

Economic development and environmental conflicts in India

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This paper about environmental conflicts in contemporary society relates to all human societies, but in particular it addresses the social contradictions of India related to conflicts over natural resources. Scientific knowledge has been used to considerably enlarge man's access to natural resources, on the one hand, and on the other, to consume the natural resources at extremely high rates of utilization. This period is also characterized by the emergence of ecology movements all over the world which are attempting to redesign the pattern and extent of natural resources utilization to ensure social equality and ecological sustainability. In this way, ecology movements have questioned the validity of the

dominant concepts and indicators of economic development whose ideology is thus faced with a major foundational challenge.

This paper attempts to analyze the relationship between economic development and conflicts over natural resources to trace the roots of the ecological movements. Further, in the light of the ecological perspective, it examines the fundamental assumptions and categories of development economics that are used to set the objectives of 'development' as well as the criteria for the choice of technologies that are used in the process of achieving these objectives.

Ecology movements and survival

The intensity and range of the ecology movements in independent India have kept on increasing as predatory exploitation of natural resources to feed the process of development has gone up in extent and intensity. This process has been characterized by the huge expansion of energy and resource intensive industrial activity and major projects like big dams, forest exploitation, mining, energy intensive agriculture, etc. The resource demand of development has led to the narrowing down of the natural resource base for the survival of the economically poor and powerless, either by direct transfer of resources away from basic needs or by destruction of the essential ecological processes that ensure renewability of the life supporting natural resources.

Against this background, the ecol-

ogy movements came up as the people's response to this new threat to their survival as a demand for the ecological conservation of the vital life support systems. The most significant life support systems beyond clean air are the common property resources of water, forests and land on which the majority of the poor people of India depend for survival. It is the threat to these resources that has been at the centre of the ecology movements in the last few decades.

Among the various ecology movements in India, the Chipko movement (embrace the trees to oppose fellings) is the most well known. It started as a movement of the hill people in the state of Uttar Pradesh to save the forest resources from exploitation by contractors from outside. It later evolved to an ecological movement that was aimed

at the maintenance of the ecological stability of the major upland watersheds in India.

Exploitation of mineral resources, in particular the opencast mining in the sensitive watersheds of the Himalayas Western Ghats and central India have also done a great deal of environmental damage. As a result environmental movements have come up in these regions to oppose the reckless operations of mining. Most successful among them is the movement against limestone quarrying in Doon Valley.

The large river valley projects, which are coming up in India at a very fast pace, is another group of development projects against which ecology movements of the people have come up. The large scale submersion of forest and agricultural lands, that is the prerequisite for the big river valley projects, always take a heavy toll of dense forests and the best food growing lands. These have been usually the material basis for the survival of a large number of people in India, specially the tribal people. The Silent Valley project in Kerala was opposed by the ecology movement on the ground of its being a threat, not directly to the survival of the people, but to the gene pool of the tropical rain forests threatened by submersion.

The ecological movement against the Tehri high dam in the UP Himalaya exposes the possible threat to the people living both above and below the dam-site through large-scale destabilisation of land by seepage and strong seismic movements that could be induced by impoundment. The Tehri Dam opposition committee has appealed to the Supreme Court against the proposed dam by identifying it as a threat to the survival of all people living near the river Ganga upto West Bengal. Most notable among the people's movements against dams on the issue of direct threat to survival from submersion are Bedthi, Inchampalli, Bhopalpat-

nam, Narmada, Koel-Karo, Bodhghat, etc. In the context of already overused land resources, the proper rehabilitation on a land-to-land basis of millions of people displaced through the construction of dams seems impossible.

Development from the view point of the dispossessed

Though the ecology movements relate to issues that are geographically localized, like forests or water pollution, their reverberation is national and even global in import. This macro-micro dialectic is rooted in the cognitive gaps associated with development planning and this dichotomy has been analyzed politically as the result of the existence of the two Indias. Every development activity has a need for natural resources. In the context of limited natural resources, by either non-renewability or ecological limits to renewability, the resource needs of the two Indias are bound to compete with each other. In this unequal competition the survival of the less powerful but more populous micro-economy is directly threatened. This threat may come either by resource transfer or by ecological factors leading to resource degradation. Yet the significance of the ecology movements does not merely lie in the fact that they are voices of the dispossessed.

The positive feature of these movements lies in the manner in which they make visible the invisible externalities of development based on a particular economic ideology and reveal its inherent injustice and nonsustainability. The recognition of these inadequacies and the imperatives arising from the right to survival creates another ground and another direction for development which ensures justice with sustainability, equity with ecological stability.

The ecology movements can no longer be considered merely as specific and particular happenings. They are an expression of the univ-

ersal socio-ecological impacts of a narrowly conceived development based only on short-term commercial criteria. The impact of ecology movements cannot be assessed only in terms of the impact on particular projects they originate from. The impact, in the final analysis, is on the very fundamental categories of politics, economics, science and technology which together have created the classical paradigm of development and resource use. The emerging irreversible threat to survival arising from the development process requires a re-evaluation not just of some individual projects and programmes which have been shown to be ecologically destructive, but of the very conception and paradigm of development that generates such projects. The ecology movements are revealing how the resource intensive demands of current development have ecological destruction and economic deprivation built into them. They are also stressing that the issue is not merely of a trade off of costs and benefits because the cost of destruction of the conditions of life and well-being is not just a matter of money, it is a matter of life itself.

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The need for a development that will lead to improved standards of living, not undermine them, that will create ecological stability, not instabilities, is clear. The crises of market orientation of economic development has created responses from the local communities as well as from ecological movements. The contribution of international development aid and loans to the processes of ecological destruction of the resource base for survival in the Third World has provided the platform for a joint global response of the ecology movements in the North as well as in the South.

The ecology movements need to be analyzed against the background of the forces of economic development. The various dimensions of social movements, for survival, for democratic values, for decentralised decision-making at the local levels are all components of the ecology movements. While at the local level they may demand better management of forests in mountain catchments or better conservation of water in drought-prone areas, on the whole they are slowly progressing towards defining an alternative model for economic development, a new economics for a new civilization. That is how ecology movements all over the world are coming closer as an upcoming political force that will put its signature in the history of humankind in the coming few decades.

Under such pressures the agencies of classical models of development are also turning 'environmental' overnight, and a new co-option attempt has begun.

The ecology movements have raised issues that on the one hand, touch upon the question of activating micro-action plans to safeguard natural processes and survival; while on the other hand, providing the macro-concept of ecological development in the global, national and regional spaces. The issue is not simply of planting trees here or protecting a tiger there. The issue is related to a fundamental change in human concepts about life, about development, about civilization. They are related to the most central issues of ecological degradation of nature's productivity that is threatening human survival at a global level. After about four decades of development efforts if the Third World is still faced with hunger, it is time that the old development strategy be replaced by a new one that is based on a holistic understanding of the total situation. The ecology movements of the world have entrusted themselves with this most challenging task of evolving humane and sustainable development.