

Sustainable future?

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India's record in environmental protection in the past 25 years is one of early victories followed by setbacks resulting from a shift towards unsustainable development caused by pro-liberalisation reforms.

IN the last quarter of a century, has India been able to balance its attempts to achieve human welfare and prosperity with safeguarding its natural environment? Has it moved towards the goals of sustainable development that it is committed to along with other countries?

The 1970s and 1980s were heady years for all those interested in the environment. There was increasing concern over rising pollution of water and air and the decimation of forests and wildlife, which were witnessed in the period before and after Independence. A number of people's movements brought this to our attention: notable among them were the Chipko activists struggling to save Himalayan forests, several anti-big dam protests in central and southern India and traditional fisher communities agitating against the commercialisation of fisheries. The government, too, responded positively with the creation of a dedicated Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) and the promulgation of path-breaking laws on wildlife, pollution and forests. A new forest policy (1988) shifted focus away from commercial use to ecological and social values. Considerable space was opened up for citizens in the environmental decision-making process; civil society groups were included in expert committees advising the Environment Ministry. The judiciary, too, pitched in with a number of progressive judgments on issues such as pollution, mining and forests.

PERILS OF GLOBALISATION

But the environmental gains of the 1970s and 1980s were temporary. From the early 1990s, the fragile nature of these gains became painfully obvious. New economic policies that ushered India into economic globalisation were initiated in 1991, led by Manmohan Singh as Finance Minister. These included opening up India's economy to global investments, moving towards growth led by exports and middle-class consumption, privatisation of a number of sectors and liberalisation of the regulatory environment to make things easier for industry and commerce. Whether such policies were necessary to stabilise India's economy is itself a big question, but whatever the answer to this, one outcome is undeniable: the country moved further away from sustainability than it had ever been. Here are some indicators. Production and export of minerals and marine fisheries has jumped manifold, with severe consequences for forests, land, water and the coastal/marine environment. Marine product exports (of about 475 items) have gone up from 139,419 tonnes in 1990-91 to 612,641 tonnes in 2006-07. There are visible signs of overfishing in Indian coastal waters, and intensive aquaculture has caused widespread pollution, destruction of local biodiversity and displacement of traditional livelihoods. In 1996, the Supreme Court, acting on citizens' complaints and reports by the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), prohibited non-traditional aquaculture across India. Unfortunately, this is widely violated.

Minerals production has nearly doubled since 1991. Exports constitute a significant portion of the new mining. In the case of lead ores and concentrates, they went up from a mere 543

tonnes in 2003-04 to an astounding 11,02,514 tonnes by 2007-08. Limestone exports shot up from about 200,000 tonnes in 1995-96 to 879,000 tonnes in 2007-08. The environmental and social impacts are horrendous, as witnessed at the blasted limestone and marble hills of the Aravallis and the Shivaliks, the cratered iron ore or bauxite plateaux of Goa, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, the charred coal landscapes of eastern India and the radioactive uranium belt of Jharkhand, to name just a few.

Of all the forest land diverted for non-forest purposes since 1980, over 50 per cent has occurred since 2001, mostly on account of increasing demand for such land by industry and infrastructure. Of the nearly 100,000 hectares of forest land given to mining since 1980, over 70 per cent has been given since 1997. All these areas were also home to traditional communities, which are subject to a new wave of internal colonialism. Already, about 60 million people have been displaced by “development”. The means used by the government and the corporations are diverse: cajoling and bribing village headmen to accept relocation, using outright force as currently being attempted in Orissa’s Adivasi belt, and even cooking up a civil-war-like situation by arming Adivasis to fight Adivasis (in the pretext of controlling naxalism) in Chhattisgarh’s notorious Salwa Judum campaign. If humans are so badly affected, can wildlife be far behind? While the disappearing tiger is repeatedly (and justifiably) in the news, imagine the plight of hundreds of other species that do not get media coverage. Nearly 10 per cent of India’s recorded diversity of 130,000 wild plant and animal species may be heading towards extinction. Mining alone threatens over 90 national parks and sanctuaries, which are supposed to be sacrosanct for wildlife.

MOEF’S UNCONCERN

As this damage intensified over the years, the MoEF should have strengthened the system of environmentally sensitive planning, regulations and safeguards with full involvement of citizens. Unfortunately, it has done precisely the opposite. The 1996 notification on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), designed to make development projects ecologically sensitive, was “re-engineered” in 2006 to weaken it. The Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) notification of 1991 is being changed to provide easier access to natural resources for commercial activities.

