



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Ensuring sustainable development by curbing consumerism: An eco-spiritual perspective

Prerna Jain<sup>1</sup> | Pragati Jain<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Department of Economics, Jaipuria Institute of Management, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India<sup>2</sup>Department of Economics, Central University of Rajasthan, Ajmer, Rajasthan, India**Correspondence**Prerna Jain, Department of Economics, Jaipuria Institute of Management, 1-Bambala Institutional Area, Pratap Nagar Sanganeer, Jaipur, Rajasthan 302033, India.  
Email: prerna.jain@jaipuria.ac.in**Abstract**

The contemporary economic growth models have directed the economies on an unsustainable trajectory where the present generation seems disenchanted with the heap of waste, debt, and insufficiency inherited from their forefathers. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the cause of consumerism and recommend an eco-spiritual policy perspective for ensuring sustainable development. The paper analyzes that the United Nations recently announced Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cannot lead the economies towards sustainable development. Ensuring sustainable development will require curbing consumerism consciously through exploring the unexplored spiritual dimension, which can inspire humanity to lead a life of simplicity, moderation, and minimum desires for sustainable and all-inclusive development. It has been stressed that aspiration of breakthrough result requires moving away from the external to the inward synthesis of the spiritual aspects, which believes in co-existence, acknowledging care, and concern for both human beings and the nature. The paper argues for an eco-spiritual perspective for furthering the goal of sustainability.

**KEYWORDS**

consumerism, ecological footprint, eco-spiritual, human development index, policy perspective, sustainable development, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

"An empty stomach is one problem, but a full stomach a hundred problems" (Sadhguru, 2016). This is the fate of the contemporary growth models. Kenneth Galbraith (1958) states that production reached the heights of absurdity when the argument gained momentum that it is a necessary condition for thriving economy and an insurance against economic depression, but he outlined a striking paradox that the practice of thrift can plunge an affluent society into deep economic depression. Thus, present social, moral, and environmental scenario of the world can largely be attributed to the neoliberal economic growth models (Khan, 2015). Relentless economic expansion based on consumerism has brought inequity and ecological bankruptcy. The underdeveloped world needs growth, but the developed world requires degrowth for not merely sustenance but for reasons long sought by the human spirit. The United Nations

Interactive Dialogue 3 (2015) emphasizes developed countries to exemplify the sustainable economic growth process by decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation through resource efficiency in consumption and production, reduction in waste generation, and incentivizing activities that are environmentally sound. Spreading awareness about the different lifestyles on the environment can induce individuals to behave in harmony with nature.

Research (Orecchia & Zoppoli, 2007; Guercio, 2015) has revealed that more stuff has snatched away the health (physical as well as mental) and happiness leaving economies in wilderness. Meadows, Meadows, Randers, and Behrens (1972) pointed the excessive use of planetary resources and the dire need for economies to live within ecological boundaries. Harangozo, Csutora, and Kocsis (2018) too pointed the need to respect the planetary limits and argued that for creating a sustainable economy, the present conventional growth model must be changed. Tamas (1999) emphasized that the present

development models focusing on the material aspects of life are fundamentally flawed as they have widened the gulf between rich and poor, are responsible for environmental deterioration and social breakdown, and are incapable of addressing humanity's need.

Of course, development is essential for humans to flourish and progress, but it is really worthwhile to ask how much and what kind of development is to be sought for the humans to really maintain the humanity. Friend (1992) highlighted two opposing views regarding sustainable development. One is that sustainable development is unattainable due to the voracious appetite for materialism and high population growth, and another, an optimistic one, is that human ingenuity can overcome this daunting task by introducing substitutes for exhausted resources and energy efficient and waste-reducing technologies. All the economies at present are pleading for sustainability, but the analysis in this paper suggests that even the recently announced Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are directed towards unsustainability, which seems astonishing, but this is the reality. The question that needs attention is: for how long are we going to live with blueprints that clearly have not delivered their promise? The paper argues that now is the time to evolve consciously and take charge of the reality for the benefit of the humanity.

