

# Patrick Geddes: Sociologist, Environmentalist and Town Planner

*Patrick Geddes' pioneering work in applying sociological understanding of environmental concerns to town planning did not get due recognition during his own lifetime and also subsequently. But, with the quest for seeking inter-linkages between various specialised streams of knowledge gaining momentum of late, Geddes' interdisciplinary inquiries into natural and social sciences have gained significance within contemporary academia.*

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## I Introduction

Patrick Geddes' first contact with the university of Bombay was in 1914-15 when he was invited to deliver a series of four public lectures on the study of Bombay which are said to have been a great success. In the summer of 1919 Sir Chimanlal Setalvad, the then vice-chancellor, offered Geddes the post of professor of sociology in the University of Bombay. Geddes, then 65, accepted the offer, adding the title civics to the designation of his chair and set about organising the department of civics and sociology in the university. Before this, Geddes had been lecturing at Canning College in Lucknow; at the University of Calcutta; and had organised a summer school at Darjeeling, dealing with a variety of subjects like regional survey, town planning, nature study, social evolution and others.

When Geddes took charge, the department was temporarily housed in the Royal Institute of Science not far from the main university buildings. Characteristically Geddes gave his daily lectures in the form of conversations and seminar (a style which his successors tried but with little success). A course on the Elements of Sociology was also offered to the public on three afternoons a week, the lectures being invariably followed by discussions. Further, since Geddes was no admirer of mere book learning, Saturdays were devoted to excursions to various parts of Bombay and neighbouring villages, and whenever possible, to more distant places [Ferreira and Jha 1976: xi].

Between 13 and 18 students were enrolled in 1919 for a three-year course in

sociology. The emphasis of the course was on practical work, for undertaking which Geddes sent his students to his friends in different parts of India. But when Geddes went to Palestine in 1920 and the students were left on their own, the Senate of the university did not take a favourable view of the situation. Exasperated, he wrote to the Senate that he was conducting not only a new course in India but an experimental one which had to be allowed to run for three years without interference. Besides, he argued, he was training his students in 'pure' sociology for which fieldwork was absolutely essential [Meller 1990: 225-26].

The initial recruitment figures dwindled slowly since the course did not run for long periods during Geddes' absence. By 1924, the last year of the five-year contract with the university, Geddes' health suffered greatly and so did his ability to enthuse his students with his unconventional courses. Geddes' attempt to find an Indian collaborator did not meet with success either. He sent his best students, G S Ghurye and N A Toothi among them, to England for further training. Although Geddes wanted Ghurye to become his collaborator and assistant, as he later wanted Lewis Mumford to do, it did not work out that way. In fact it was Toothi who found Geddes' ideas stimulating and he promoted his approach after his return to India. A more favourable response came from Radha Kamal Mukherjee from Calcutta who found Geddes' ideas inspiring as is evident from his own studies. There is otherwise little evidence of the impact of Geddes' approach on sociologists. One of his biographers, Helen Meller, writes that Geddes' warmest support in India came not from sociologists

but from one of India's most outstanding natural scientist, Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose [Meller 1990:226-27].

After more than half a century, Geddes' influence on sociologists in India remains negligible although geographers and town planners show a greater appreciation and engagement with his ideas and approach. However in the context of increasing environmental concerns, especially the crisis of urbanisation in India, Geddes' idea do acquire contemporary relevance. A man, whom no less a scholar than Lewis Mumford describes as one "whose life shows a constant interpenetration of the general and the particular, the philosophical outlook and the scientific outlook, the universal and the regional: this world – enveloping mind was also deeply concerned with the improvement of life at his own doorstep" [Boardman 1944: XI], certainly deserves greater appreciation. This article is an attempt to remind sociologists in India of our legacy and given that the department of sociology in Bombay University has recently completed its seventy-fifth year, it is probably a good time to do so.

## II Early Influences

Patrick Geddes was born in October 1854 at Ballater in West Aberdeen, Scotland, and brought up and educated in Perth. Growing up in the Scottish countryside, renowned for its beauty, in close communication with the hills, woods, fields and gardens, was an experience which greatly influenced Geddes' personality and career. He was often to claim that his father was his first and best teacher. He had given him the finest education for life by encour-

### III Geddes and the City

Geddes' objective in establishing civics as applied sociology, it is observed, was "to dispel the fear of cities and mass urbanisation, and to release the creative responses of individuals towards solving modern urban problems". He pioneered a sociological approach to the study of urbanisation, discovered that the city could be studied in the context of region, that the process of urbanisation could be analysed and that the application of such knowledge could enhance life in the future [Meller 1990:1]. He believed that the best method for studying the city was to begin, on the one hand, with 'its geographical location', and on the other, with the 'evolution of its historical and cultural traditions' [Meller 1990: 144]. In his own words, "to decipher the origins of cities in the past, and to unravel their life processes in the present... are indispensable...for every student of civics [Geddes 1915:4].

