grandchildren—and I've never come across a woman who is wanting in the nurturing factor. However difficult a situation maybe, by and large, women never shirk their responsibilities towards their families. They really are great heroines.

According to Peck, the single most important aspect of any social culture is the family. He writes, 'The most basic culture in which we develop is the culture of our family, and our parents are its "cultural leaders."' (Peck 1978, 177) In this context, the role of the mother is crucial as a cultural, moral, intellectual and emotional family leader, whose leadership, so to speak, would have a crucial impact on the nature of communities. Women's spirituality can play a leading role (see Box 5) in transforming the urban environment of cities like Delhi. Without their leadership, sustainable cities are not possible. Without empowering women, cities will suffer from a void where their leadership should be. Spiritual sustainability must take this into account if it is in turn to empower sustainable development.

Conclusion

The sustainability concept is very complex and integral to a world where knowledge and practices have been dominated by reductionist and fragmented western paradigms that leave out where the motivation and care for future generations come from. The power of spirituality as an overarching element in building sustainable communities and a sustainable lifestyle in a sustainable city is widely (intuitively and rationally, through education and experience) recognised by women in Delhi. It is in accordance with the spurt of interest and literature on contemporary spirituality as it relates to love, psychotherapy, consumerism, sex and religion, often with overlapping or similar explanations.

A spiritual approach to community building leads to empowered women, who have a sophisticated understanding of being responsible for their individual and communal lives.

Suzuki and Dressel (2004, 350) observe that human beings are principally built and programmed to be of service.

Box 5. Excerpts from Interview with Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, 2 February 2005

I think women are always exploring non-oppressive alternatives, because we have to deal with patriarchy in so many ways. We have to deal with coercion, abuse of power; we are constantly negotiating and renegotiating our space within the built environment. We care for those who defend our land, their home and the spaces that they occupy. I think women have a very special role. And I think they need to recognise that they have a contribution to make.

I think women's groups can take on this leadership, of humanising a city. It should be one of the agendas of the women's movement—but right now humanising a city has not been part of that. And you would think it would be given the high crime rate against women. But there is a face of Delhi that is not as aggressive as it may seem to be. So how do we retrieve that face of Delhi and how do we protect and preserve that part of Delhi, without harking back to the past or romanticising the city in any way? But the little practices of community sharing and caring—especially caring for the elderly, philanthropy, the idea of altruism—how can we bring this back? Most people still react aggressively.

And you have a large migrant population that comes and goes. The service sector is completely filled by migrant labour. So there is a sense of familiarity and bonding. But Delhi is a capital city and we have to invest more in it. We have to make it more people friendly. We have to have a greater sense of ownership about it. Right now we always blame someone else—we pass the buck on to the politicians or the bureaucrats, because we are still at one level a very bureaucratic city. But we can't expect the bureaucracy to do everything for us. Community, expression of citizenship—all of that will work. And spirituality is the key because it provides the framework for our relationships with the others, and with the community at large.

However, Jones warns that 'contemporary spirituality plays into an increasingly prevalent consumer mentality' (1997, 17). He writes, 'Rather than understanding *desire* as an indication of a human lack only satisfied by knowledge and love...through transformed living, desires signify the need for new levels of consumption by the self.' (1997, 17) According to him, this is because citizens of capitalist societies are tutored to see things as commodities, subject to the individual. The change in such attitudes and behaviours is at the core of the sustainability agenda and women's rich spirituality is an integral part of a foundation of a world built around harmony, care and respect, where women's voices,

including the ones from the women of Delhi, are powerfully heard. Conversely, without such an agenda, sustainability cannot be achieved, for Delhi or the world.

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