

# **Environmental Conservation and Economic Development: Finding the Balance**

**Report of a Roundtable Discussion  
organized by the Bahá'í Chair for Studies in  
Development, Devi Ahilya University, Indore**

**Date: 29 September 2025  
Venue: DAVV Campus, Indore**



## Introduction

The Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya University organized a roundtable discussion on “*Environmental Conservation and Economic Development: Finding the Balance.*” The event brought together scholars, social entrepreneurs, and development practitioners to reflect on one of the most urgent challenges facing India and the world: how to reconcile the imperatives of rapid economic growth with ecological sustainability and ethical responsibility.

The session opened with introductory remarks by Dr. Arash Fazli, Head of the Bahá'í Chair, followed by special addresses from Prof. Rakesh Singhai, Vice Chancellor, DAVV and Padmashri Dr. Janak Palta McGilligan, Founder and Director of Jimmy McGilligan Centre for Sustainable Development. The panel discussion featured Prof. Himanshu Upadhyaya (Prestige University), Mr. Varun Raheja (Co-founder, Raheja Solar), Mr. Ambrish Kela (Co-founder, Jaivik Setu), and Dr. Yogesh Jadhav (COO, Barli Development Institute for Rural Women).



## Opening Remarks

Dr. Fazli framed the discussion within the Chair's ethical lens, emphasizing that the purpose of development must be re-examined. Economic activity, he noted, was historically seen as a means to a moral or social end, but has today become an end in itself.

He argued that sustainability cannot be reduced to a checklist of green practices or corporate compliance norms. The fundamental question, he said, is "*Sustain what?*"—a system of vast inequalities where 12% of the population consumes 60% of the planet's resources cannot be ethically sustained. True sustainability must rest on justice and a transformation of values.

He highlighted that growth and development are not synonymous: growth, beyond a point, becomes cancerous, while development is about the realization of latent potential. "If we value the life of the environment as much as our own," he concluded, "we will naturally make the changes required to protect it."



### Remarks by Prof. Rakesh Singhai, Vice Chancellor

Prof. Singhai reflected on the complexity of the problem, cautioning that humanity’s relationship with nature is both dependent and adversarial. Recalling public debates from the 1980s on ozone depletion, he observed that many natural phenomena—cyclones, floods, or heavy rainfall—cannot be fully ascribed to human causes.

At the same time, he acknowledged that unchecked population growth and consumption patterns are intensifying pressures on natural systems. He called for practical solutions that enable coexistence: “If we must build homes for people, some trees will have to be cut—but we must find balance.” Prof. Singhai emphasized that sustainability must emerge not merely from fear of catastrophe but from balanced living, guided by individual responsibility.



### **Address by Padmashri Dr. Janak Palta McGilligan**

Dr. McGilligan delivered an inspiring account of her forty-year journey in promoting sustainable community development. She traced the founding of the Barli Development Institute for Rural Women, which has trained over 6,000 tribal girls from 500 villages in literacy, livelihood skills, and environmental stewardship.

She described how barren land was transformed into a model sustainable campus, featuring India's first large-scale solar kitchen, rainwater harvesting systems, and organic farming units. Her students went on to lead grassroots transformation—bringing solar cookers, clean energy and gender equality into their villages.

Reflecting on her life's philosophy, she said: "The earth itself has been my teacher. Sustainability begins when we treat nature as our own, with restraint."

Her narrative demonstrated that ethical conviction, community participation and innovation can combine to create regenerative local economies rooted in dignity and self-reliance.

# Panel Discussion: Key Insights



## Himanshu Upadhyaya: Rethinking Development

Prof. Upadhyaya highlighted that India’s environmental discourse must go beyond infrastructure-led development. Drawing from his work in environmental history, he noted how large projects like the Tawa Dam displaced communities and altered ecosystems, leading to movements such as Save the Soil.

He urged a redefinition of development itself—“from malls and airports to clean water, clean air, and healthy soil.”

Quoting Nehru’s caution against the “*disease of gigantism*,” he called for celebrating small-scale, community-based innovations that work in harmony with nature.