A National Environment Policy (NEP) was pronounced in 2006, providing justification for putting economic considerations above environmental ones, despite two years of strenuous opposition by civil society. A Biological Diversity Act (BDA) promulgated in 2003 has remained toothless on matters of conservation and people’s livelihoods. The policy on special economic zones (SEZs) has sidelined the environment. The MoEF itself has been marginalised by a government intent on catching up with a double-digit growth rate at any cost. The overall result of this process is a marked move towards unsustainability.

According to the Global Footprint Network and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), India now has the world’s third largest ecological footprint (after the United States and China), and its citizens are using almost twice what the natural resources within the country can sustain. The capacity of nature to sustain Indians has declined sharply by almost half in the past four decades or so. This, despite an explicit commitment made in India’s 1992 National Conservation Strategy and the Policy Statement on Environment and Development, to “ensure sustainable and equitable use of resources for meeting the basic needs of the present and future generations without causing damage to the environment”.

Six decades after Independence, we do not have a national land-use plan that could safeguard areas crucial for ecological, livelihood and water security. Two decades after professing commitment to sustainable development, we do not have targets and indicators on this in our

Five-Year plans. The above-mentioned policy on environment and development committed the government to an annual natural resources budget that would ensure sustainability in planning; no such budgets are available, even 17 years later. Meanwhile, globalisation has only increased the disparities between the rich and the poor, caused declines or stagnation in the real wages of a huge section of the population and created conditions for mass unrest and conflict. The year 2009 has seen some welcome steps by a new Environment Minister seeking to make a difference. But there is hardly any sign of fundamental changes in environment and development governance. The proposed National Environment Protection Authority, for instance, remains very much embedded within the regulatory framework that has so far failed India's environment and citizens.

TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

In the midst of this gloomy picture, there have emerged many signs of hope. One is a massive increase in environmental awareness generated by governmental and civil society programmes and the media. Awareness of the harmful effects of pesticides, accidents such as the Bhopal gas leak and the impact of climate change has raised more concern in the public than ever before.

There is increasing resistance of people affected by destructive development: Sikkimese monks and Arunachalese youth groups against mega-dams threatening sacred landscapes, villages forcing water-guzzling Coca-Cola plants to shut down, farmers refusing to let their land be taken up for SEZs, and Adivasis in Orissa keeping at bay powerful industrial companies such as Vedanta and POSCO. It is in these that there is hope for the convergence of environmental, human rights, Adivasi, Dalit, women's and other world views, all of which aim to challenge the status quo but have so far not managed to work together on any sustained basis.

Complementing the movements of resistance is some remarkable work on alternative pathways to human welfare and development. This includes the spread of organic farming networks in States such as Maharashtra (and some States, such as Uttarakhand, actively supporting such farming); women's self-help groups (SHGs) making natural resource-based products in many States; decentralised water harvesting providing succour in drought-prone areas such as Alwar in Rajasthan and Palamau in Jharkhand; holistic village development reversing the rural-urban migration in some villages of Maharashtra; self-initiated forest and wildlife conservation by thousands of villages in Orissa, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, Nagaland and other States.

Such efforts are finding strength in laws such as the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), and the Forest Rights Act (FRA), that came in against the tide, thanks to strong civil society mobilisation working with sensitive officials and politicians and political pressure from the Left. The rude shock that climate change is giving people may turn into a major opportunity as the government shows signs of putting significant investments into renewable energy and public transport, and a welcome commitment to reduce the country's carbon intensity. Some corporate bodies are considering different ways of conducting business, though the much-touted corporate social responsibility (CSR) remains mostly a sham. Consumers are getting more aware though fashion-led initiatives such as "green" Bollywood stars, who claim they are doing recycling, are superficial and potentially dangerous if they distract people from the deeper changes needed in their lifestyles.

Will these alternatives show the path to a more sustainable and equitable future? They will, if they are bound together in a more holistic framework and vision where all citizens have full

opportunity to participate in decision-making and where ecological sensitivity permeates such decisions. India still has many communities with age-old traditions of wise-living with the earth. It has some of the most innovative thinkers and doers of the modern era, creating truly revolutionary technologies and institutions. India has the ability to organise peaceful mass movements that can shake the strongest of oppressive forces. Its experiments with decentralised governance are beginning to work, and the stability of its democracy (howsoever incomplete) in a dangerously unstable region is remarkable. So such a radical ecological democracy is entirely within the realms of possibility. In any case, it is certainly less utopian than the empty promises of those who tell India that the current neoclassical model of development will make all Indians prosperous and that such prosperity will be sustained through the generations.

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