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November 06, 2011

First Published: 22:32 IST(6/11/2011)
Last Updated: 22:34 IST(6/11/2011)

Schumacher vs Schumacher

As the hype over Formula One (F1) ebbs, it is time to think about what it represents for India. What better way to do this than to contrast one Schumacher (Michael) with another (EF)? While most readers will be familiar with the former, I may need to introduce the latter. Which I guess is itself a statement of sorts.

EF Schumacher (EFS) is well-known in development and environment circles as the author of *Small is Beautiful*, a powerful critique of what is wrong with today's mega-project, speed-obsessed and centred model of development. EFS advocated, in its place, decentralised, small-scale processes for human well-being.

I have nothing personally against Michael Schumacher (MS). I'm sure he has many admirable qualities (guts, for one!). It is what he, or rather F1, represents, that I'm getting at. Today, we are addicted to speed and to mega-achievements. We want to move faster and faster from one place to the next, achieve higher and higher rates of economic growth, use lightning-speed communication, and make as much money as fast as we can. We eat on the run ('fast food' is aptly named), our messages are sent in cryptic text messages or bbms. We glamorise individual achievement, making heroes of those who beat others in cut-throat competition.

But we forget that there is a cost attached. The fuel spent, pollution caused, and land acquired for F1 are tiny but unambiguous symbols of this. Cutting the time taken to travel from Mumbai to Pune by an hour, with a new expressway, sacrificed forests, and split villages into two. The uncontrolled consumerism of a tiny minority of rich people has disproportionate and huge consequences; the 'ecological footprint' (overall environmental impact) of the richest is up to 300 times that of the poor. The blind pursuit of 9-10% economic growth rate through industrialisation dispossesses crores; over 50 million people have been displaced by 'development' in the last few decades. It also means endangering life on earth, as global biodiversity loss and climate change cause increasingly bigger 'natural' disasters. 'Speed thrills but kills', the familiar sign on our highways, is a wise adage well beyond what the highway authorities mean it to be.

It is these and other impacts EFS drew our attention to, several decades ago. Many other visionaries like him have done the same, including our own forgotten Mohandas Gandhi. The Dalai Lama put it succinctly: "These are times of fast food but slow digestion; tall man but short character; steep profits but shallow relationships."

Several practical initiatives are showing that the EFS path is practicable. The Slow Food movement emphasises the health and social benefits of cooking and eating properly. Across India, groups are successfully trying organic farming, labour-intensive crafts and rural industries, and locally-managed renewable energy. Indigenous people around the world are showing how to relate to nature not as mere raw material for exploitation, but as the nurturer of our spiritual-cultural-physical well-being. Economic democracy movements are empowering ordinary citizens to control production and consumption, and build economic relations as human ones, not simply mediated by money. From these initiatives are emerging what can be called a Radical Ecological Democracy, in which everyone has the right and capacity to take part in ecologically and socially responsible decision-making. In this, economic growth rates are replaced by real indicators of human well-being, like access to nutritious food, health, education, clean air and water, cultural and political security. The collective 'commons' is prioritised over selfish individualisation.

It is a sign of our times that googling 'Schumacher' first brings MS. But EFS is the second, and that is cause for hope. Like the tortoise, slow and steady (and small) that wins in the end, this is the only way humanity can make peace with its earthly home and with itself.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

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