Prof. Upadhyaya also critiqued the technocratic capture of sustainability, noting that while policies exist for mining-affected communities or forest dwellers, local participation is missing. “Without democratic planning,” he said, “even well-intentioned sustainability programs become elite-driven.”

---

❖

“Without democratic planning, even well-intentioned sustainability programs become elite-driven”

❖

---



## Ambrish Kela: Rethinking Growth and Waste

Mr. Kela questioned India's obsession with GDP as the sole measure of progress. "Every medicine has a side effect," he remarked, "and GDP growth too leaves its side effects behind."

He emphasized that growth must not blind us to what we are leaving behind—ecological damage, waste and moral fatigue.

Drawing on nature's own rhythm of growth, stabilization and decay, he cautioned that unbounded expansion leads to collapse. He called for rediscovering the power of smallness—local initiatives, individual responsibility and community action—and redefining waste as a potential resource.

"In nature," he concluded, "nothing is waste. Even we are recycled back into the soil."

---

❖

“Every medicine has a side effect and GDP growth  
too leaves its side effects behind”

---

❖



### **Varun Raheja: Innovation from Waste**

Speaking as a young social entrepreneur, Mr. Raheja shared his experience of founding Raheja Solar, a circular-economy enterprise that converts agricultural waste into value-added products. He explained how his team works with over 100,000 farmers, turning discarded fruits and vegetables into solar-dried products such as tomato “pesto” and banana-fiber fabrics.

Raheja argued that sustainability and profitability can coexist, provided the focus is on “waste-to-wealth” models and decentralized innovation. He observed that social media celebrates urban affluence but overlooks rural success stories of self-reliance.

“Real development,” he said, “is when those at the bottom of the pyramid rise even one step higher—and when that one person creates jobs for ten more.”

---

❖

---

“Real development is when those at the bottom of the pyramid rise even one step higher”

---

❖

---



## Yogesh Jadhav: Ethics and Grassroots Sustainability

Dr. Jadhav proposed that GDP should be seen as a side effect of environmental conservation, not its goal.

Drawing inspiration from E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* and his own experiences at Barli Institute, he highlighted how ethical governance and grassroots engagement are essential to sustainability.

He recounted his doctoral experience at DAVV, where an evaluator dismissed the term "ethical governance" as "good governance." Reflecting on that moment, he noted: "Morality is what you do when no one is watching."

Dr. Jadhav underscored the importance of *combining corporate social responsibility with individual social responsibility*—and of fostering introspection in development practice. "Development begins at the grassroots," he said, "and ethics is the foundation on which it stands."

---

❖

---

“Development begins at the grassroots, and ethics  
is the foundation on which it stands”

---

❖

---

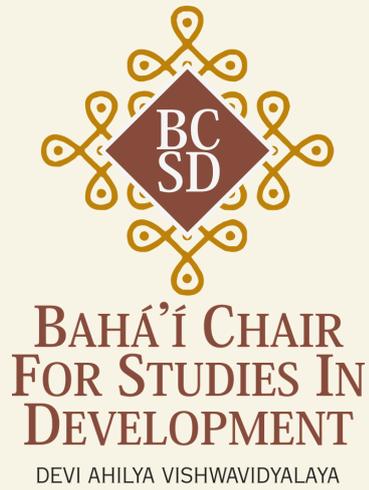


## Closing Reflections

The roundtable underscored that sustainable development requires a paradigm shift—from material accumulation to moral and ecological balance. Speakers agreed that solutions must emerge from participatory, community-based approaches, guided by values of justice, moderation and interdependence.

Dr. Fazli, in his closing remarks, thanked the panelists and participants for illuminating diverse dimensions—ethical, economic, scientific and social—of the theme. He reiterated that the task ahead is not merely technical but moral: “The question is not how to sustain what we have, but how to transform what we are.”





Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development  
Devi Ahilya Vishwavidhyalaya, Indore  
NAAC Accredited 'A+' Grade University  
Nalanda Campus, RNT Marg, Indore.

Tel: 0731-2527080  
E-mail: [info@bahaichairdavv.org](mailto:info@bahaichairdavv.org)  
Website: [www.bahaichairdavv.org](http://www.bahaichairdavv.org)