

# The Inadequacy of G20 and its Need to Initiate a Reformulation of Development

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## Abstract:

The G20's primary focus is ensuring economic growth and global financial stability, which has in time expanded to include the concerns of climate change, sustainability etc as well. But the currently dominant conceptualization of 'growth' and 'development' is the primary reason for these major issues like the looming climate catastrophe, humongous disparities in wealth, extremism born of disaffection, etc. On top of it, the G20 is also marred by severe underrepresentation of countries which is a serious issue, given the powerful influence of the group over global economics. As such, this forum is not suited for discussing sustainability and inclusiveness because its core concern is the anti-thesis of these objectives. However, if the group is willing to engage in serious reformulation of what growth and development means, it is an apt platform very well suited for the task. The world is currently under a transitional phase when the evident failure of west's modernist paradigm is creating space for alternative knowledge systems to come to the fore. G20 countries should use this as an opportunity to create alternative paradigms. India should urgently re-engage with its own ancient knowledge which contains the key to addressing pressing concerns.

**Keywords:** G20, Alternative Paradigm, Development, Sustainability, Indigenous Knowledge.

## Nature of G20

G20 is a premier forum that brings together the largest economies of the world to discuss, formulate solutions to, and co-ordinate policies on pressing financial and economic concerns of the world. Founded in 1999, it functioned at the level of finance ministers and governors of central banks of the member countries, but in the wake of the 2007 global financial crisis, the heads of states got involved which exponentially enhanced the significance of the forum. The initial focus of the forum was limited to sustainability of sovereign debt and global financial stability. Eventually, the predominantly economy driven focus was jarred by the onset of crises like Wuhan virus pandemic, climate emergency, etc and the member nations are slowly realizing the need to incorporate these issues in the forums' deliberations. For example- the Action Plan on 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted in 2016, the 2017 summit focused on fighting terrorism, the theme for 2018 was 'Building Consensus for Fair and Sustainable Development', 2021 theme was 'People, Planet, Prosperity'. For the year 2023, under Indian presidency, the theme is 'One Earth, One Family, One Future'.<sup>1</sup>

## Why the G20 has no ground to discuss sustainability and inclusiveness.

Given the current state of global affairs, seeking ways to avert the multiple crises that threaten humanity's survival on planet earth is an urgent requirement that concerns everybody. In a report commissioned by

the World Wildlife Fund and conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit, it was found that in India, the growth in engagement and awareness of environmental issues has grown by 190%. Global media coverage for climate related issues increased 103% from 2018 to 2019. Google searches related to bio-diversity and nature loss have steadily increased. Consumers’ search for sustainable goods has gone up by 71% since 2016. These figures are indicative of the fact that there is an increasing demand for action from governments and big businesses for the sake of the planet and the future.<sup>2</sup>

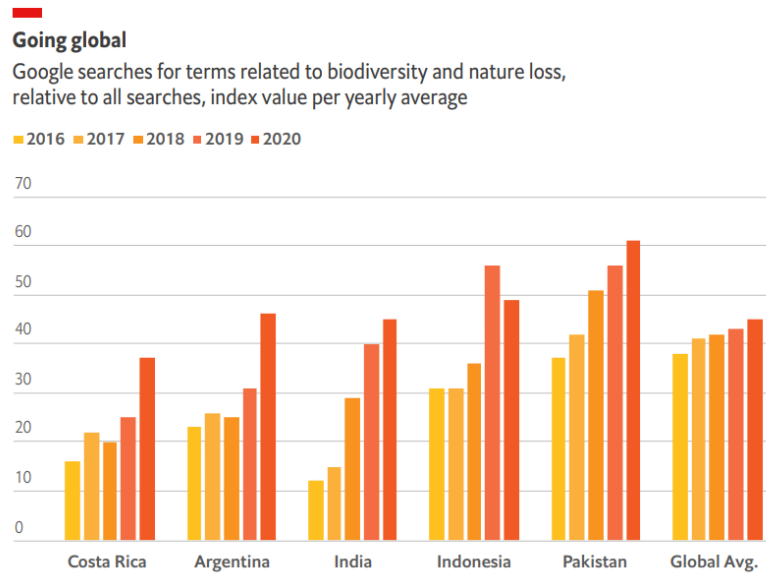


Image 1: Graph depicting Google searches for biodiversity and nature loss over the years 2016 to 2020. Source: An Eco-wakening report (Pg18).

