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## **Environment: For Whose Development?**

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### **Abstract:**

The tragic environmental disasters the world has been experiencing in the last few years are invitation to search for alternatives to the system that causes such results. As a help to such a reflection, we shall begin with a note on different schools of thought involved in the debate on the environment before looking at some recent events. We shall not limit ourselves to the urban events that make headlines but go beyond them to the ongoing impact on the rural poor because while the environment has today become a major issue, the way one understands it depends on the class one belongs to. Events affecting the middle class receive greater attention than those affecting the voiceless rural poor. That is why our starting-point is the environment primarily as the livelihood of the poor. Its deterioration affects them as much it destroys nature.

### **Keywords:**

Environmentalists, development, displacement of people, forest development, the poor, tribals, victims of globalisation.

During the last two years India and the rest of the world have experienced several disasters that some call natural, though their link with the degradation of the environment is difficult to deny. Among them are the unprecedented floods in Europe and the inundation of Mumbai, Chennai and New Orleans during 2005 and the worst floods of half a decade in Assam for two successive years. One may not stretch this thesis too far by linking tsunami with climate change because one does not know its exact causes, but it is difficult to deny its link with the snow in Abu Dhabi the same day. These and other events should make one sit back and reflect on the type of development that has led to environmental degradation and to the marginalisation of the poor.

It is also an invitation to a search for alternatives to the system that results in such events. As a help to such a reflection, we shall begin with a note on different schools of thought involved in the debate on the environment before looking at some recent events. We shall not limit ourselves to the urban events that make headlines but go beyond them to the ongoing impact on the rural poor because while the environment has today become a major issue, the way one understands it depends on the class one belongs to. Events affecting the middle class receive greater attention than those affecting the voiceless rural poor. That is why our starting-point is the environment primarily as the livelihood of the poor. Its deterioration affects them as much it destroys nature.

## **Types of Environmentalists**

How one looks at the implications of development-induced environmental degradation depends on where one stands on the issue of resource use. There are at least four stakeholders in the debate on the environment, the most important being the communities whose sustenance the natural, particularly common property, resources (CPRs) are. The tribals and other rural poor who sustain themselves on land, water and forests, the fish workers who live on the marine resources, the Dalits a majority of whom work on land owned by others, as such depend on its sustainable use and a favourable climate, and other communities like the quarry workers have nature as their sustenance. To them the environment is an ecosystem with human communities at its centre. These resources have traditionally

met their food, fodder, medicinal and other needs. Around them they have built their cultural, social and religious systems and their very identity. A symbiotic relationship has developed between them and nature. As a result, they have used the resources judiciously, treated them as renewable, preserved them as sustainable and have recognised their own right and that of nature to a life with dignity.<sup>1</sup>

On the opposite side are many urban environmentalists to whom the environment is “beautiful trees and tigers”<sup>2</sup> and its deterioration is air and water pollution and deforestation. The communities that sustain themselves on them do not enter their thinking. Some would even like to preserve nature from them. For example, those opposing the Forest Rights Bill that is before the Parliament assume that the tribals are the real destroyers of wildlife and that one has to protect it from them. The urban environmentalists also oppose the third stake holder, the industrialist who treats land, forests and water as raw materials for his own profit and to produce consumer goods for the middle class whose lifestyle depends on them. In between is the fourth stakeholder, the official bodies like the Forest Department and the Pollution Control Board dealing with the resources. By and large these three stake holders are more concerned about water, air and forests than the communities that depend on them.<sup>3</sup>

## **Environment and Development**

The debate around the environment and development has to be situated in the context of the contest between the stakeholders. Most planners view development only as building the infrastructure and maximising profit. Forests, land and water would then be only raw materials. But the communities that sustain themselves on them belong to the 70% of the population that lives in the informal economy while the legal, administrative and economic systems are based on the formal system. The two emanate from opposite, even contradictory, foundations. The formal is based on the concept of property, the individual and the written word. Profit is its moving force. The informal system, especially tribal, is based on the resource, word of mouth and legitimacy by the community. Sharing and equity are its foundations.<sup>4</sup> To the formal sector their livelihood is a commodity and a raw material to produce goods for over-consumption by the

middle class. Profit depends on rendering them productive and for this purpose they alienate the resources from the communities that sustain themselves on them. For example, they view land only as a place of cultivation and building and ignore the agricultural labourer, the trader, the barber and others who live on it by rendering service to the village as a community.<sup>5</sup>