Theoretically, Geddes proposed that just as the stone age is now distinguished into two periods – Paleolithic and Neolithic, so also the industrial age requires distinction into two phases, an earlier one as Paleotechnic and the nascent as neotechnic. The former was characterised by dissipation of stupendous resources of energy and materials, of great wealth and poverty, and crowded, dreary industrial towns. The latter with its better use of resources and population towards improving humans and their environment together, seeks the creation of "city by city, region by region, of its Utopia, each a place of effective health and well-being, even of glorious and... unprecendented beauty" [Geddes 1915: 73].

When Geddes began his work in mid-1880s, industrialisation and urbanisation had profoundly altered the relation between human beings and their environment. He belonged to a generation of writers and thinkers who had developed a critique of the industrial revolution and its social consequences [Meller 1990: 3-4]. Geddes sensed the unrest especially among the youth of his times disturbed by the consequences of industrialisation and urbanisation. It manifested itself in unemployment and mis-employment, in disease and folly, in vice and apathy, in indolence and crime [Geddes 1915: 86].

His critique was, however, not that of a romantic, but of a scientist who wanted to analyse and understand the process of urbanisation. The purpose of acquiring

methodology with which the connections between all disciplines could be studied [Meller 1990: 45]. Place, work and people (Geddes replaced family with 'people' or 'folk') have, in his scheme not to be "separately analysed as into geomorphology, the market economics and the cranial anthropology which still go on, in necessary detachment from each other...Within the single chord of social life all three combine" [Geddes 1968: 267]. He argued that geography, economics and anthropology were so closely related that their union within sociology was sure to yield rich results.

In academic sociology, Geddes, along with others like Victor Branford and J A Thomson, belonged to a school of civics sociologists which attempted to reassert the importance of environmental factors in human evolution. It refuted any attempt to set heredity and environment in opposition. It sought to popularise the sociological method of Le Play and "to establish the city as a natural phenomenon". It transcended the 'nature', 'nurture' categorisation "since the city expressed the evolutionary process in geographical space and historical time" [Halliday 1968: 380]. Hence it is remarked that for this school, "sociology was the science of man's interaction with a natural environment; the basic technique was the regional survey, and the improvement of town planning the chief practical application of sociology [Halliday 1968: 380].

In general, for Geddes (the founder-member of the British Sociological Society in 1903) sociology as a subject was to have a definite practical purpose. Sociologists were to be people of action who took part in the evolutionary struggle between society and environment so that the positive tendencies were identified and encouraged and the negative/destructive ones repressed. The idea was to plan by application of laws of nature or social evolution, so that better ways of life might be devised. These were not mere fanciful Utopias, but rooted in evolutionary tendencies and therefore may be realised if one planned for them with foresight. In contrast to Utopian proposals which are essentially without definite place and therefore futile, Utopia are of place (i e, are regional) and realisable [Branford and Geddes 1917: 250]. To Geddes Utopia really meant making the best of each place "in actual and possible fitness and beauty" [Brandford and Geddes 1919: 87].

aging his love of nature and especially by teaching him how to care a garden [Meller 1990:6]. Significantly, gardens figured prominently in his subsequent work as a town-planner.

After an early education which included subjects such as geology, chemistry and botany, Geddes studied biology for many years under the greatest natural scientists of the time. Huxley's influence upon Geddes is said to have been profound and enduring. The splendid range of Huxley's mind that went beyond his specialisations inspired many. But as Philip Mairet writes, it was in disagreement with Huxley that Geddes developed many of his own ideas. For example, Geddes found Huxley's contemptuous treatment of Comte's positivist philosophy totally unjustified. Geddes, like many of his time, was impressed by Comte with whose work he is said to have formed an enduring attachment [Mairet 1957: 18-20]. He was also attracted to Spencer's idea of applying the concept of evolution to society. He accepted Spencer's view of society as an organism of functionally interdependent parts and appreciated his attempt to trace the evolutionary forces working towards changing society. But it was Fredric Le Play whose method most influenced Geddes' own approach to sociology. For, it was in Le Play's work that he found "a point of contact between the naturalistic and social studies which had been pulling him in different directions" [Mairet 1957:28].

