

All for a change

ONE would think that if more than 1,000 scientists belonging to various countries and working for 10 years, pointed out the grave danger posed by increasing carbon emissions to the climate as well as the global economy, world leaders would take notice and initiate restorative action. Instead, they choose to either pass on the buck or worse, plainly deny the existence of such a problem.

A scientific report prepared under the aegis of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and released in July 1996 — and the reaction it has elicited — say as much. The report was agreed upon by scientists from more than 170 countries in December 1995 in Rome and it says that increases in greenhouse gases (GHG), mainly carbon dioxide (CO₂), since pre-industrial times (1750) had led to the warming of the earth's surface, besides other climatic changes. Its main conclusions are:

- Atmospheric concentrations of CO₂, methane and nitrous oxide (N₂O) have grown by 30, 145 and 15 per cent respectively, largely due to fossil fuel use, land-use changes and agriculture.
- Many GHG like CO₂ and N₂O remain in the atmosphere for centuries; hence, it takes a long time to reverse their effect on the climate.
- If CO₂ emissions were maintained at near current (1994) levels, they would lead to an almost constant rate of increase in atmospheric concentrations for at least two centuries, reaching twice the pre-industrial concentrations by the year 2000.
- Global mean surface air temperature has increased between 0.3 and 0.6°C since the late 19th century. The global sea level has risen by 10-25 cm over the past 100 years.

Oil-producing nations, presuming that an acceptance of the climate change threat will mean a reduction in demand for oil, have decided to collectively oppose the report. On their part, industrialised countries which have been advocating imposition of a carbon tax on fossil fuels (like oil), are of course not thinking of sharing this tax revenue with the countries that produce the oil. This increases the burden of stabilising or reducing emissions on the oil-producing nations. While industrialised nations can conveniently shift to nuclear or other non-GHG emitting sources, the survival of oil-producing countries which have no alternative, is threatened.

In reality, all this is still a lot of hot air as far as industrialised countries are concerned, since they have not met even their first obligation under the climate change treaty — that of bringing back their CO₂ emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000. Furthermore, industrialised nations are not keen to have further agreements on their emission targets beyond the year

2000, as was agreed upon last year at the Berlin summit on climate change. Optimists believe this situation may change if Clinton comes back to power in the US, as he is expected to push for a legally binding agreement to reduce industrialised country emissions after researching on the targets and timetables.

However, there is a catch. Industrialised countries, especially USA, are not willing to take emission reduction steps if developing countries do not join in. USA wants developing countries to share its CO₂ reduction commitments in exchange for investments in developing country efforts to reduce emissions, calling it the joint implementation of the convention. For example, the investment by an American company like Enron in a low-CO₂ emitting gas-fired power station, compared to a coal-powered one, will allow the US to demand credits from India for helping reduce emissions in US. These credits in terms of CO₂ reduction obligations in the climate treaty, will serve to decrease the US' liabilities and increase those of India.

How does a developing nation like India handle this challenge? On one hand, it has to keep in mind the interests of power companies dependent on coal, and on the other, it has to look out for the interests of the poor and vulnerable sections of society who are most likely to face the brunt of any changes in climate. Until now, India has chosen to reject climate science by not taking any position on it.

This is bad politics. With the second largest scientific manpower in the world, India should be able to judge the science of climate change on its merits, accept it and demand that the real culprits, the industrialised countries, should be made to pay for the havoc wreaked on the environment.

Also, to ward off efforts like the 'joint implementation' by industrialised countries, the concept of global governance of common property resources like the atmosphere, has to be put on the UN agenda. This means asking the international community to first determine how much emission each citizen of the world is allowed, before determining which country should reduce, stabilise or increase its share. While having failed to stop their own sky-high per capita emissions, industrialised nations like the US are demanding that developing countries do it for the benefit of a level-playing field for their multinational corporations.

India needs to challenge this by developing national and international agendas on its course of action. Without such agendas, our diplomats will keep relying on rearguard actions and fighting losing battles. The least Prime Minister Deve Gowda can do is present a white paper in Parliament on the intensity of climate change, its potential and actual impacts and possible policy options required to mitigate them. ■