In the past religion legitimised such monopolisation. For example, much of the thinking on development was justified through the Judaeo-Christian misinterpretation of Genesis 1.26 which was viewed mainly as God's command to dominate nature. Ignored was the fact that this command included also equitable distribution and the access of all to the fruits of creation. Development is thus based on the assumption that the natural resources are raw materials meant to be exploited to ensure the investor's profit. "It is western Christianity that has taught us to see ourselves as the centre of things with the right, even the duty, to conquer, subdue and have dominion over nature. Early scientific thought reinforced this view of ourselves, by seeing the earth as the centre of the universe, with the planets, the stars and the sun all circling round it."<sup>6</sup>

Its result has been the destruction of nature that is the livelihood of the poor and the consequent impoverishment of the communities whom the God of history created in His own image (Gen. 1.27) and on whose side He has shown Himself (Lk. 4.18). For example, the outdated drainage system was certainly a major cause of the Mumbai floods of 2005. The unprecedented 97 cm of rain in three days caused by climate change was the second. However, the damage could have been kept within reasonable limits if the greed of the real estate speculators had not led to the reclamation of the Mahim and Bandra creeks that were rivers through which excess water from the city flowed out to the Arabian Sea. Once the builders filled them to put up high rise buildings, the excess water could not flow out of the city. That greed is seen also in the price that land fetches in Mumbai. 20 acres on which the textile mills stood once were sold in late 2005 for around Rs 700 crores, or Rs 35 crores per acre. Another 16.2 acres are expected to fetch Rs 40 to 50 crores each in January 2006. Using the pretext of the 1983 textile workers' strike, the owners had closed them down in order to sell the land as real estate.

## Land, Water and Displacement

Another consequence of treating land and water as commodities alone, is the displacement of peoples' for dams, industries and other projects, in the name of national development. The post-independence Governments used the enabling laws enacted by the colonial regime to make it easy for the entrepreneurs to take control of land. These laws have their foundation in the *Permanent Settlement 1793* and continued in various legislative measures from a Calcutta law of 1824 to the *Assam Land Rules 1838* and culminated in the *Land Acquisition Act 1894* (LAQ).<sup>7</sup> These laws are based on the eminent domain of the State which is called *terra nullius* (nobody's land) in Australia. The White colonisation of the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and southern Africa was based on the principle that anyone can occupy land belonging to none. The Australian judiciary has struck it down as unconstitutional since what the coloniser occupied was the livelihood of the communities inhabiting it,<sup>8</sup> but it continues to be the basis of Indian land laws under its American interpretation of eminent domain. Its first facet is that all natural resources like forests, as well as land with no individual title belong to the State. Its second facet is that the State alone has the right to define a public purpose and deprive even individuals of their assets in its name.<sup>9</sup> Their land can thus be acquired without their permission for the profit of the entrepreneur.

Post-independence Governments have kept these colonial laws intact and have even made them more stringent. For example, the Government of India amended the LAQ in 1984 to make it possible for the State to acquire land for private companies. Using this change the State has acquired land for Enron whose corruption is well known, the Tata Steel Plant in Gopalpur and 15,200 acres at Kalinga Nagar in Orissa and for numerous other private projects instead of getting them to buy the land they required. They thus get land at a low price while they would have to pay more if they bought it directly.

The National Water Policy 2002 is another example. Its focus is on water as a resource for irrigation and power and on building large dams. Its objectives are exploitation of the hydro-potential at a faster pace, maintaining a minimal share of hydro-power in the national system, enabling inter-state and inter-regional transfer of power and encouraging private investment in this sector. So it suggests basin-

wise investigation and planning of the hydro-potential and privatisation of water but has very little to say on drinking water. The policy ignores this aspect and treats water only as a commodity for irrigation and power to the profit of the private sector.<sup>10</sup>

This private profit-driven enterprise is given concrete shape in the projects being planned. For example, on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2002, the then Union Minister for Power outlined in the Rajya Sabha plans to build 11 hydro-electrical projects (HEP) in the Northeast because it has 58,971 MW of hydel potential or 38% of India's total (*The Assam Tribune*, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2002). On 24<sup>th</sup> May 2003, launching the 50,000 MW Hydro-Electrical Initiative for the Northeast former Prime Minister Mr. A. B Vajpayee said that the region should become India's powerhouse (*The Telegraph*, May 24, 2003). According to Mr M. Debnath, former Member-Secretary, Narmada Board, at least 48 HEP were under study in the Northeast in 2001.<sup>11</sup> There is another list of 138 possible dams in the Seven Sisters of the Northeast and 23 in Sikkim<sup>12</sup> to produce power for export to the rest of India and to Southeast Asia (*The North East Times*, February 11, 2002). That they are taken seriously is seen from the fact that the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh praised the decision to go ahead with work on one of them even before getting Central clearance though it is against the law, because it will bring revenue to the State (*The Telegraph*, February 2, 2002). Many of these massive dams will be privately owned.