Le Play's method of survey was governed by his postulate that the three key units for the study of society were 'lieu', 'travail', 'famille' (place, work and family). The first, or geographical locality, presents the environmental pressures (needs) and the possibilities (resources) which determine the nature of the work. Work, in turn, determines the organisation of the family, the biological unit of human society. Conversely, the needs and potentialities of the family shape the character of the work, which in turn progressively modifies the environment [Mairet 1957:28].<sup>1</sup>

Armed with the approach of Le Play and Comte, Geddes felt confident to develop his own evolutionary approach to the social sciences. Taking his cue from Comtean sociology, which sought to encompass all knowledge, Geddes developed his position as a generalist and synthesiser of knowledge. He felt confident that he had invented a new and potentially powerful

such knowledge was to direct change away from what was destructive towards the betterment of life of individual and community, towards 'city development'. In his own words, "to criticise the city of the present, and to make provision for its betterment". His *Cities in Evolution*, published in 1915, is regarded as an outstanding introduction to the study of city as an organism. He was the first writer to see slums not simply as something ugly and unhealthy, and therefore to be wiped out, but as a 'living part of the city' with a past and a future which makes sense in 'relation to the whole' [Summerson 1963:167].

Town plans were to aid the improvement of the present cities towards 'cleanliness, good order, good looks'; conservation of nature not only for recreation and repose but for its hills, rivers and forests which are essential for 'maintenance and development of life, of the life of youth and of the health of all'; and towards a greater interaction between town and countryside [Summerson 1963:94]. He believed that in the new period of social and political evolution in which reconstruction of the city was taking place, new ideals of citizenship and a sense of human fellowship and helpfulness would also emerge. This would express itself in greater participation in the improvement of the city in the long-term interest of enhancement of life of all citizens. In a sense, Geddes' goal, which transcended the boundaries of conservation, planning or even geography, was geotechnic, i.e., as applied science of making the earth more habitable. For Geddes, to achieve a new equilibrium between a natural and manmade world, which went beyond physical environmental planning to cultural evolution, was precisely the challenge of modern civilisation [Meller 1990: 13].

#### IV

### The Outlook Tower and other Experiments

An early experiment carried out in pursuit of his civic crusade was to move into a rundown workers' tenement in Edinburgh with his newly married wife, and improving and beautifying it. At the same time they also founded the first student halls of residence in Scotland.

A more fantastic experiment, however, was given expression in the Outlook Tower, "the world's first sociological laboratory" founded in 1892. It was conceived by Geddes as a civic and regional museum,

the idea being to educate people to understand their region and the larger environment in all its complexity and from all possible viewpoints. As Philip Abrams puts it, the Outlook Tower with its collection of maps, photographs, projections, demonstrations by means of 'camera obscura' and ad hoc lectures, "was the most brilliant of Geddes' many attempts at an action sociology" – a presentation of the sociological dimension of cities, urban problems and town planning [Abrams 1968:66].

The tours conducted by Geddes through the Tower, began with the Camera Obscura on top of the dome, which reflected the panoramic outside view in a series of images like moving pictures, the way an artist would see it. Then from the observation balcony outside, Geddes would show how meteorologist, geologist, geographer, zoologist, botanist would look at the region. To illustrate each of the outlooks, he had set up typical instruments, or specimen as the case may be. What existed, therefore, was a kind of index museum representing everything that the natural sciences knew about this region which extended from the Highlands and Pentland Hills down to the Firth of Forth and the North Sea. Next came the outlook of the historians, literary scholar, and of men of action like engineers and planners who are engaged in reshaping the environment. Their methods of observation and samples of their studies were also displayed [Boardman 1976:4-5].

The storey under the Camera Obscura was devoted to Edinburgh and the surrounding region. Prints, maps, sketches and photographs were displayed here showing the city's chronological history from pre-Roman times to the 19th century. There were also constructive plans for how its defects could be remedied and how its heritage of culture and art could be preserved. For, as Geddes put it, "after regional survey should come regional service". The floors below were devoted to Scotland, the British empire, Europe and the world in general.

A diagram showing a landscape from mountain peaks to the sea with a text beneath naming the occupation which corresponded to the particular part of the valley section was displayed. In this simple diagram Geddes saw the basic elements of sociology – place, work and folk – illustrated. In it he also saw "the only valid method by which to study nature and man in order to improve them both [Boardman 1976: 186-87; Fleure 1953:10].

