

Date: 20 October 2007

Subject: General Paper

Topic: Man & Nature

Question Source: NJC Prelims General Paper 1

*How far would you agree that despite Man's attempt to control Nature, Nature has instead been more successful in controlling Man?*

For most of the history of Man's existence, he has cowered under the forces of nature; the slightest gust of winds or the most minor volcanic eruption would have been able to wipe out the earliest of mankind, neither guided by his wits nor protected by his tools. Subsequent developments that Man has instituted were thus directed at making himself less vulnerable to the forces of nature, at overcoming his own natural constraints. Rather than to claim outright that Man attempts to control Nature, it would be more sensible to realize that the ability to manipulate parts of Nature, is a natural outcome of Man's will to protect himself from the brutality of Nature. Nonetheless, Nature's power remained and is still setting the constraints Man faces in a bid to survive; while it is probably not the will of Nature to control Man, the obstacles it presents have indeed been setting the general path for Man's development - effectively controlling Man.

To begin, Nature requires all organisms to consume food and drink in order to survive and this constraint meant that Man have to devote resources and time to sourcing for vital nutrients to remain in existence. In a bid to minimize the energy we expend for the foraging activity and get the most out of our nutrients, Man worked around this constraint through agriculture and settlements. The advent of planting and harvesting of crops meant only to improve the lives of people but turned out to become some sort of control of Nature because Man would manipulate the places to grow plants, alter the conditions of a particular piece of land with a plough and watering the soil to accommodate crops. Nonetheless, Nature remains in power as climate ultimately determines the fate of the farmers and the crops; Man merely managed to gain a little more autonomy in his fate.

Man has been deprived of flight by Nature but overcame it through close study of the laws of Physics and engineering. The Wright brothers were not trying to conquer Nature with their invention, but simply trying to experience the ability to soar. Granted, flight has helped Man become more mobile than Nature initially desired but this attempt to increase the ease of traveling long distances is can only be considered a successful attempt to take control of the skies - Nature itself is far from our control. We are still subjected to laws of gravity and have merely overcome our constraints by adhering to the limits set by Nature. All sorts of flight accidents stands testimonial to the fact that Nature continues to control the fate of Man. If Man were to be able to control Nature even in the slightest aspect, many accidents could have been prevented.

Technology and knowledge of physical laws are not the only advancement mankind has made that helped us reclaim our stake in our lives, social innovation and organization systems have produced similar outcomes of 'controlling Nature'. Nature has distributed resources unevenly and made it difficult for any single individual or even entire specie to amass the wealth of the entire planet. Man, with their will to advance and take control of their lives, have evolved economic systems to divide up the task of resource extraction and other labour, allowing factors of production to be combined in wonderfully sophisticated ways that defines our level development. Even so, scarcity remains a fact of life that we have to live with, just like many other constraints that are defined by Nature.

Further innovations Man initiated presents the recurring pattern: Man works within the boundaries set by Nature, overcome his initial constraints but continues to be subjected to the

merciless forces of Nature. Indeed, nuclear energy has heightened Man's destructive powers but he is merely harnessing a natural source of energy from the fundamental particles that makes up everything in Nature. Even genetic engineering, seen as Man playing God and thus an attempt to take over nature, is more of an effort to maximize the potential of organisms with features that have long been designed by Nature but dispersed in different species. On the other side of the Man-Nature debate, it has never been Nature's will to control Man but its power has continuously place Man at its mercy, effectively manipulating the acts of Man and guiding our development.

Nature's control over Man is best exhibited by catastrophic events that wipe out large populations and evidence of Man's development. The eruption of the volcano at Krakatoa in 1883 killed almost 40 000 people in a single event, and this does not include the casualties from the Tsunami the eruption brought about. A more recent event, the landfall of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 in Honduras is claimed to have wiped out fifty years of development of the country. Nature has set Man to rebuild their homes, having destroyed these structures. Man remains helpless under the forces of molten rocks and gales of destruction even after developing technology to minimize the impacts of these disasters; even attempts at predicting Nature's behaviour have often failed.

Other times, little signals that Nature has given us sent us into great panic and our knowledge of Nature's erratic behavior doesn't help us gain control of it. Rising sea levels, melting ice caps and increasing average global temperatures are cited as Nature's reaction to our efforts to overcome too many of the constraints that Nature has set for us. Climate change is perhaps a trade-off for our improved standards of living that Nature has not set aside for us in the dawn of Man. Nature stays in control as man around the world gather to discuss means to appease Nature - to try and reverse climate change through emission reductions, and perhaps more innovations to cool down the Earth.

Man, in our attempt to gain control of our lives and fate, and overcome our vulnerability has created wonderful innovations that seem to manipulate Nature in different ways. Nonetheless, they remain constrained by the laws of Nature and while Nature has no intention to control Man, it has by far been extremely successful with restraining much of Man's ambitions and in effect, determining the fate of mankind.