Thus, revenue, much of it to be spent on the administration, is what impels the States to permit this plunder. They ignore the fact that the Northeast is one of the 25 mega-biodiversity zones of the world and one among 18 biodiversity hot spots. Also ignored is the fact that the region which is home to various ethnic groups has witnessed armed ethnic conflicts for decades mainly because of land loss to immigrants and to development projects. Its fallout is militarisation, because of which development itself is located within a defence perspective.<sup>13</sup>

Many dams will be in Arunachal Pradesh whose tribes live on community owned land according to their customary law but the State does not recognise these CPRs as their livelihood. Because of this disjunction between the legal and social reality they have lost much

land to the immigrants as well as to development projects and will lose more to the dams but most of them will not even be compensated because their CPRs are considered State property according to the eminent domain. This is true also of other States. For example, by the early 1970s the tribals of Tripura had lost 60% of their land to the Bangladeshi Hindu immigrants. More of it was acquired for the Dumbur dam but out of about 9,000 families displaced by it, only around 2,500 were compensated. The rest were not even counted among the displaced because they lived on the CPRs. The unrest in Tripura is attributed mainly to their impoverishment that followed from it.<sup>14</sup>

Such massive land acquisition in the name of national development is not limited to the Northeast but is true of the whole of India, especially its tribal areas. The eminent domain ensures that what the State calls public purpose gets priority over the people but it does not oblige the State to rehabilitate those whom it deprives of their livelihood. It has resulted in massive land loss since independence. In Orissa more than a million ha were acquired 1951-1995, in Andhra Pradesh around 1.2 million ha and more during the last decade. In West Bengal 2 million ha, in Gujarat 3 million ha and in Assam 700,000 ha have been acquired 1947-2000. In most States around half of it is CPRs that are the livelihood of the rural poor. Since they are considered State property, its losers not only do not get compensation but are often not even counted among the displaced (DP) or those deprived of their livelihood without being physically relocated (PAP).

The exact number of the DPs/PAPs from 1947 till today is not known. They are more than 4 millions in West Bengal, 2 million in Orissa, 3.5 millions in AP and many more in other States. The All India total is around 60 million. Only around a third of the DPs have been resettled. In Orissa 35.27% of the DPs in 1951-1995 were resettled<sup>15</sup> against 28.82% in Andhra Pradesh<sup>16</sup>, 33.63% in Goa<sup>17</sup>, 9.8% in Kerala<sup>18</sup> and fewer in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Gujarat and Assam.

## **Forests and Development**

Equally important are forests that have met more than half of the food, fodder, medicinal and other needs of the rural poor in general and of the tribals in particular. Because of this dependence, a symbiotic relationship had grown between them and the forests and they had built

an economy, culture, social and political systems around them that ensured that they were treated as renewable resources. However, to the State they are a commodity and a raw material that was given to the industrialist at highly subsidised rates. Because of the industrialist found it cheaper to destroy them than to replant them. That began the vicious circle of sequential exhaustion. The industrial agent began by cutting forests near the village and from there went to the next village, the next block and the next district. Then he began the sequential exhaustion of species. For example, after exhausting bamboos for paper, he took to soft wood species like mangoes.

Impoverished and deprived of their land, those whose livelihood it was, fell into the hands of the moneylender who accompanied the industrial agent, lost their land to him and often became bonded labourers. For sheer survival they began to destroy the forests and cut trees for sale as firewood or for timber often as bonded labourers of the contractors. That symbolises not only loss of forests but also their alienation from their culture of treating them as renewable. They go beyond losing their vested interests in its preservation to develop a culture of their destruction for survival.<sup>19</sup> This transition from constructive to destructive dependence is basic to the loss of forests. As a result of these processes India's tree cover declined from 40% in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to 22% a century later and to around 13% today.<sup>20</sup>