The Outlook Tower synthesised the specialised and even conflicting viewpoints. It also served to highlight all aspects of a place, its ugliness, poverty and crime against its heritage of scenic beauty, natural resources and human culture. Geddes' Outlook Tower, it is observed, "was far more than a passive repository of knowledge; it was the outpost from which Geddes launched many projects for civic betterment and sent out many exhortations in print and in speech to arouse people to both understanding and action" [Ferreira and Jha 1976:5-6].

The Tower was also his alternative to the dull, tedious examination-oriented education system which destroyed the creativity of the young minds. Inspired by Le Play who urged social scientists 'to live rather than write', he proposed to educate the young through practical activities, laboratory work and field-studies. Observation, as opposed to book learning, was for him the key method of education. Only in this way could the youth be involved in the practical problems around them, and enthused to work towards solving them.

#### V

### Geddes as Town Planner

To Geddes, it must be pointed out at the outset, town planning which he called 'City Design', was not a new and special branch of engineering, or of sanitation, building, architecture, gardening or any other fine arts, as most people mistakenly believe. It was not a new specialism added to the existing ones, but a combination of all of them 'towards civic well being' [Geddes 1918, I: 15-16]. In this section we will examine some of Geddes' ideas of town planning which became influential among planners. As Geddes' most distinguished disciple and follower, Lewis Mumford points out, "...I believe that a sober historic judgment will show that no other mind had a greater influence upon both movements (cities and regionalist) during the last 50 years. There are many active participators in housing, regional planning, and city development who do not know what they owe to him or how many ideas they found 'in the air' were originally conceived by Geddes... [Boardman 1976:xi].<sup>2</sup>

Recognising the significance of the region, Geddes advocated 'regional survey' to bring about the reunion of town and country. The two could then be considered as 'city regions', each occupying a definite geographical area. The big

metropolis, he observed, often grew in wealth and power by exploiting and even exhausting vast areas with their small towns. The latter became increasingly impoverished, and that was why a world-wide movement for decentralisation was growing [Tyrwhitt 1947: 29]. His notion of regional planning, it is observed, mediated between the “abstractions of universalist planning and the parochialism of the locally concrete, and also between town and country” [Visvanathan 1987:21]. Yet, region was far more central to Geddes’ conception is evident from his plea for a ‘regional outlook’ and ‘regional culture’, whereby a new vision must arise where people see their life in all its ‘everwidening relations, its expanding possibilities’ where the personal and the regional, the national and the human are reconciled in a common purpose for a better life. The regional outlook, ‘the rustic, the vital and the ethical’ must increasingly supplement the present ‘too purely urban outlook with its mechanical, venal and legalistic point of view’ which has so far dominated the politics, education and even science [Boardman and Geddes 1917: 243, 249].

To town planning Geddes brought the methods of ‘diagnostic survey’ and ‘conservative surgery’. The former implied an extensive, preferably walking, tour of city, meeting and talking to the people in order to acquaint oneself with how the city had grown and what problems it faced at present. Geddes’ ‘diagnosis before treatment’ may seem obvious today, but the idea was new in town planning at that time.

Addressing a gathering in 1910, he argued “If you...wish to shape effectively the growth of your town, you must first study it, and from every conceivable point of view. Study its location and means of communication, its history and culture resources, its industries, commerce and population, and a hundred other factors; in short, make first a balanced Civic Survey, and then set about drawing plans and passing ordinances” [Boardman 1944: 248]. By his insistence on a survey to examine the city’s past and present before trying to shape its future growth, Geddes upset the town councillors who wanted quick results. But through his own work Geddes demonstrated that detailed and thorough surveys could be done without spending too much time or money.

Conservative surgery, another phrase taken from the medical science, meant improvement of the city with the minimum of human and financial cost. He believed

that every city had its rundown areas, ugly and unhealthy quarters, congested and narrow lanes which could be upgraded and renewed without adopting drastic and expensive measures. These ideas are well illustrated in Geddes’ Indian reports. He viewed the city as an organism – not as a machine, parts of which could be easily thrown away. It was this belief which underlays his argument that it was important to first understand the inner, the older part of the city which might appear chaotic at first, but in it “gradually a higher form of order can be discerned – the order of life in development”.