Terms such as ‘sustainability’, ‘environment friendly’, ‘empowerment’, etc have become a part of all discussions and narratives over the last decade, so much so that any organization, or group takes care to incorporate these terms in its programmes, official statements, etc. even if it is only for the sake of appearances. While it is not refutable that over the last two decades, some meaningful efforts with effective impact on concerns of sustainability and inclusivity have been made, it is also true that there is a tendency towards using these issues for creating positive public image in order to foster acceptance and support for the organization or group from people, instead of aiming for meaningful outcomes. A demonstrative example of this tendency is consumer behaviour towards environment friendly or sustainable or green products. *Tezer and Bodur* studied consumption behaviour with respect to green products and argue that consumers sense an increase in their value as members of society upon use of products with low environmental impact. They call this the green consumption effect.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, *Caniels* and others conclude from their study on Polish youth that green purchasing attitudes or pro-environment attitude is not motivated by the desire to do good for the society but rather by the desire to look good.<sup>4</sup>

It comes as no surprise that the G20 forum has also included these concerns in its discussions, but whether this platform is a suitable setting for meaningful engagement with the concerns of inclusiveness and environmental protection needs to be asked, because it is closely linked to a pertinent question that the aforementioned report ends with- if the people care, why is nature still under threat? The report does not engage with the question at much length, and it mentions three causes for this gap- lack of awareness, cost implications for implementing changes that can make existing systems environment friendly, and weak

enforcement of laws concerning these issues. This kind of reasoning is true but rhetorical and fails to address the root cause.

The G20's presidency for the year 2023 is with India which has chosen the theme- 'One Earth. One Family. One Future'. The forum's official website elaborates that this theme affirms the value of all life forms. It also states an emphasis on making environmentally sustainable choices at individual and national levels. The message is to strive for just and equitable growth.<sup>5</sup> Leaving aside the practical problems involved in getting divergent national interests of so many countries to sync to a particular end to be attained in certain ways, there is a fundamental reason that renders G20 unsuitable as a platform for advocating sustainability and inclusiveness. G20's primary concern is to ensure global economic growth and financial stability. All its summit Leaders' Declaration stress the need to enhance growth to ensure prosperity of citizens.<sup>6</sup> This growth and prosperity is understood to be a consequence of increased industrial output. If economic expansion is interpreted as the only (or the primary) way for creating a good life for people, setting more industries, increasing production as well as consumption becomes the desired end, and this very tendency is the primary cause of environmental destruction and degradation in the first place. When the basic paradigm is unable to divorce industrialization from prosperity, the conceptualization of sustainable development also gets limited to tactics that can delay the onset of the climate catastrophe, instead of being geared towards finding actual solutions.

This problem can further be boiled down to the level of the individual. The self-perception of an individual today is based on the conceptualization of the individual as self-interested, i.e. his/her actions are guided to securing his/her own interests, as an outcome of Renaissance generated ideas of rationality and modernity. This perception of an individual as self-interested being prioritizing its own interests is projected onto the primary unit in international affairs, i.e. the nation-state, which is similarly guided by national interest as the primary concern. *Morgenthau's* six principles enunciated in 1948 still guide the behaviour of countries in global affairs – that international politics is guided by laws rooted in human nature (which is understood as selfish), that moral principles cannot be applied to international politics.<sup>7</sup> The global North is still reluctant in sharing its material and intellectual/technological wealth with the global South unless such sharing serves their self-interests.

From Brandt report (1980) to Brandt Equation (2002), the basic concerns continue to simmer.<sup>8</sup> The developed countries are willing to compromise with their comforts only to the extent that helps further their own agendas economy-wise, public image-wise or domestic vote politics-wise. The most recent example of this self-centeredness was exhibited when the developed countries chose to hoard vaccines and critical medicines and other supplies amidst the Wuhan virus pandemic, when they should have extended help to the less-resourceful nations.<sup>9, 10</sup> *Thomas Burns* correctly brings attention to the fact that the pandemic of 2020 was a much bigger crisis than the financial crisis of 2009. Yet, the forum's response unlike in 2009 was tepid and inadequate. A decade ago the G20 leaders seemed to firmly believe that the world was on the brink and only multilateral cooperation was the only way forward but that spirit is now absent.<sup>11</sup> It needs pointing out here that the G20 was formed only after the G7 found themselves incapable of handling the global economic crisis by themselves.

The G20 is a forum that wields the power to shape and direct world economy, claiming the goals of inclusivity, yet from the entire continent of Africa with its 54 countries, there is only one member (South Africa) in the G20. Such criticism has been directed at G20 for some time now. *Andrew Cooper* points that there is a legitimacy gap due to the G20 being a self-selected concert of big powers.<sup>12</sup> Swedish economist *Anders Aslund* stated in 2009 itself that the G20 has arrogated for itself financial decision

making that should be shared by all countries. He argued against the institutionalization of G20 as the de facto global financial decision making body because there was no specific criteria for its membership, no agreed rules of governance, and most importantly it expects that decisions made by 20 countries be followed by 160 countries which are not even represented in the forum. Indeed, he went ahead to call the G20 an ‘extraordinary regression in international governance’.<sup>13</sup> When economic clout is apparently the primary criteria for the membership of this forum, endorsing of slogans like one earth one family seem more like an exercise to fit in with the latest trends because there is much underrepresentation. So long as growth is understood in terms of capitalist industrialization, the inequalities in growth and prosperity will rage because the developed west will continue to need an Asia to shift their dirty pollution spewing industries to, and an impoverished Africa to dump their waste to and extract their minerals from. To expect such an institution to work for a sustainable and inclusive world is too big a stretch.

