

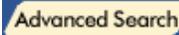


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WELFARE ECOLOGY Underpaid Labour, Exploited Nature

By ADITI ROY GHATAK

In 1969, when they labelled ecology as a “subversive science”, the proponents had stirred a hornet’s nest. The hornets are yet to settle down as newer notions of ecology have come and gone, each challenging prevalent assumptions about nature and natural resources. Over a period of time they contributed to the evolution of the global economic agenda forcing the “rich” to make the “concern for nature” the cornerstone of their development strategies.

Two things are clear. While a possible crisis that capitalism would have faced from hardcore environmentalists was averted by the advent of the new deity, “sustainable development”, the Third World capitalist did not quite keep pace with the western strategy.

Ethics

Thus, even while the environmental hullabaloo is strong, it falls short in its determination to change hearts and minds. After all, even after the World Bank walked out of the Narmada Dam project on grounds of its environmental unsustainability, Indians have refused to understand the science, the ethics or the endogenous knowledge base that has underpinned the environmental arguments. A country run by contractors has its own bulldozer’s logic. Neither nature, nor tribal societies nor underpaid labour cut much ice under such a regime.

Gro Harlem Brundtland’s definition of sustainable development, presented at the Rio meet, as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” has perhaps found the most sensitive countervailing note in India’s own Dhrubojyoti Ghosh’s thesis on “sustainable impoverishment”. This UN Global 500 clearly belongs to the camp that seeks a new environment agenda, at least for impoverished societies such as India, rather than a managed environment strategy or a modified one that several late 20th century thinkers have questioned.

Some environmentalists have opposed the “managerialism” that has overwhelmed the sustainable development argument and emphasised the need to incorporate human beings and society in all its political and epistemological dimensions and certainly the economic ones. Ghosh’s theory fits into this overall perspective by introducing man’s right to self-determination in the environmental dialogue.

Here lies the rub. The foundations of global wealth have often been built with underpaid labour, working in unfair conditions and by the abuse of nature. The success of the reformist movements — through the forces of leftism or socialism in India — in improving conditions somewhat in some places represents minor victories in this battle for empowerment.

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The appalling belts of poverty in the heart of India's capital or in the heartland of the Marxist citadel in Kolkata and certainly in the suburbs of its financial capital, Mumbai, are indicative of the position that the poor man enjoys in the overall environment agenda. That such inequities hardly dislocate social order forms the basis of Ghosh's "theory of deceit masterminding the global industrial order" that he calls "sustainable impoverishment".

Strategy

Such an impoverishment strategy does not distinguish between factors of production, land and labour — read nature and exploited human resource — as it goes about its business of producing wealth, unless the juggernaut comes across some immovable force. Class struggle was one such force and ecology was another, forcing the masterminds to accept that "nature infinite" was a myth and re-strategise.

The rich have learnt faster because they have a greater financial stake in securing the future in terms of both man and nature. In India, one does not need to look at the United Nation's Human Development Index to understand the status of the "man without the means". The universal acceptance of the "sustainable development" agenda is a mere recognition of the fact that wanton disregard for how one is disposing of waste would destroy the very earth the wealth-producing/ waste-generating facility is based on.

It is another matter if the waste is disposed of at a distant venue: USA's plastics recycled in distant Gujarat, for instance. This public acceptance of the "preserve nature" perspective by the global industrial giants has, in one shot, defanged the ecological snake. The UN support to this defanging process was only to be expected; as was the World Bank, IMF and ADB's subscription. The rich have always been miles ahead in accomplishing "sustainability", real or unreal, for self-preservation and have achieved it despite occasional stink over Nike sweat ships or the South Asian collapse of the late nineties.

Some things have changed — an imaginative boycott of Nike shoes, forced the shoemaker to retrace its steps and re-enter the realms of sustainability. That so much does not change is because of what Ghosh describes as the cycle of "virtual rationality" that is based on the three pillars of fear, fantasy and falsehood. Why is it that no riots broke out at Chechurgheria, 24-Parganas, West Bengal, where almost entire villages were affected by silicosis thanks to killer quarrying activity of the Surendra Khanij? Simply because people were afraid that the only industry providing a livelihood in this blackhole of West Bengal would quit if anyone dared to protest. In this state of the dispossessed, a job is a veritable fantasy. Exploitation, never mind how brutal, remains within the sustainable limits of this social order. Indeed, this has always been the universal order of development. There are no global standards, the golden rule is push as far as you can. The difference is that if earlier only man protested on his own behalf — the Chinese or Russian revolution — today a section of the enlightened world is protesting on behalf of nature. In the West, they are being heard with greater respect even by the industrial leaders. India moves at its own pace. The West has even taken over the development of India's ignored endogenous knowledge and technology base simply because it is better informed and quicker to appreciate the prospects of commerce.

Marriage

When good environmentalism is good economics, there is a fine marriage between sustainability and development. More importantly, if while flying the sustainability flag from one forum, one can pursue the exploitation agenda on others, one has the advantage of both worlds. The high-performance automobile makers are a prime example.

Where does the 21st century environmentalist fit into this complex scenario? First, he must accept the reality and think of change within the current structure of attitude and resources, wherein exploitation of nature

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beyond its carrying capacity is fundamental to the quality of industrial growth being chased. Utopian solutions featuring the overthrow of capitalism — around eco-socialism, for instance — would seem rather juvenile. Yet knowledgeable writers persist with them.

More realistically, environmentalism may be dealt with as the highest stage in the evolution of trade-unionism that aims to combat the plunder of nature and man under the aegis of what Dr Ghosh describes as “welfare ecology”. Arguably, this emerges as the most outstanding takeout from the ongoing environmental dialogue under which sustainable development would necessarily refer to a process “that recognises the limits of exploitation” without distinguishing man from nature. The area of pursuit thus specified must be expanded to encompass the globe and any assessment of the quality of 21st century civilisation must be based on an honest assessment of the plight of the country of a billion people.

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