In town planning, Geddes saw co-operation as the most important method to solve problems. He believed that while competition was an essential part of the animal and plant life, co-operation was even more important in the evolutionary scheme. He wrote, “it is possible to interpret the ideals of ethical progress through love and sociality, co-operation and sacrifice, not as mere utopias contradicted by experience, but as the highest expression of the central evolutionary process of the natural world” [quoted from Roe 1995:77]. The idea was to involve people in improving their surroundings. That he succeeded in doing so is amply demonstrated by his early experiments in the Edinburgh slum referred to earlier and by his Indian experiments to which we will now turn. It is important to remember that underlying his town planning exercise was his notion of collaboration between physical planning and social planning. Therefore it was absolutely necessary for a planner, according to Geddes, to have a training in sociology.

## VI The Indian Experience

Geddes’ earlier engagement and experiments with urban renewal prompted Lord Pentland, the then governor of Madras, to invite him to bring his ‘Cities and Town Planning’ exhibition and to continue his educational work in India. Pentland also succeeded in convincing his friends, Lords Willingdon and Carmichael, governors of Bombay and Bengal respectively, of the value of Geddes’ work. Geddes was therefore able to show his exhibition in the important towns. Interestingly, the original exhibition was lost on its way to India, but his friends and supporters in Britain and Europe sent him fresh material for another, which he took around in India.

Geddes came to India in 1915. During

his 10-years stay in India, he toured through the length and breadth of the subcontinent and prepared several reports describing in great details the nature of urban problems and the possible ways to overcome them. For the first time in his life, he had an opportunity in India to supplement his educational and propaganda work with well paid commissioned town planning reports. These reports, nearly 40, are said to represent the first major contribution to the development of modern town planning in India on a fairly large scale. He is believed to have done more than any other individual to promote town planning in India [Meller 1979:343].

Although Geddes noticed the collapse of the old tradition of town plans in India, neglect of sanitary regulations, encroachments and congestion everywhere, he paid rich tributes to the Indian civilisation. For example, he was impressed by traditional architecture and planning in the temple town of the south. He saw a great deal of ‘civic beauty’ in simple homes and shrines as well as in the magnificent places and temples. He was appreciative of some of the features of Indian homes and towns, such as the proud place given to the venerated tulsi plant (symbol of the well-kept Hindu home); the shrine in the courtyard, even the narrow lanes in housing areas which opened into squares with shade bearing trees. The narrowness of the lanes, he found, made for shade and quietness and left the building sites large enough to enclose courtyards and gardens [Tyrwhitt 1947: plate 7].

Geddes was often critical of the civic officials and engineers whose interventions for improvement such as wide, open thoroughfares, destruction of slum areas, flushed sewers, etc, often resulted not only in high expenditure but also in great human suffering. Much of the work was in the hands of officers who were not trained for it, who were unaware of the sociological aspects of the problems and whose views on hygiene and sanitation were largely based on European traditions.<sup>3</sup> Their attempts to clean up the city or to broaden the roads often caused eviction and displacement of people, and were, therefore, extremely unpopular [Tyrwhitt 1947:18-19]. This kind of planning went against Geddes’ principle that “town planning is not mere place-planning, nor even work-planning. If it is to be successful, it must be folk-planning. This means that its task is not to coerce people into new places against their associations, wishes and

interest – as we find bad schemes trying to do. Instead its task is to find the right places for each sort of people; places where they will really flourish” [Geddes 1915:91].

He condemned a scheme proposed for improvements in Lahore, which would have demolished temples, mosques, ‘dharmashalas’, tombs, shops and houses, as indiscriminate destruction of labour as well as of the cultural values of people [Guha 1992:59]. He believed that an important function of the town planner was not to be a mere improver of certain streets, however important at the cost of the city as a whole. The old buildings and streets ought not be destroyed in the process [Geddes 1965:3].

His respect for tradition also led him to argue for better maintenance of resources such as tanks and wells. Rather than see them as malarial hazard as the sanitary officers were inclined to do, which Geddes valued them not only for being an assured source of water but also for having a positive effect on the atmosphere. Too often the authorities, impatient at the polluted state of the tanks, had filled them rather than taking necessary steps to keep them clean. In Lucknow, for instance, the engineers had filled in many tanks and water conduits as part of the campaign to eliminate malaria. In the same year, 1915, heavy monsoons which brought torrential rains caused extensive flooding to occur, bringing disaster to the city. An easier solution was to stock the tanks with “sufficient fish and duck to keep down the *Anopheles*” [Tyrwhitt 1947: plate 25].