## 2 | NEED FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The need for sustainable development has been echoed since 1987 with the publication of Brundtland Report. Since then, the development models have been questioned (Assadourian, 2016; Barros, 2012; FEEM, 2011; Hay, 2006) as they have made us go beyond limits leaving a debt that seems unpayable. The present consumption patterns cannot be met by a finite planet, and two planets shall be required to meet the ever increasing consumption (Global Footprint Network, 2017). Hediger (2006) urged for progressive transformation of economies as the growth models have led the world towards ecological bankruptcy, which has made us think about sustainable development. The works of Kapp (1961, 1970), Grinevald (2008), and Steffen et al. (2015) have emphasized on the need for sustainable development as they find economies in the state of bewilderment crossing the planetary boundaries. Guercio (2015) urged for a new paradigm of growth where simplicity becomes the mantra. The facts published in the United Nations Interactive Dialogue 3 about the natural resource extraction during the 20th century is distressing, as it has grown by a factor of 8; more specifically, extraction of construction materials grew by a factor of 34, ores and minerals by a factor of 27, and fossil fuels by a factor of 12. Thus, the major cause of environmental degradation and climate change is undoubtedly the high resource consumption coupled with carbon intensive polluting technologies and processes. These facts make us realize the need for sustainable development.

However, Luke (2005) remarked that sustainable development project is merely an ideological construct and is neither sustainable nor developmental. The depressing scene is that the various laudable goals adopted by the United Nations like millennium development goals from 2000 to 2015, which were targeted towards poverty,

equity, education, child and maternal health, environmental sustainability, and global partnership, failed to meet its target. Hence, further to meet the global challenges, the United Nations launched the largest ever SDGs, 17 in number, which are the following: no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible production and consumption, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace, justice and strong institutions, and partnerships for the goals for 2016–2030, respectively. These 17 goals are further divided into 169 targets so that nations can move towards sustainable development.

Sustainable development means development within ecological limits enhancing human well-being. For measuring human well-being, Human Development Index (HDI) is considered, whereas ecological footprint per person is considered to measure sustainability.

HDI is a composite measure of education, life expectancy and per capita income. On a scale of 0 to 1, less than 0.550 is considered low human development, 0.550–0.699 for medium human development, 0.700–0.799 for high human development, and 0.800 or greater for very high human development. The United Nations defines 0.7 as the threshold for a high level of development.

Ecological footprints represent the demand human puts on nature. With the current population, per person availability of biologically productive surface is 1.7 global hectares (gha).

Thus, sustainable development necessitates an average ecological footprint of not more than 1.7 gha and HDI of at least 0.7. (Global Footprint Network, 2017; Wackernagel, Hanscom, & Lin, 2017).

## 3 | ASSESSING SDG INDEX FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

To track SDG achievements, Bertelsmann Stiftung and Sustainable Development Solutions Network (2016) have published SDG Index which immensely under perform on sustainability. The countries ranked high on SDGs are also high on ecological footprint and vice versa, implying that SDGs that increase resource dependence outweighs the goals that decrease resource dependence. Thus, SDGs shall further increase our demand for resources magnifying the ecological deficit (Table 1).

Table 2 reveals that the three countries that comes in the sustainable development range do not have good ranking as regards SDGs, which conveys that something has gone wrong in identifying SDGs. An analysis of ecological footprints for countries reveals that 51 countries out of 152 are within global limits of 1.7 gha, but 49 countries have HDI below 0.7. These are the countries that can evolve to develop their people using the ecological reserves. Eighty-five countries have high HDI value, but equally surprising is that 82 countries have ecological footprint far above the limit specified of 1.7 gha. These countries are responsible for the ecological bankruptcy the world is facing. Hence, an urgent need for them is to curtail their ecological consumption for the betterment of the world.

