

# The New Indian Express

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**A pact with nature**

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The year 2007 is very special, not only for India, but for Europe as well. India celebrates the 150th anniversary of 'the First War of Independence' of 1857 as well as the 60th anniversary of Independence from the British while Europe commemorates the 50 years of its coming together. These celebrations last the entire year, giving us time to reflect on the past and ponder on the future. Where is Europe 50 years after the signing of the Treaty of Rome? The most pessimistic watchers like Michel Rocard, a former French Prime Minister, believe that "Political Europe is dead. But Economic Europe remains. It is the first economy in the world; it can put its weight on the rules of world game". Whether optimistic or gloomy, the fact remains that 50 years after the extraordinary adventure of the European Union was launched, the

European process has seen the emergence of a new kind of aspiration for unity which translated into a voluntary association of its nation-states.

At the root of this endeavour was the reconciliation of two bitter enemies, France and Germany. At a time when old demons were threatening to reignite their bitter rivalry (three wars were fought in less than a century), Jean Monnet, the father of Europe, and a few of his colleagues used the very object of dispute — coal and steel production — to trigger a close cooperation between France and Germany. Thus was born the European Coal and Steel Community, the embryo of the European Union.

Europe may have not achieved political unity, but at a time when India and Pakistan are dreaming of softening their borders or making them irrelevant, one can travel through most of the European nations without encountering a frontier checkpoint. One no longer needs to change currency in 13 European nations where the Euro is the common currency.

There is, however, another field in which Europe has made tremendous progress. I realised this a few days ago when I came across an Indian news item: "The Government took on the Supreme Court today when it questioned the court's stand on the appointment of members of the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC)."

The Court was hearing the long-standing forest case and examining the composition of the Forest Advisory Committee that permits allocation of forest land for developmental works. On December 15, the Court had stayed the composition of the FAC when the Ministry had questioned the credentials of certain members. The Ministry of Environment and Forest reiterated its earlier stand: none of the six suggested names were 'qualified experts' as required by the Ministry

guidelines. For the Government, these well-known environmentalists were only 'enthusiastic lay persons' and not 'experts' in wildlife and ecology.

In contrast, at the same time, the French TV channels beamed the campaign of an 'enthusiastic lay person' called Nicolas Hulot, a TV anchor who has been running a programme on nature. He started a campaign in view of the forthcoming 2007 French Presidential elections. His scheme called 'The Ecological Pact' is simple, he asks not only the presidential candidates but also the public "to place environment at the heart of the political debate". The Pact is a detailed and concrete programme that Hulot requests the candidates to sign. And believe it or not, the main candidates such as Ségolène Royal or Nicolas Sarkozy have already signed the Pact and agreed to its terms. In just two months, more the 4.7lakh ordinary citizens have followed suit. Hulot has become so popular that there is tremendous pressure on him to declare his candidature to the Presidency.

Hulot's point is: "Our societies have only two possible choices and there is an abyss between the two. Either we accept to be subjected to the forthcoming changes and time will impose on us an inevitable upheaval... or we provoke and conduct ourselves the ecological mutation. Today, no reasonable being can doubt that tomorrow's world will be radically different, whether we would like or not."

His motto is "No more talking. Let us act together before it is too late." Probably inspired by Hulot, the French President Jacques Chirac initiated an International Conference for Global Ecological Governance, held in Paris on February 2 and 3, 2007. Chirac's purpose is to create an official UN body dealing with the environment: "We all know that uncontrolled human activity is bringing about a sort of slow collective suicide. Disaster can only be averted if nations can come together to

support jointly agreed commitments. Let us create a United Nations Environment Organization, the expression of the world's ecological conscience, with the means to assume this responsibility."

A Committee of Honour has been nominated with Hulot as one of its members. The Chairperson of the Committee, Alain Juppé, a former Prime Minister, visited India during the last week of January to promote the Conference. But will any 'expert' listen to an enthusiastic former French Prime Minister in Delhi?

What is perhaps even more interesting about these individual initiatives, (though they could go a long way to create awareness) is that the European Union and its 27 member-states are collectively taking the fight against the degradation of the environment and global warming on a war footing.

The European Commission, which is independent of the member-state's governments, has proposed "a comprehensive package of measures to establish a new Energy Policy for Europe to combat climate change and boost the EU's energy security and competitiveness."

The Commission's package has set a series of ambitious targets on greenhouse gas emissions and renewable energies. It also presses for "an international agreement to be reached on the post-2012 framework which should lead to a 30% cut in emissions from developed countries by 2020."

José Manuel Barroso, the EU Commission President believes that "the challenges of climate change, increasing import dependence and higher energy prices are faced by all EU members. A common European response is necessary to deliver sustainable, secure and competitive energy. The proposals put forward by the Commission demonstrate our commitment to leadership and a long-term vision for

a new Energy Policy for Europe that responds to climate change. We must act now, to shape tomorrow's world".

More in the environment domain than in any other field, a 'common response is necessary'. Retrospectively, even if it was just for this, this common approach (of today 27 nations) makes the European experiment worthwhile. Whether it is due to wisdom or necessity, the spirit of 'sharing' common responsibilities of the founding fathers 50 years ago when six European nations agreed to have a Common Market, is still alive.

One of the concrete outcomes is that the European Union has almost reached a target set in 2001 for renewable electricity target: 21 per cent of electricity generated in the EU Member States will come from renewable energy sources by 2010.

While India and China are doing extremely well in the economic field and are considered by all as the powers to reckon with during the current century, it is unfortunately far from true for the environment. Here the European Union can certainly help, first and foremost by showing the importance of a united approach in matters concerning the common future of the planet which has forced an enlarged Europe to make 'common' policies decisions.

But the earth's future does not depend on Europe only, it is the responsibilities of each nation, each continent. The forthcoming SAARC Summit, hosted by India could be an opportunity for Delhi to take the lead with its regional partners to try to emulate the European Experiment in the ecological field. But will the 'expert' babus understand the pressing necessity?

Sunita Williams, the Indian born astronaut, recently told some Indian children: "The earth is a beautiful planet. It's hard to imagine anyone arguing down there. It really is." Do 'experts' want to save it?