Speaking of the great Masunda tank of Thane, Geddes strongly recommended its improvement not only as a source of water but as a water park, a beautiful evening resort for the public. He argued that “any and every water system occasionally goes out of order and is open to accident and injuries of very many kinds, and in these old wells we inherit an ancient policy of life insurance, of a very real kind and one far too valuable to be abandoned” [Geddes 1965:3]. For Surat he proposed that by just planting more trees, cutting a few paths, filling up some unsightly holes, making a few bridges from bamboos and branches, a public park could be developed from the existing ‘Nullas’. Young boys and girls could be mobilised as civic volunteers in the development of the same. No city, he believed, was too poor to undertake such modest improvements, or to achieve substantial success

within half a generation, even without the government help.

Elsewhere he noted with approval the existence of the tradition of ‘floating car’ accompanied by a ‘water festival’ with illuminated lanterns in some cities. Instead of filling up tanks at the outbreak of malaria, he advocated the revival of ‘water festival’ not only because it was the most joyous form of festival but also the best way to keep the tanks clean. When properly maintained, he found the temple tanks and city tanks “the very finest and most beautiful of public places and public gardens in the world” [Geddes 1919:469].

He also defended the ceremonial procession of Lord Jagannath’s ‘car’ which had obviously come in for a lot of criticism from the authorities. In it he saw ‘a civic institution and a festival essentially beneficent’. It encouraged the maintenance of good roads, discouraged perpetual encroachment upon streets, and in the collective pull, an admirable form of civic education took place [Geddes 1919: 468].

Geddes had come to India with the hope of introducing his doctrine of ‘civic reconstruction’ since modern industrialisation and urbanisation had just begun in India. To many British administrators however, his reconstruction message appeared to be superfluous and even dangerous. The Indian Civil Service which provided administrators for the municipalities, ignored him. After his initial popularity with liberal governors like Pentland, Willoughby and Carmichael, he did not get much support from the British administrators who were generally hostile. Meller writes that “he remained all his time in India as an outsider, tolerated by the British but not encouraged” [Meller 1979: 204]. But Geddes turned increasingly to the princely rulers of the native states and came to be regarded as a prophet of civic reconstruction.

Geddes believed that local knowledge and understanding, along with consideration and tact, were necessary when dealing with the requirements of the citizens. With power of social appeal and civic enthusiasm, the town planner can arouse people to participate in the schemes of improvement. For plans to succeed, more than technical expertise and activity, municipal powers and business methods were required. “The town planner fails unless he can become something of a miracle worker to the people. He must be able to know their signs and wonders, to

abate malaria, plague, enteric, child mortality and to create wonders of beauty and veritable transformation scenes” [Tyrwhitt 1947:37].

This is exactly what Geddes did for the people of Indore as we shall see in the following section.

## VII The Indore Experiment

Geddes was invited to Indore in 1918 in order to find means to improve malaria and plague infested conditions of the city.

The maharaja of Indore had spent large amounts of money on an alternative system of water supply for Indore which was designed to flush water through the sewers and thereby remove the cause of plague. In spite of the effort and expenditure, the scheme had not succeeded. Geddes was consulted, and after 10 months of thorough investigation, he prepared a two volume report discussing the issues of water supply and drainage, health and disease, gardens and parks in Indore in great details. More importantly, he proposed the establishment of a new university which would train students for civic reconstruction in Indore and elsewhere. But leaving aside the serious issues discussed in the two volumes, we narrate below a delightful experiment Geddes carried out to get rid of the dreadful plague.

As he went around the dusty lanes trying to identify the problem areas, the local people are said to have shown signs of open hostility. For them the sight of a white sahib going around with a map forbode trouble in the form of demolition, eviction and so on. The hostility was so great that Geddes saw people point at him and say, “That’s the old Sahib that brings the plague”.

Taking it as a challenge, Geddes went to the ruling prince of Indore and asked to be made maharaja for a day. Having got complete authority to pursue his plans, Geddes set about his campaign for reconstruction in a novel and efficient manner. He spread the news all over the city that a new kind of pageant and festival would take place on the Diwali day. Diwali being an important religious festival, but above all it being that “annual insurrection of the women from which all men can but flee”, known all over the world as spring cleaning. The new festive procession, it was announced, would not follow either the traditional Hindu or Muslim route through the city, but the one along which

most houses had been repaired and cleaned. Priests were involved in having the roads outside the temples cleaned, repaired and planted with trees. Free collection and removal of rubbish was organised and over six thousand loads were carted away from homes and courtyards. Rats were trapped by the thousands in the city. At the same time, much house-repairing, cleaning and painting was carried out all over Indore since everyone wanted the procession to pass along their street.