**TABLE 1** Top 10 countries in SDG Index and their ecological footprint

S. no.	Country	SDG Index score (Rank; 2017)	Total ecological footprint (2016)
1	Sweden	85.61 (1)	4.98
2	Denmark	84.16 (2)	5.79
3	Finland	84.02 (3)	9.31
4	Norway	83.94 (4)	5.28
5	Czech Republic	81.90 (5)	5.51
6	Germany	81.68 (6)	5.3
7	Austria	81.42 (7)	5.57
8	Switzerland	81.18 (8)	5.6
9	Slovenia	80.54 (9)	7.97
10	France	80.32 (10)	8.17
	India	58.07 (113)	1.16

Note. SDG: Sustainable Development Goal.

Source: <http://www.sdindex.org/>; <https://www.kaggle.com/footprintnetwork/ecological-footprint/data>

**TABLE 2** Countries in the sustainable development range out of 152 countries

S. no.	Country	SDG Index score (Rank; 2017)	HDI (2016)	Total ecological footprint (2016)
1	Georgia	68.58 (64)	0.75	1.58
2	Dominican Republic	67.22 (68)	0.71	1.53
3	Sri Lanka	65.91 (78)	0.75	1.32
	India	58.07 (113)	0.6	1.16

Note. HDI: Human Development Index; SDG: Sustainable Development Goal.

Source: <http://www.sdindex.org/>; <https://www.kaggle.com/footprintnetwork/ecological-footprint/data>.

Looking to individual countries' biocapacity, 109 countries have biocapacity deficit, and the remaining (152–109) 43 countries have biocapacity reserve. Although India is within the global measure of ecological footprint, but analyzing its situation with its total biocapacity, it is presently running an ecological deficit of –0.71. India needs to take it seriously (Table 3).

Emma Mawdsley (2004) has rightly remarked that Indian middle class is crazy to adopt western culture, and they are blindly following the western lifestyles giving way to consumerism. One of the foremost reasons for biocapacity deficit is increasing consumerism the world over. The question that needs attention is how to curtail the excessive consumption to attain sustainable development.

**TABLE 3** Biocapacity deficit in India (2016)

	Total ecological footprint	Total biocapacity	Biocapacity deficit
India	1.16	0.45	–0.71

Source: <https://www.kaggle.com/footprintnetwork/ecological-footprint/data>.

## 4 | INCREASING CONSUMERISM AND ITS IMPACT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

“Consumerism is a situation when too much attention is given to buying and owning things which are not really necessary” as defined by Cambridge Dictionary. A society with higher levels of consumption can thrive due to the simultaneous and unmindful production leading to increased extraction of natural resources, thereby decaying the environment. Rothman (1998) has emphasized that consumption and its pattern have the power to dictate production. Hence, if the demand for goods and services decreases, the production shall ultimately decline. Duchin (1998) regarded consumerism as an appropriate tool to measure global environmental impact. It can directly assess the impact through the amount of garbage creation and car usage; indirectly, the impact can be assessed by accounting the production activities. Studies of authors like Stern, Common, and Barbier (1996), Ekins (1997), Rothman (1998), and Suri and Chapman (1998) also substantiate consumer-based approach for measuring the environmental impact.

Sustainable consumption plays a prominent role in sustainable well-being of the society. (Caeiro, Ramos, & Huisigh, 2012). Oslo Ministerial Roundtable (1994) covered the environmental, social, and economic aspect in its definition of sustainable consumption and defined sustainable consumption as “using goods and resources for fulfilling basic needs which ensures a better quality of life while lowering the use of natural resources; emission of waste, pollutants and toxic materials so that it does not jeopardise the needs of future generations.”

Increasing consumption by the households has adversely impacted sustainability (Bartolj, Murovec, & Slabe-Erker, 2018; Rockstrom et al., 2009). Even the environment-friendly innovation in products and technology has been undermined by the increasing volumes of goods consumed and discarded (Geyer & Zacarias, 2002). The economic logic of growth dynamism and social logic of crave for social status have boosted consumerism. Ritzer, 2004 the economic growth model based on the profit motive has fostered innovation. This innovation has led to production of refined and cheap products, and these products are demanded by the consumers who are in the midst of social complexity.

