

## **M V Nadkarni's Reply to Festschrift Presentation, 23.2.2026, ISEC –**

### **Reflections gained from my Learning Journey**

Dr Ashok Dalwai, Prof Parmod Kumar, Prof Ananta Kumar Giri, Prof R S Deshpande, Prof Krishna Raj, Prof S Sudha, Prof Suresh Babu, Prof Kala Sridhar, Prof Ninan, Prof. Jos Chathukulam, Dr. Nagesh Prabhu and dear friends, my hearty Greetings to each one of you, including those who are online! Thank you very much for your kind words.

This book, 'Quest for Planetary Wellbeing', edited with great competence, and love by two eminent social scientists, Professors Ananta Giri and R S Deshpande, is an ideal Festschrift to an imperfect person. I am aware of my imperfections. So I feel truly humbled. The editors, especially Professor Giri, have taken great troubles in collecting as many as 29 superb essays, apart from a Foreword, two Afterwords, and three endorsements, together extending to over 600 pages. The eminent contributors are from all over the world. It is big work; I feel overwhelmed. I am greatly indebted to not only the two esteemed editors, but also to all contributors. I can't mention all their names here, but I am sincerely and personally grateful to each one of them. I am very sad, however, that Professor U Sankar, one of the eminent contributors, is no more. I bitterly miss him. I also heartily thank Dr Ashok Dalwai, Prof Parmod Kumar, and all of you who are present on this occasion and participated in the event.

I admire the title given to the Festschrift thoughtfully by the wise editors – *Quest for Planetary Wellbeing*. Let us reflect for a moment on the perfectly designed, well endowed, and beautiful planet Earth given to us by its Creator. But we are vandalising it due to our short term selfish interests. We are also violently fighting among ourselves disturbing the peace, happiness, and even the lives of millions of people, harming the environment, and creating millions of tons of debris through destructive wars. Securing planetary wellbeing is the most urgent task for all of us. The essays in the Festschrift contribute to the quest for it. They reflect my deeply felt concerns.

Dr Julien Gerber says in an endorsement to the volume that it is 'a gem of a collection'. Quoting Giri's words, Dr Marcus Bussey says in his brilliant Foreword to the volume, that the essays are 'enlightenment bridges'. They surely are - to the society, economy, humanity, Nature, and even the Transcendental. Each essay is beautiful in its own way. This reminds me of Da Raa Bendre, a prominent Kannada poet. In a poem on flowers, he observes:

*Ondarolu ondilla, ondarolu kundilla, Ondondu andavoo tanatanage chanda.*

(Each is unique, none has a blemish! Each one's beauty has its own flourish!)

My only worry is, given its extremely high price, how it will sell in India. I hope that the editors will urge the publishers to bring out a much less expensive Indian edition.

The volume is aptly multi-disciplinary, which suits my work. I have not been confined to economics, and had a bite at sociology, political economy, environment, ethics, religion, and Gandhian thought. I may appear like a monkey jumping from tree to tree according to

whims. But a logically connected account of my works can help in appreciating the unity in the apparent diversity in my work. To me at least, these fields are essentially interconnected. Professor Deshpande has dealt with my work in detail in the volume, and so have seven more essays by eminent scholars. They have done a marvellous job. I will bring out only salient reflections gained from my 'learning journey', using Giri's words.

Before doing that, let me clarify that my concept of wellbeing is both material and spiritual. It is a sin to preach Vedanta to a hungry person, asserted Swami Vivekananda. Basic material needs of all should be met on priority. But needs go beyond '*roti, kapda aur makaan*' (food, clothing and shelter), and cover good health, education and environment too. They also legitimately cover security of life and property, self-respect, and freedom. It is not unethical to seek comforts which make life worth living. But this should be possible for all, and not just a few. All should have opportunities to realise the full potential of their personalities. Economic growth is necessary for this, but it should be inclusive and environmentally sustainable. This is where economic and social policies have a role. A truly democratic state should not hesitate to tax the affluent adequately enough to use the proceeds for providing equal opportunities to all. The affluent should not regard this as a tax but as a contribution morally due from them for the wellbeing of all. They would have the spiritual satisfaction of playing a positive role in uplifting the deprived and less fortunate.

Wellbeing, however, is not based only on possession of commodities, but as Amartya Sen(1985;1999) points out, more on developing one's capabilities. These capabilities are not confined to production of commodities, but also to providing services and making the lives of even others happy and meaningful. Greedy pursuit of wealth irrespective of harm it causes to humans and environment cannot constitute true wellbeing. True wellbeing is ethical and shared with others. That is when it becomes spiritual. Those with excess wealth should consider themselves as trustees for it as Gandhi insisted. Wealth and wellbeing arise in society more out of cooperation and complementarity, than competition. This is true not only at the level of individuals, but also at the level of communities and countries. Wellbeing is interconnected and synergetic. It extends to the planet as a whole. No country, no community can be safe and secure when the planet as a whole is in crisis on multiple fronts.

