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## ECONOMICS VERSUS ECOLOGY: THE PLIGHT OF GEOGRAPHY\*

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It is ironical and a grave concern that the economic vision is close to writing off the bottom 10 per cent of our society from the geographical canvas. Shockingly, large numbers of the middle class are now perfectly willing to sacrifice large sections of the society for the sake of development. The way modernization is conceptualized has led to genocides; an enormous degree of violence; the demolition of civilizations; and the devouring of landscapes.

Witness the changing times wherein *'causes'* have been generously accepted while majority remains afflicted with serious *'effects'*. Far from enforcing course correction, development gets aggressively pushed as if there were no tomorrow. In the era of development aggression wherein growth rate has been its potent indicator, biological and physical features of the landscape have been at the receiving end. Special economic zones, sprawling malls and concrete structures are harbingers of a new geography.

### Community, who?

Is growth a question or the idea of growth? I think 'growth' in itself is not the question but the 'idea' of growth indeed is a compelling question. For those of us who are enamored by double-digit growth and are harvesting the fruits of progress, industrial and

market expansion may seem a necessity for economic growth that only holds promise to enhance livelihoods and incomes. Without doubt, economics of growth has undermined the value of human survival, and that of the earth we inherit.

What is lost as economic development proceeds? One would instead argue that economics is the enabler that provides the justification for building a world based on markets, where goods and services get traded across borders. However, what gets lost is 'community'! The community we see around us has been morphed into an 'imagined community' - that remains subservient to the designs of the state. This needs to be understood in the context of dramatic times we are passing through.

Taking clock backwards will get you a sense of the depth and dimension of the issue that has been raked. The 'empathy' towards our surroundings, now called 'environment' and towards our fellow beings have slowly but surely been converted into 'apathy'. For the sake of convenience it could be referred to us 'connectedness of concern'. Why and how has this connectedness or empathy been eroded? When markets grow beyond community control and proxy for the State, the demise of community becomes inevitable.

Just contemplate for a moment: are you

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the community or the individual? It may be tough to draw a line between these two forms of human existence. But it may be easy to fathom that the ideology of economics has fostered self-interest over the interest of the community at large. The cumulative 'self-interest' reflects what has been referred to as 'imagined community' that is often, if not always, hostile to 'communities' in the traditional sense of the term.

Examples abound to illustrate this hypothesis. Be it special economic zones or genetically modified seeds, be it mega projects or sprawling malls, 'imagined community' of vested interests positions itself to contest the interests of 'real communities'. From Nandigram to Singur and from Niyamgiri to Ratnagiri, clash of communities present intriguing evidence of the perceived gains of industrialization at the cost of human and physical geography. Economics undermines identity(ies), creating fertile ground for bloodbath.

### **Dissent, why?**

The critical issue is that economics not only morphs community, it considers 'dissent' akin to direct confrontation. The shrinking space for 'dissent' is disturbing, because 'they' look at all dissent as an attack, not only on their ideas but on them directly. You are planting 'new' idea in their mind and making them think that they could be wrong—that is their fear. Interestingly, imagined community creates the cushion for the State to legitimize its actions, which may not be in the interest of a democratic majority.

Democracy has become an apology, in letter and in spirit, signifying the 'collective wisdom of individual ignorance'. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, The Mahatma, was opposed to such idea of growth that helps proliferates ignorance, as modernism was an intrusion in Indian culture and could only

devastate India culturally, economically and socially; (that) it is intrinsically hostile to India's environment, local knowledge system and diversity. Ethnic and religious conflict is a pathological expression of modernity, not of tradition. Over 170 districts are torn apart by State-sponsored ethnic conflicts.

There is more to come as economics, also called dismal science, subsumes all other forms of sciences and traditional knowledge systems. Economics as the study of how scarce resources are allocated to unlimited ends has become the guiding *mantra* of market proliferation, of State's existence and of human survival. At the same time it erases community, or at least marginalizes, an important source of the knowledge that individuals need to navigate an uncertain world gets eroded too.

Far from strengthening human existence, over-dependence on economics makes humans vulnerable to uncertain market behaviour. The economic meltdown the world is just witnessing has exposed human vulnerability. The impact could have been devastating had globalization been complete! That a majority of the poor, thriving on subsistence economy, have not only survived but promise to provide cushion for the 'economy' to bounce back shows how vulnerable the magic of 'virtual economy' has been!

### **Governance, What?**

Whatever be our belief, human survival is a function of governance. Economics does give us the freedom of using currency as an expression of self-interests, but that freedom is governed by market which works hands-in-glove with the State. One of the ironies of recent history is that just as many countries are delivering greater formal electoral power than ever to their people, so real power around a range of issues which affect ordinary people has been shifting from nations themselves to

super-national levels.