The emphasis on technical and economic efficiency has led to more output with less inputs and cost minimization, respectively. Joseph Schumpeter (1934) while analyzing the theory of economic development emphasized that economic growth is driven through innovation and “creative destruction,” which refers to the demise of the old products and processes and its replacement by new ones due to innovation mechanism. Firms that fail to produce and market newer and cheaper products risk their own survival. The cheaper products have either increased its own demand or diverted the savings to other products leading to a rebound effect. The rebound effect and creative destruction have led to more products being produced and consumed. Thus, achieving efficiency in production is not a guarantee for sustainability.

Jackson (2009) while analyzing the social logic of consumerism has highlighted the symbolic expression, which goods carry for those who possess them. Apart from satiating the survival needs, consumerism has fostered due to its affiliation to social identity. Media today

through messages and images seek to promote a totally materialistic way of life. Advertising seeks to make people want what they do not need, creating new desires throughout their whole life.

Gabor Harangozo et al. (2018) remarked that transition to a sustainable growth model through curbing consumerism has been due to lack of practical experience in enhancing subjective well-being through sustainable lifestyles. Policies and democratic response is the need of the hour, if we have to stay away from crisis.

## 5 | CURBING CONSUMERISM THROUGH ECO-SPIRITUAL MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

John Stuart Mill (1848) in the 19th century anticipated the increase in conspicuous consumption and advocated that economies should aspire for the "stationary state" once it reaches to an optimum level and aspire for more satisfying pursuits of life. Herman Daly (1996) in *Beyond Growth* remarks about the outcome of the ever increasing consumption through an adage "When a boat is too full, obviously it is more likely to sink." He outlined the policy framework for sustainability wherein he mentioned: "Consumption of natural capital should not be treated as income; taxes on resource extraction should be more as compared to tax on income and labour; the philosophy of global economic integration (free trade and free mobility of capital) should be abandoned; in the short run there should be efforts to maximize the productivity of natural capital and investment should be there to enhance its supply in the long run."

The inadequacy of economic theory and models to explain the complex structures with its simplified assumptions and rationality of human behavior forces us to move beyond economic theory to find answers and solutions to the present-day challenges. Economic analysis has largely been concerned with analyzing the positives such as the multiplier effect of investment overlooking the negative side such as depleted resources and polluted environments undermining the social and environmental costs of production (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971). Tamas (1999) outlined that the governments of the world have shown keen interest in spiritual (which pertains to higher endowments of the mind) development at various development fora, but the spiritual vision initiatives remain unexplored. Excluding the spiritual element from the development process is like eliminating the vitality and making it a hollow, mechanistic husk. A profound reorientation to the development process can be brought through the spiritual dimension, and much needs to be accomplished in this direction.

Making human being rational and curbing consumerism shall require transcending from economic growth to eco-spiritual growth model. The eco-spiritual model for sustainable development focuses to optimize development within ecological boundaries by attaining high spiritual quotient (SQ).

The term *spiritual quotient* was coined by Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall (2000) in their pioneering work on SQ: *Connecting with Our Spiritual Intelligence*. They have outlined 12 principles: self-awareness, spontaneity, being vision and value-led, holism, compassion, celebration of diversity, field independence (standing against

the crowd), humility, tendency to ask "WHY", ability to reframe, positive use of adversity, and sense of vocation (feeling of serving and giving back).

This model does not overlook the development needs in the less developed countries but aspires for degrowth of the developed world where increasing consumerism is leading them towards a garbage economy.

The eco-spiritual model is outlined as

$$ES = f(EF, HDI, SQ),$$

where ES represents eco-spiritual model, EF is ecological footprint, HDI is Human Development Index, and SQ is spiritual quotient.