Let me now turn to a few reflections gained from my work. In my PhD work, done at Karnatak University under Dr D M Nanjudappa, I showed the crucial need for stability in agricultural prices for economic development. In seeking stability in price environment, we face the challenge of resolving the conflict between interests of consumers and producers especially in agriculture. I showed how the dilemma was resolved satisfactorily in a socialist economy, through my book on '*Socialist Agricultural Price Policy – A Case Study of German Democratic Republic (East Germany)*'. It was based on my postdoctoral work at the Humboldt University, Berlin, during 1973-74, and was published in 1979.

The continued interest in the problem of prices made me take up the study of new Farmers' Movements in India. While the old Peasants' Movements had focused on land reforms, the new Farmers' Movements focused on securing remunerative prices. While the earlier movements were mainly under a feudal rural economy, the new movements showed a transition of the rural sector towards a capitalist economy. A political economy approach,

taking into account the rural class structure, was adopted. My work on farmers' movements was published both in Kannada and English (in 1986 and 1987 respectively).

Apart from the problem of remunerative prices, another problem afflicting farmers is that of recurrent droughts. I took up the analysis of the impact of 1972 drought when I was in Marathwada University, and found how farmers adjusted adversely to droughts by selling their productive assets and impoverished themselves. This affected them badly even when good season returned. Subsequently, I took up the related problem of instability in rainfall and yields, mainly in collaboration with R S Deshpande. The work on this topic resulted in at least 9 published research papers during the 1970s and early 1980s. The study included measurement of instability, identification of crops and regions affected most by it, and their relationship with the level of economic development. A subsequent field-based work on drought-prone districts in the three states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu suggested that though the spread of irrigation was a help, what helped more was a diversification of the rural economy with a boost to cottage and small industries, providing alternative employment and reducing poverty. The findings from this fieldwork were published in a book in 1985. What struck me was the neglect of drought-prone areas, and their contribution. The main produce of these areas – millets and pulses, consumed mainly by the poor, also suffered from neglect. I tried to make amends for this to some extent.

While discussing the new Farmers' Movements, I referred to the transition of the rural sector towards a capitalist economy. An evidence of this was the prevalence of reverse tenancy, under which marginal and small farmers leased out their holdings to middle or large farmers. I was probably one of the first to point out the emerging phenomenon of reverse tenancy. I found this in my field work in Marathwada in 1974-75, and published a paper on this in EPW in 1976. Reverse tenancy helped in improving the viability of at least some holdings. But the process was hardly adequate enough to make agriculture as a whole economically viable. I returned to the problem of the crisis of viability in Indian agriculture, in Prof. L S Venkataramanan Memorial Lecture in 2017, published in EPW in 2018. It is because of the problem of viability that Indian agriculture has not been able to complete its capitalist transformation and achieve its full production potential. Even my much earlier study of 'Marketable Surplus and Market Dependence in a Millet Region' (1980) had shown that though agriculture was largely involved in the market, even the middle farmers also had a negative net marketable surplus, and therefore had no capacity for investment and growth. Though the Green Revolution raised the production frontier of Indian agriculture, it could not adequately solve the problem of viability, because it also raised costs per unit of output. Excessive use of pesticides, fertilisers, and irrigation also caused environmental problems, and even affected soil fertility. Farmers like Narayan Reddy pioneered organic agriculture to solve this problem. I have presented his story along with the background problem of higher per unit costs in a paper in EPW in 1988.

Agriculture with a bulk of farms non-viable, is a drag on development in general too, not agriculture alone. Development of nonfarm sectors has to be employment oriented and absorb some workforce from agriculture to create viable holdings.

As early as in 1981, Dr V K R V Rao started a centre for ecological economics at ISEC, and asked me to lead it. He foresaw that research on this subject had a great potential. I am highly grateful to him for his trust in me. I am happy that this Centre has done well over the last four-and-half decades, enthusing even the faculty outside it to do research on ecological issues, producing several books and research papers for reputed journals, and turning out a large number of PhDs in the area.

My work on environmental problems covered 'Political Economy of Forest Use and Management' (1989) and the issues relating to Common Property Resources. In studying the problem of forests, I adopted a political economy perspective. Economics of resource use transforms itself into a problem in political economy, when the resource use is decided not by one decision maker but through a struggle between multiple vested interest groups aiming at competing multiple uses. Though the Forest Department is supposed to own and conserve forests, there are other interest groups too like the other government departments interested in economic growth, private industries using the raw material from forests, department of mining, forest dwellers depending on forests for their livelihood, and farmers using them as common property for fuel wood, fodder, and grazing cattle, and even illegal miners and hunters. Often the politically and economically powerful interests get away with unsustainable exploitation of forests. Conservation of forests depends on the support and cooperation it gets from local people, since they have a stake in it.