On the Diwali day a grand procession took place. First came the stirring spectacle of the cavalry, the infantry and artillery of the state. Then came elephants carrying cotton and other important crops, rich merchants and the goddess Lakshmi symbolising prosperity and wealth. Soon followed a dismal scene of poverty, crumbling houses, demons of dirt, giant-sized models of rats and mosquitoes accompanied by dreadful wailing and melancholy. After a brief break came cheerful music heading the long line of sweepers in spotless white, with new brooms and freshly painted carts. Behind the sweepers marched a civic procession of labourers, firemen and police, officials, mayor and Maharaja Geddes himself, and after them, enthroned on a stately car, a new goddess evoked for the occasion, the Indore city. Her banner bore the name of the city on the one side, and on the other, the city plan showing proposed changes to be made. Next came carts representing all the crafts on which the craftsmen acted out their parts. Carts loaded with fruits and flowers, which were distributed among the children followed. The last of them contained thousands of pots with seedlings of the Tulsi plant to be distributed among the households of Indore. This novel procession passed through almost every part of the city, finally ending at midnight in a public park where the giant of dirt and rats of plague were burned in a great bonfire. After the symbolic destruction of the enemies, the festival was brought to a close with a grand display of fireworks.

The effect of the exercise was immediately apparent. A new enthusiasm and confidence spread among the people to be clean and beautify their homes and the surroundings. Above all, the plague came to an end partly because the city had been cleaned up and partly because the season was over. Geddes became a leading figure in Indore. Whenever people saw him, they pointed at him and spoke excitedly, saying this time, "There's the old Sahib that's

charmed away the plague" [Boardman 1944:386-90].

Geddes demonstrated unquestioning faith in people's support and participation in any real improvement of their surroundings. To the allegation probably often made by the administrators that people did not care for improvements, Geddes replied, "Everywhere in the slums we see women toiling and sweeping, each struggling to maintain her poor little home above the distressingly low level of municipal paving and draining in the quarter. The fault does not lie with the people and I have no fear that people of the cities would not respond to improvements. The immediate problem is for municipal and central government to understand what improvements really are needed and desired" [Geddes 1915:82].

## VIII Concluding Remarks

Geddes combined several disciplines – biology, sociology, geography, town planning – to develop his approach to study the interaction between human beings and their natural environment. He also combined several activities – lectures, exhibitions, demonstrations, writings and pageants – to propagate his ideas of civic reconstruction, with total devotion and indefatigable energy. Interestingly, his biographer writes, his 'fierce energy and wild enthusiasm' was balanced by his wife's 'calm level-headedness and a strong common sense'. While he indulged in grandiose and expensive schemes, she took the responsibility of working out the practical details on which their success depended [Meller 1990:7].<sup>4</sup>

In this context, it may be of interest to note Geddes' ideas on women which he developed in his monograph titled, *The Evolution of Sex*, with J A Thomson. According to him, women played a vital role in social evolution as wives and mothers. "Their nurturing tendencies shaped the economic and social environment, creating ever higher levels of civilisation" [Meller 1990:83]. A view which will not find much support today.

Geddes was essentially a crusader, acutely aware of the need for transformation from the machine and the money economy of the industrial age to one of life and civilisation. He asks the rhetorical question, "May not the pursuit of personal wealth grow less exigent as we gain a social well-being expressed in betterment

of environment and enrichment of life" [Geddes and Slater 1917:VII]. He believed that in the coming age of 'life economy' people will be creative in proportion as two conditions are satisfied. The inner life of people must be enriched and opportunities must be provided to all, irrespective of class, rank or sex, for the development of personality through citizenship. The university is called upon to play a vital role in the moral and intellectual transformation of the people, of the city and the region. It must not only give rise to the new doctrine but plan and aid its practical application, so that unity of thought and purpose may develop together in a common citizenship [Geddes and Slater 1917:XII]. Geddes and his collaborators dared to hope that the university may hasten the coming of the dawn by preparing the translation of dream into deed – the dream of creating Utopia, fulfilling the high ideals of the past, emancipation and renewal of lands, cities and people [Branford and Geddes 1919:377]. Ironically, this was just what the English universities did not do. He believed that with their narrow-minded specialism and academism, sociology was not the sort of thing they would promote.

