

MAN AND HIS ENVIRONMENT

If a chemist or a physicist or anyone for that matter endeavoured a brief description of the current environmental problems, he would find it troublesome and far exceeding the knowledge of an individual scholar, for the situation with our environment has long become a subject of joint research of scientists from different fields who have to combine their wisdom and information from other domains, with experts in sociology, psychology, philosophy hurriedly coming into the picture.

Yet, to put it briefly, one of the causes of the current situation with our environment should be searched in the lack of development of particular fields of knowledge, and of an adequate picture of the intricately acting whole, which is our planet.

It is man's intervention in nature that has singled him out from the rest of the animal world since his early days. It is this very intervention that has put him in this highly technological world of ours, with the rate of progress in particular fields being faster than that in our fundamental knowledge of the general operation of the Earth.

The threat to the environment is a demanding problem man has to cope with at the beginning of the 21st century. What is so peculiar about the environmental crisis when compared to the other menacing problem, that of a nuclear catastrophe? Surely not its global character and everybody's involvement.

A nuclear catastrophe, as seen nowadays by practically everyone everywhere, would inevitably involve any country, no matter how small or big it is, and would disturb every individual, whatever life he might be living. Should it happen, its inescapability is too obvious to be disputed. So is its explosive character.

In contrast to this, the environmental crisis is of an accumulative nature. It is just not clearly understandable and the intricate pattern of the interaction of all factors is what makes it so hazardous. For no single action taken, or decision made, can bring about an immediate catastrophe, nor could there be the last step that would set in motion an avalanche of irrevocable and immediate events leading to the ultimate doomsday.

Consequently, what is needed first and foremost is to take close to our hearts the possible adverse impact of the long-range effects of our actions, however noble the motives may seem to us at present, on the entire human civilization. Should we fully realize the danger, quite a new approach to the problem would appear.

Next comes the urgent need for basic research to get more profound knowledge of the cause-effect relationship, the time factor necessarily taken into account, in the whole realm of human environment, both natural and man-invaded.

Fundamental and irreversible as they may often be, the changes in our environment are not likely to bring mankind to the brink of extinction overnight. It would take us some time yet to get there. So let us use the time for learning how to preserve our planet in good shape and in running order for an indefinitely long time.