Climate change is another result of deforestation and of environmental degradation. It is not an issue of clean air but of people's lifestyle. The rich countries that account for most ozone layer destroying emissions refuse to reduce them for fear of affecting their lifestyle. The USA, that causes a fifth of all greenhouse gas emissions has rejected the Kyoto Protocol, that demands the reduction of such emissions by 15% before 2010. The other countries accepted it initially but later changed the discussion to clean mechanisms thus diverting attention from the livelihood issue. Clean mechanism is a euphemism for transferring their outdated technologies to the poor nations. They may be cleaner than that of the poor nations but will soon be outdated but the "donors" get credit points that exempt them from reducing the emissions within their own borders. They have been asking the poor countries to sacrifice some of their development in order to reduce



emissions, but through credit points for clean mechanisms, they exempt themselves from this obligation. They refuse to recognise that over-consumption in the Global North and by the middle and upper classes in the poor countries causes poverty in the South.<sup>21</sup> Instead of developing its own clean technologies, India has yielded to the temptation to import “clean mechanisms” from the rich countries and has joined the biggest offender, the USA in rejecting the Kyoto Protocol.

## **Globalisation of Intensification**

These processes are being intensified by globalisation that depends on a consumerist society. It is called a “free market” economy, but in reality it is the freedom of a few countries to impose their lifestyle on others in order to get control of their markets and natural resources. A sign of it is the growing disparities in the global income and resource use. According to estimates, in the late 1960s, 32.5% of the world’s population accounted for 87.5% of its income. In 1978 the global income was US \$8.5 trillion and the world population 4.4 billion, thus giving a per capita average of a little over US\$ 2,000. But roughly \$7 trillion of it, or 82%, was generated in the North, which contained around 25% of the population. The 75% living in the South shared the remaining \$1.5 trillion. A decade later, 784 million of the world population of 5,101 millions or 15.4%, had an income of \$13,394 billions or 78.2% of the total of \$17,135 billions. According to estimates, in the 1990s 80% of the world’s income was enjoyed by 15% of its population.<sup>22</sup> Income is one of many signs of differential access to the resources. In the mid-1990s 17% of the world’s population living in the rich countries used 70% of the global energy, 75% of its metals, 85% of its wood and 60% of its food. That is basic to environmental degradation.<sup>23</sup>

The recent Agreements that are intrinsic to globalisation legitimise such inequalities in the name of a “free” market. Among them are the Convention on Bio-diversity signed at the Earth Summit of Rio de Janeiro, 1992 and the World Trade Organisation that emerged from the GATT negotiations completed at Geneva in December 1993 and signed at Marakash, Morocco, on April 15, 1994. Through such Agreements those who over-consume the resources, ensure that the poor preserve the environment on their behalf. These Agreements are also a part of the process of extending the culture of a consumerist society to countries

like India. It has resulted in a more intense attack on the environment. Integral to it are projects that India has initiated, including those related to forests, that will further destroy the people's livelihood. For example, studies on the World Bank Forestry Programme in Madhya Pradesh show that in reality it is meant to turn forests into plantations for industrial raw material. The tribals and other forest dwellers are denied access to these "plantation forests". Even when access is granted, they are unable to meet their food, fodder and medicinal needs because almost exclusively commercial species are planted in them.<sup>24</sup>

## The Poor and Women as Victims

While all feel the impact of environmental degradation most of its victims are the poor in general and women among them in particular. For example, out of the estimated 60 million persons displaced or deprived of their livelihood by development projects since independence, 40% are tribals who are a little over 8% of the country's population, at least 20% are Dalits and another 20% are other landless rural poor like the fishing communities and quarry workers.<sup>25</sup> That situation continues because there is greater attack on their livelihood after globalisation. For the focus today is on mining for private companies in Middle India and for major dams in the Northeast<sup>26</sup>. Around 90% of coal and more than 50% of most other minerals are in the tribal regions and the effort is to exploit them. Which will result in massive tribal displacement.<sup>27</sup>

The same is the case of other forms of environmental degradation. For example, the Mumbai floods affected all but almost all those who died because of the landslides were slum dwellers who had to occupy the worst land. The neglect of the African Americans during the New Orleans floods is well known. Urban pollution has increased because of the encouragement given to individual vehicles. In Delhi alone they deposit more than 2,000 tonnes of pollutants everyday that result in health hazards especially of children. Every class suffers but the middle class can have some recourse to health care while the poor can rarely afford the costly medicines.