Apart from forests, there are common lands used by local people for grazing their cattle and fuel wood, which are a great help especially to the poor marginal farmers and landless labour. They can own cattle and access fuel wood mainly due to the availability of common lands nearby. But there are two problems here. Common lands are used also by the non-poor middle and even large farmers. I found that though in relative terms as a proportion of income the poor gain from them more than the rich, in absolute terms the rich gain more than the poor. The second problem is their unsustainable exploitation.

Forests also suffer from encroachments for cultivation, but encroachers do not automatically get ownership title to encroached lands and have to indefinitely wait for it. In the meanwhile, they cultivate them, but do not invest in soil conservation since they don't have ownership rights. The problem is particularly acute in hilly areas. As a result there is a risk of such lands becoming barren. This problem was analysed jointly with V Govindaru in a paper titled, 'Nobody's child: The Economic and Institutional Aspects of Soil Conservation in India' published in 1995.

In a comparative study of industrial pollution control in India and Netherlands, I found that as a proportion of GDP, the expenditure on pollution control was almost the same in both countries (1997). The capacity to take care of environmental problems is limited by the size of GDP or level of economic development. The accumulated environmental problems were created mainly by the rich countries and they have a moral obligation of helping developing countries in tackling them. Excessive consumerism of the rich both in rich and developing countries is the villain behind climate change.

Realising this role of consumerism turned me to Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy. He was against India taking the same reckless growth path taken by the west, and presented an alternative civilizational path (described in my paper of 2015). He had no problem with people satisfying their real *needs*, but wanted them to restrain their *wants*. He also preferred technology to be employment oriented and supportive of livelihoods of the poor. He upheld the principles of Truth and Non-violence, where nonviolence was not only with reference to other human beings, but also with respect to Nature. Gandhian philosophy of *Sarvodaya* meant welfare of *all*, not of majority alone. Every individual is important, none is dispensable. Even if a development project benefits the majority but deprives a minority, and has favourable benefit-cost ration, it is unacceptable unless the deprived minority is fully compensated and rehabilitated and is not worse off but shares the benefit like others. Similarly, if a project has a potential to harm environment, it is unacceptable unless effective preventive or mitigating steps are inbuilt into the project design and implemented.

Much before Amartya Sen argued about the dangers and irrationality of separating Economics from Ethics (in *On Ethics and Economics* in 1987), Mahatma Gandhi had asserted in 1941: 'Economics which departs from or is opposed to Ethics is no good and should be renounced'. Developing the Gandhian view, I wrote the book, '*Ethics for Our Times – Essays in Gandhian Perspective*' (2011, 2014). I directly dealt with this issue in 'Integrating Ethics into Economics', Third Founders' Day Lecture, CMDR, 2013. In a paper published in EPW in 2025, after the Festschrift went to the press, I explained how misleading mainstream economics is while emphasizing on competition as the major drive for economy, ignoring the more important role played by complementarity and cooperation.

Gandhi looked at many other issues also including religion. For Gandhi, ethics was the essence of religion, and Truth was God. He regarded Hinduism as 'relentless pursuit after truth'. He clarified that 'my regard for Hinduism and its beauties did not, however, prejudice me against other religions'. Explaining his stand, I wrote *Hinduism- A Gandhian Perspective* (2006, 2008; updated as *Handbook of Hinduism* in 2013). I also tried to dispel misunderstandings about Hinduism here. For example, I showed that the caste system is not intrinsic to Hinduism, and that Hinduism is not world-denying or 'other-worldly' as commonly supposed, but cared for life in this world itself and preached a moral path for living it. The Bhagavad-Gita also is a guide to lead life meaningfully in this world itself, more than for attaining *Moksha*, as explained in my book on the Gita (2017, 2020). The book shows that the Gita has amazing applications of modern interest like guidance to leadership, enterprise and management; pursuit of truth in scientific research; and success in career.

The five *Shatakams* or centuries of verses which I composed in Sanskrit along with translations in English are also on social ethics, published separately earlier, and brought together in one volume in 2022. They are respectively on environmental ethics, Gandhi's philosophy, Hindu philosophy, humanitarianism, and philosophy of democracy. It is again ethics which attracted me to the *Vachanas* (Sayings) composed in Kannada by the Shivasharanas of 12<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka. These devotees of Shiva were far ahead of their times, and fought against social evils like caste discrimination, suppression of women, and

superstition. Out of more than 20,000 Vachanas left by them, I selected only 320 for translating both in Sanskrit and English, published together in 2024.

I am not sure if my work has been path-finding. But I am happy that I led a meaningful life because of it, and grateful for the kind support received from friends, colleagues, students, relatives, and even those whom I did not know personally but who were linked with me through my works. I am especially indebted to ISEC which has been my *Karma-bhoomi* for half a century.

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