### **G20’s suitability for re-imagining growth**

The first need of the hour is to retract the individual from being the selfish Renaissance man and re-establish him/her in a more human framework. Thence, a rethinking of what prosperity, growth and development allude to must follow. This rethinking has already been initiated from various quarters, sometimes referred to as post-development school of thought. *James Ferguson, Arturo Escobar, Gustavo Esteva, Helena Norberg-Hodge, Wolfgang Sachs* etc have called out the limits of modern development and its impending failure. Mahatma Gandhi was also a strong critic of modernist development. To quote the Mahatma-

“I do not believe that multiplication of wants and machinery contrived to supply them is taking the world a single step nearer its goal... I whole-heartedly detest this mad desire to destroy distance and time, to increase animal appetites and go to the ends of the earth in search of their satisfaction. If modern civilization stands for all this, and I have understood it to do so, I call it Satanic.”<sup>14</sup>

G20, if willing to participate in this rethinking, can make meaningful contributions and initiate significant changes here.

The G20 is quite apt a platform for this purpose. G20’s previous track record shows that its mechanisms are effective in making collective action possible. Its crisis management potential was displayed by its deft handling of the 2009 global economic crisis, when stimulus measures worth more than a trillion dollars were undertaken to prevent global depression. The coordination of the G20 countries has strengthened the international financial regulatory system.<sup>15</sup> In 2016, the group adopted the 2030 Action Plan Agenda for Sustainable Development to contribute towards the fulfilment of Sustainable Development Goals, and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development. In 2019, UNDP and OECD prepared a report to G 20s efforts in this direction. Some of the key achievements the report lists include increase female participation in the workforce, enhancing food security through concrete initiatives, cooperation on tax transparency, etc.<sup>16</sup>

Its current membership represents 85 per cent of global GDP, 75 per cent of global trade, two-thirds of human population. With due efforts it can be transformed into a truly globally representative platform for financial decision making. But even in its current form, this is a group of some of the most affluent, populous, countries in the world who have willingly come together to form a group where actionable decision making is desired. Decisions made in this forum ultimately set the trends for global economy and influence domestic policies as well. A group of such immense influence formed for the sake of collective growth is the best suited for initiating reconceptualization of growth, development and prosperity. The two

goals of prosperity through unending industrialization and sustainability are irreconcilable. As this forum's focus shifts towards inclusive and economic growth, it needs to pioneer an expeditious reformulation of what growth and development is understood as.

## Conclusion

In this post-pandemic world, societies and leaders are aware of the undeniable need to change our ways of thinking and living because the stakes are simply too high to ignore. However, this awareness is weighed down by habits and lack of alternatives. Having lived in the modernist paradigm for over a century, as a collective, the human society has become used to living and perceiving the world in a certain way so much so that it has become difficult to imagine a different way of being, despite knowing the urgency for changing our ways. In his report titled the Economics of Biodiversity, *Dasgupta* mentions an estimate by the Global Footprint Network for 2020 that we would need 1.6 earths to satisfy demands on a sustainable basis.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the established ways, and band-aid approach to dealing with its fallout is insufficient.

Industrial revolution marked a shift from co-existence to domination, from needs fulfilment to satiating unending desires. Riding the wave of power and wealth acquired through colonialism, the west was in the position to dictate the narrative globally. Through the influence gained on the colonies, the western colonizers were able to assert their ideological hegemony, in the process of which, the indigenous knowledge traditions of the native communities were purposefully ridiculed and rendered to insignificance, even to the minds of the colonized themselves. Within India, the onslaught of imperialism was faced at all fronts- military, economic and cultural imperialism. Facing defeat in all these aspects made self-consciousness and self-confidence impossible. While elaborating upon the various aspects of imperialism, Morgenthau states that cultural imperialism is the most subtle and most successful imperialist policy because it aims at the conquest of minds by persuading of imperialist's superiority and gaining willing subservience.<sup>18</sup> However, now that the west's modernism-rooted value system has failed, the erstwhile colonized natives are also able to break through the bonds of neo-colonialism, or the colonial hangover of idolizing the west, and are re-engaging with their roots in a positive manner.

Indigenous philosophies around the world, not just Indian, have gravitated towards harmony in existence and balancing means and desires. Any genuine discussion on the basics of the desired manner of human co-existence on earth would have to harken to traditional knowledge systems in India. It is a repository of the deepest contemplations on those fundamental questions that modernity sought but failed to answer. Should G20 choose to invest attention to the problem of faulty formulation of growth currently dominant, ancient Indian thought can support the development of a new paradigm of development and prosperity. The west's inherent tendency is for extremes, while that of India is that of balance. Times of turmoil are best suited for ushering in new ideas. India is in a favourable global position, and has the knowledge base to come up with solutions to persistent global problems. It would be rather unfortunate if New Delhi only draws on the great texts like the Upanishads to create slogans without engaging with it deeply. While this will contribute to image building for India, and provide a sugar-coating for the G20 forum itself, the fundamental problems faced by humanity will remain unresolved.

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