Even among the poor, the impact is felt more by women, children and aged persons than by men. For example, a study of the DPs/PAPs of development projects in Orissa and AP showed a steep rise

of more than 100% in five years, in air pollution and stress related ailments and water borne diseases. The impact was more on women and children than on men, because of higher malnutrition among them after the loss of their land and forests. Even after their loss the woman is expected to continue to play her role of ensuring regular supply of food, water and medicinal herbs to the family, organic manure to the fields and fodder to the cattle. She is unable to fulfil this task after the loss of forests, the source of food and herbal medicines.

In case of the displacement of the people, their livelihood is not replaced. If some economic resources are replaced, they invariably go to men. For example, the project rarely gives a job to the DPs/PAPs. If it does, it is limited to one job per family, almost invariably to men, considered its head. Tribal and Dalit women had enjoyed a higher social status and greater economic autonomy than their counterparts in caste societies did, though they were not equal to men. This relatively high status depended on the partial control they exercised over the CPRs. After their alienation the woman is unable to work outside her home since the projects do not give her a job. If resettlement is land based, land is allotted to individuals, invariably to men except in women headed households since men are considered heads of families. Thus she loses her economic autonomy and is reduced to being a housewife alone, unable to make an economic contribution to the family economy. Slowly she loses her decision-making role since with individual *patta* becoming the norm of land ownership after resettlement, power is transferred to the man and from him to his son.<sup>28</sup>

Together with land and forests, women also lose access to their traditional work without any alternative. With the alienation of this source of their sustenance they cannot grow or collect the food that the family needs and have to buy this and other basic needs. However, influenced by the outsiders who come to the project, men spend a substantial amount of their earnings on clothes, entertainment and other trivia, thus leaving a relatively small amount for the woman to run the household. Malnutrition is its consequence, particularly of girls and women because over time, women internalise the ideology of their subordination and follow the dominant caste custom of feeding elders, men and boys and girls in that order and themselves

eating last. In case of food shortage, which is common when they are deprived of their livelihood, women have to starve and girls get less food than the others do.<sup>29</sup>

Besides, deprivation of their livelihood often results in additional workload for women but less food for the family. For example, with deforestation for industrial needs and development projects the distance of forests increases, and so does women's workload. In Orissa and Chattisgarh the distance of forests had increased from around one km from the village to more than five km in a span of two decades. So women had to walk the extra distance to collect less food because children and older women were unable to accompany them. The combination of higher workload and malnutrition affects their health too, but because of the extra workload, they are unable to visit the health centre since it is open only during the day when they have to work in the fields or forests. As a result, many pregnant forest dweller women are forced to work till a week before child delivery and begin to work again within a week after it.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

The above discussion on the environment and development shows that deprivation of their livelihood and deterioration of the environment understood as natural resources has had an adverse impact on the poor in general and on women in particular. More often than not they lose their livelihood to the benefit of the better off sections of society. Deterioration of their status and environmental degradation do not have to be automatic consequences of modernisation if the communities, whose livelihood it is, continue to have some control over its process. That requires a search for alternatives to the present type of modernisation and to the natural resource and capital intensive pattern of development. In making this statement we assert that, what causes environmental degradation and deterioration of the status of the poor in general and of women in particular, is not modernisation in itself but its present model controlled by one class. One cannot fight against modernisation and development because the poor and women have as much of a right to change and modernise themselves as men have. What is required are environment friendly alternatives that are supportive of the subalterns in general and of women in particular.

The first challenge in this search is a new understanding of and approach to development itself. Today it is identified with economic growth and results in processes that marginalise the subaltern classes in general and women in particular. Some of its assumptions can be questioned, for example the need for individual vehicles at the cost of public transport. The consumerist society too needs to be questioned. One can also ask whether the present projects are the best means of meeting even genuine needs. For example, does one have to displace the poor in the hill areas in order to supply drinking water and irrigation in the coastal areas? Would developing low priced desalination technologies for its 7,000 km coastline not be alternatives to it? Is hydro-electrical power the only option in a country that has 300 days of sunshine? Why does the country import solar technology of the 1970s instead of developing low-priced alternatives? What a city needs is street lights, not necessarily electric lights. But the human and industrial waste is sent into the rivers and oceans and then money is borrowed from abroad to clean them. Instead recycling plants can ensure that costly processed water is not used for cleaning houses and toilets and for watering the garden. Recycling can provide the fertilisers for the gardens that are imported today and gas based street lights for the city.

One can give many more concrete technical alternatives. What is required is a new thinking on development. One has to go beyond economic growth and share markets to demand that the benefits reach every class. Christians need to reinforce their belief in the creation and its use as a resource to be developed for the benefit of all. That will be a method of fulfilling the mission of Him who came to make all things new.

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