As a consequence, governance has been reduced to a cocktail of 'deficits' such as:

- democratic deficit
- coherence deficit
- compliance deficit
- credibility deficit
- conscience deficit

The cumulative effect of deficit democracy has been felt on a daily basis. A society in transition, made up of a huge 'aspirational class', consequently confronts the unholy trinity of bad policy, inept governance and dumbing down of the public mindscape. The industrial development, as a (bad) policy prescription, induces stress with inner resources to fight back with. You get mind-body-spirit disunity that retail therapy pretends to fix: by stoking our insecurity.

Noted psycho-sociologist Ashis Nandy has rightly observed that the country has become battleground between the two economic systems: capitalist and socialist. Curiously, the socialist commitment is shrinking in favour of capitalist system. The manner in which socialist system (public resources) has been used recently to bail out the capitalist system (market economy) indicates the disturbing shift. It also reflects State's arrogance in taking the electorates for granted in strengthen the state-market nexus.

The State's arrogance has percolated at all levels of (mis)governance, reducing humans as well as landscapes to easy manipulation. Only can an arrogant State venture to alter the geography of the country (through proposed interlinking of rivers) wherein 'imagined community' hails each erroneous move by the State as a step towards much desired progress. Science and wisdom get fossilized in the academic edifices created out of public resources and meant for larger public good.

### Survival, whom?

As we remain part of an 'imagined community', the survival of the bottom 10 per cent only affects us as much. Over 100,000 suicides by farmers mean a significant statistics but don't cause equivalent pain and anguish. The individual and collective consciousness has been held hostage by self-interest in the market of greed. The economics as myths has been all pervasive: promoting individualism, presenting knowledge as algorithm, and the nation as the sole legitimate community.

The handling of dreaded pesticide endosulfan and the equally dangerous white asbestos issue at the recently-concluded Rotterdam Convention reinforces the state-market nexus as much as the fact that the survival of the poorest is not on the State's priority. While the west has always been accused of pushing its hazardous waste and obsolete technologies, the same cannot be accomplished without the connivance of the State, its regulatory machinery and its co-opted academia.

Some years ago, Lawrence Summers, in turn a distinguished economist, government official, and university president, who was then the Chief Economist of the World Bank, sent a memo to one of his subordinates. The memo said in parts:

*Just between you and me shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs...A given amount of health-impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages. I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that...*

*The Economist* (February 8, 1992), to which the memo was leaked, found the language 'crass, even for an internal memo,' but 'on the economics his points are hard to answer.

It might seem outrageous to those who may not be exposed to a course in economics, but for those who go through a college degree in economics the argument seems economical rational. The trouble with economics is that it reduces everything to numbers, measured within the framework of profit and loss.

If in economics terms people either exist as consumers or are relatively non-existent, the natural resources are no more than tradeable commodities. For the market, resource depletion/degradation gets reflected as demand and the cost correction takes care of the shortfall. No wonder, India's Finance Minister while speaking at the Harvard University in 2007 reiterated his government's commitment to extract mineral wealth at the cost of displacing the culture of livelihoods of the poor tribal.

In his seminal work *A Sand Country Almanac*, Aldo Leopold argues: 'we abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect...' Across the world, Leopold's ideas have hardly become mainstream in the six decades since its publication. Amidst tribal cultures, the ethical ties with land and natural resources have been prevalent across continents.

#### **Voice, whose?**

Such feeble voices, of the marginalized, may need to be amplified as much for our survival as for their sustenance. Given the climate change as a universally accepted anthropogenic aberration, the low-carbon lifestyles not only need to be preserved but carefully studied for the survival of future generations. Packaged with such lifestyles are the guiding principles that help us relate to the resources that the humans draw upon.

The landscape transformation and land

use changes are compelling issues that not only concern human survival under some of the adverse conditions but located within them are the secrets to mitigate the perils of climate change. Researchers have already argued that climate change can be dramatically averted if the land use change is not disturbed beyond a limit. What is the limit for each of the diverse eco-regions is a challenge that the geographers need to confront.

Tragically, however, many of our fundamental disciplines have lost their competitive edge. I can easily speak of my own discipline of soil science that has fallen by the wayside when the opportunity to mainstream it in light of food insecurity, land use change, and carbon sink were too hard to ignore. The challenge before other disciplines is no less compelling, should those on whom rest the responsibility to steer it begin to introspect and reinvent.

I'm not particularly enamored by Barak Obama, the US President elect, but what he did say during one of his campaign speeches makes compelling reading. Said he: '*we live in a culture that discourages empathy. A culture that too often tells us our principal goal in life is to be **rich, thin, young, famous, safe and entertained.** I hope you don't listen to this. I hope you choose to broaden, and not contract, your ambit of concern. Not because you have an obligation to those who are less fortunate...it is because you have an obligation to yourself. Because our individual salvation depends on collective salvation. And because it's only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you will realize your true potential 0 and become fully grown, the choice is yours. Will the years pass with barely a whisper from your generation?*'

I hope I make a sense of myself.

Thankyou!

**Further Reading:**

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*The Intimate Enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

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*Identity and violence: The illusion of destiny*, Allen Lane, London.

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