Various indices have been developed to measure sustainable development, like Ecological Footprint Index, Greendex, Happy Planet Index, HDI, Sustainable Competitiveness Index, and so forth, each having its own strength and limitation. But an important component to measure sustainable development is the spiritual dimension. The spiritual dimension needs to be measured by developing the SQ Index of the countries.

Data of ecological footprint and HDI are readily available of the countries, but the SQ index of countries is not available, thus limiting the calculation of eco-spiritual index of the countries. The study recommends that international organizations should look into developing the SQ index of the countries as this shall be an important step in directing the accomplishment of SDGs.

The paper proposes that countries ranking high on SQ shall definitely have people who are visionary, value laden, logical, and having a sense of serving and giving back. This shall foster in reducing the ecological footprints and enabling high human development.

The complexity of the modern economic life makes it impossible for governments to enforce all contracts. For a successful society, individuals need to abide to certain codes of behavior, which are harmonious and compassionate in nature. Self-enforcement to certain moral norms is the key to harmonious development (Kaushik Basu, 2018). Elgin and Mitchell (1977) and Schreurs (2010) stressed on voluntary simplicity to address increasing consumerism and increase subjective well-being. Measuring sustainability of household consumption gives individuals a feel that they can make a difference and thus encourage the promotion of sustainable behavior (Bartolj et al., 2018; Hanss, Bohm, Doran, & Homburg, 2016).

Thus, countries having high SQ will tend to be logically negating conspicuous consumption as these countries' individuals are aware, value-led, and have a sense of serving and giving back to society, which shall automatically lead to low ecological footprint and high HDI. Thus, high SQ and sustainable development are positively correlated.

## 6 | RELEVANCE OF SPIRITUALITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Spirituality transcends the realms of science and religion. Scientific knowledge aims to explore the nature of reality in the physical realm. It has provided mankind power to have control over matter and forces of nature to attain comfort and ease. No doubt science has explored

various fields such as genetics, microbiology, medicine, electronics, optics, and computer technology, but due to the lack of spiritual wisdom, its results are shortsighted. The objective of scientific knowledge was to solve the riddle of life and the cosmos but has failed in both, and it has raised more questions than solved. It has pushed the world from the age of arrows and sword to the age of atomic bombs and star wars.

Religion aimed at explaining the mankind its true identity specified certain code of conduct to avoid suffering to him and to others. It aimed at preaching noble goals for giving purpose to the life. Even though religious beliefs have scientific logic, they do not have universal appeal, and so in principle, very few follow them. Those who have religiously followed the noble ideals prescribed in their religion have definitely benefited. Today, religious intolerance has resulted in violence and bloodshed. In essence, all the religions together have failed to create a better world for the mankind.

Spirituality is a broad concept with room for many perspectives, but in general, it means to have a deep and clear understanding of the self and finding the “real meaning” and purpose of our life by developing a strong connection with the Supreme Being. Spirituality dwells in soul consciousness. The realm of spirituality is to focus on the conscient being and not the physical being. The Bhagwat Gita, a book of spiritual wisdom, is called “Sarva Shastra Shiromani,” which means the supreme scripture and is acknowledged as a unique treatise on the philosophy of life. It has a universal appeal, as it is one of the most translated scriptures. It talks about *Swadharma*: religion of the self (soul) that is purity, peace, love, happiness, power, and bliss. The vices that are prevalent today such as lust, anger, greed, attachment, and ego are all due to body consciousness. The Bhagwat Gita tells us how we can win these inner battles and emerge as better human beings, free from all bondages. At the individual level, it is a valuable and inspiring handbook for self-transformation, but at a larger level, it is blueprint for a new world order.

## 6.1 | Spirituality: A pathway to curb consumerism

Increasing consumerism draws our attention to the second law of thermodynamics, which states that every time energy is transformed from one state to another, there is loss in that form of energy, which becomes available to perform work of some kind. This kind of loss or wastage is termed as *entropy*. Thus, this law explains that the total entropy of the world is constantly increasing. It is an irony that scientists themselves have not given the seriousness to the implication of the second law of thermodynamics but promoted high-entropy civilization.