Geddes' interdisciplinary approach, his eclecticism, his attempt to unite in himself the scientist and the artist, the academic and the planner, the dreamer and the doer made him and his ideas too complex for lesser mortals to comprehend. The fact that these ideas were expressed through highly unconventional modes did not make it any easier. He had his loyal friends and supporters, among them many women, who promoted and propagated his work with much zeal. But by and large in his own time as also subsequently, Geddes did not enjoy the recognition due to him. Probably because in the days of high specialisation, Geddes tried to be a synthesiser of knowledge for he believed that specialised knowledge was inadequate to grasp the ever increasing complexity of life. He belonged to many disciplines, and each of them could claim him. While this quality sometimes left his contemporaries bewildered, upset, and even outraged, rendered his ideas somewhat confusing, and was probably the reason why he did not fit into the academia, it was undoubtedly his greatest strength. He traversed many arenas of natural and social sciences, and was equally comfortable in the lecture hall and with people on the street, giving his message of the possibility and desirability of im-

provement of cities, regions and life itself.<sup>5</sup>

Lewis Mumford sees this as one reason why Geddes failed to make an adequate impression on his contemporaries, although “he was one of the seminal minds of the last century”. Geddes shunned publicity, but more important, Mumford emphasises, “he practised synthesis in an age of specialism and stood for the insurgence of life in a world that submitted even more fully to the gods of mechanised routine” [Mumford 1944b: VIII]. His most important insights were never written down; he had distrust for what he called the modern habit of ‘verbalistic empaperment’. And what was written was often in a style difficult to take. But then, as Mumford points out, that was not his main purpose. “Geddes coupled thought to action, and action to life, and life itself to all the highest manifestations of sense, feeling, and experience...Man’s existence did not stay at the biological level of organism, function and environment, nor even at the tribal or folk level of folk, work, and place: man perpetually renewed himself and transcended himself by means of that heritage of ideal values, of self surpassing purposes, which are covered by the terms polity, culture, and art...For Geddes life had more than its animal destiny of reproduction and physical survival: it had a high destiny, that of revamping out of nature’s original materials, with the help of nature’s original patterns a more perfectly harmonised, a more finely tuned, a more complexly balanced expression of both personality and community” [Mumford 1944a:384].

Mumford prophesises, if our generation manages to live down its automatism and mechanisms and sadisms, its debilitating financial parasitism and its fatal moral complacency, if it actually escapes the necropolis it has prepared for itself – in short, if the forces of life once more become dominant, the figure of Geddes will stand forth as perhaps the central prophet of the new age. There could be no better symbol of Life Insurgent and Humanity Resurgent than Patrick Geddes himself [Mumford 1944b:XIV]. [EPW](#)

## Notes

- 1 Branford and Geddes call Le Play the father of scientific regionalism. His line of reasoning began with the soil and its natural products; it continued with man the creature of work and place; culminating in man the builder of cities and creator of arts and sciences. It returned

through all the ups and downs to the renewal or the destruction of the soil as the case may be by man’s action. The tale of that cycle, they observe, is the history of civilisation [Branford and Geddes 1917:92].

- 2 Sir Patrick Abercrombie, an architect planner and a contemporary of Geddes, writes that Geddes’ Edinburgh survey led the way in Britain. The survey appeared in public at the great Town Planning Exhibition in 1910. And, “it is safe to say that the modern practice of planning in this country would have been a more elementary thing had not been for the Edinburgh room and all that this implied... Within the den sat Geddes, a most unsettling person talking, talking, talking...about everything and anything”. The visitors could criticise the show for being a hotch-potch of picture postcards, newspaper cuttings, strange diagrams, crude old woodcuts, archaeological reconstructions. But if they listened to Geddes’ talk they would no longer be the same because “There was something more in town planning than met the eye” [Abercrombie 1933:128].
- 3 It is observed that the sanitary and civil engineers seldom questioned their priorities. Their priorities suited the British; to cut mortality figures by clearing slums and driving large straight roads through them like in European cities; fill up tanks to eliminate the mosquitoes; and ensure that the ‘civil lines’ were supplied with running water, a sewage system and street cleaner. All this largely benefited the British residents, although it was paid for by a tax on the entire municipality [Meller 1979:332].
- 4 Meller also tells us that Geddes tried to keep alive the ‘romantic’ element in his marriage by occasionally writing special love letters to his wife. Although he started with professing his undying affection, he always ended with a general discussion of environmental problems [Meller 1979:8].
- 5 Official honours were given to Geddes for his contributions. In 1911, a knighthood for ‘town planning’ was offered to Geddes, who turned it down for ‘democratic reasons’. Again in 1932, just before his death, he was offered a knighthood for his service to education, which he accepted.

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