One of the popular Indian adage says that “though man himself grows physically old, his desires grow young and become more compelling.” Spiritual wisdom enjoins on man to lead a life of simplicity, moderation, and minimum desires. It urges one not to run for worldly luxuries and pleasures. A saint-poet Bhatri Hari has rightly remarked “The thrust of strength of our desires does not weaken; it is we who weaken. It is not we who consume things but the things consume us too. It is not the time that is moving or marching fast; it is we who our moving towards our death.”

Hence, simplicity, minimization of desires, and consumption are the fundamental principles of spirituality. A simple life is all about sticking to the basics and discarding the unnecessary. Spirituality teaches one to cut down on extravagance and make room for greater meaning and momentum in life. Consumerist lifestyle struggles with never-ending desires; simple living finds pleasure in serving others. Thus, simplicity is not poverty; in fact, it is the mark of royalty that is anchored in contentment.

Spirituality teaches one to stand by values, even though when everyone else is on the unethical path. It stresses not to emulate a characterless person in life but develop the courage to follow the spiritual principles through the practice of *Rajyoga* meditation by connecting with the Supreme as mentioned in Bhagwat Gita. *Rajyoga* meditation helps one to move beyond ordinary consciousness and emerge the true self, which is filled with purity, bliss, love, and compassion. This awareness helps individuals to develop pure and positive thoughts and bring out their relevance and impact on the outer world. It makes one realize that the outer environment can be changed with a profound shift in the mindset. Thus, the starting step towards sustainable development is when the subtle shift occurs in the mindset, where people start valuing simplicity and economizing resources. This soul empowerment regains the authority to direct its mind and body to act as it desires, as against being compelled to act by the pull of the body.

To increase the SQ for the betterment and welfare of the society, appropriate signals need to be given to the society at large to develop them. The principles of Bhagwat Gita (practicing moderation in all activities, respect for nature, avoidance of waste, keeping the social interests before self-interest, freedom from greed, etc.) needs to be talked at various platforms especially where world leaders discuss the issue of sustainability. Like SDGs were taken up with consensus of 193 member states and civil society, similarly, spirituality needs attention of the world leaders to be practiced at the global level.

Curbing consumerism shall necessitate campaigning of spiritual principles by media, government, and international organizations, rewarding altruistic behaviors, taxing the conspicuous consumption, monitoring innovation, and discouraging creative destruction of products. Guercio (2015) insisted on the need of public policy advocating new standard of social behavior where nature and human values are given prominence than economic interests.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Relentless economic expansion based on consumerism has brought inequity and ecological bankruptcy. The underdeveloped world needs growth, but the developed world requires degrowth for not merely sustenance but for reasons long sought by the human spirit. The analysis in this paper suggests that the recently announced SDGs are directed towards unsustainability, which is really a matter of great concern. Majority of the countries have become ecologically bankrupt, and the rest are in the process of becoming so. Friend (1992) has rightly remarked “The present scenario of environmental deterioration and resource scarcity demands a new model and policy approach to



achieve an ecosystem integrity and a harmonious balance between economic needs and natural resource stock.”

The growth dynamism which has fostered innovation and creative destruction as well as, the crave for social status have boosted consumerism. Curbing consumerism shall require transcending from economic growth to eco-spiritual growth model to optimize development within ecological boundaries by attaining high SQ. The eco-spiritual model is a function of HDI, ecological footprint, and SQ.

Assadourian (2016) has rightly remarked that sustainable development shall be possible only when there is change in the dominant cultural paradigm, where individuals by default act sustainably. Hence, spiritual principles need to be promoted by governments, schools, media, and institutions at large. Individuals following the same need to be applauded and rewarded. The paper concludes that developing SQ shall lead to responsible consumption, thus reducing ecological footprints and enhancing high human development.

## ORCID

Prerna Jain <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5378-8212>

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