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Radical Ecological Democracy

Searching for alternatives to unsustainable and inequitable model of 'development'

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Analysis

Is There A Way Out?

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Change, Colonialism, Development, Environment, Innovation, Nature, New Economy, Policy, Politics, Power Dynamic, Society

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One doesn't need exceptional socio-political acumen to recognize that the contemporary world is in a state of toxic ferment. The dystopian future of environmental and economic collapse that we've seen advancing menacingly for long seems to be pushing fiercely on the door, now, ready to knock it down. 2017 has been a year of dire confirmations of the scary and scandalous trends that have emerged over the last few decades of rampant neoliberalism, firmly pointing us towards potential catastrophes that the earth is ill prepared to face. In a somber report published in July, 2017, the Global Footprint Network, which measures the amount of resources being used internationally so as to keep an eye on the ecological footprint of various human activities and the overall biocapacity of the earth, declared that human beings

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will have used the annual allowance of their planetary resources such as water, soil, forests, and clean air by the 2nd of August. This means that the world will be living in credit for the rest of the year. In fact, the report says that at current consumption rates, the equivalent of 1.7 planets would be required to produce enough to meet the demands of modern living.

On the economic side, too, the current picture is as stark, and marked by utterly dismal levels of inequality. In the two countries that we can talk about with some knowledge, namely the United States and India, worrying trends are visible. The Economic Policy Institute in Washington D.C. informs us that in the United States, the top tenth of the upper one percent now has as much net worth as the bottom 90%. Moreover, of the total income growth since the 2008-09 recession, more than 85% has disappeared into the pockets of the top 1%. Similarly, in India, the richest ten percent now hold nearly 80% of the total wealth. For the super rich, the top 1%, the results are even more breathtaking – they now account for nearly 3/5th of the country's total wealth, about \$1.8 trillion! The picture for the underprivileged, however, is quite different and glaringly dismal. Thirty years ago, before the country opened up its economy, India accounted for about one-fifth of the world's poorest. Today, close to one third of those, or about 400 million, live in India.

Destructive Impact of the Elite Model

It's not an accident that capitalism allows a small minority to corner its largesse. C. Wright Mills, the American sociologist coined the term 'The Power Elite' in the 1950s to describe the nexus between the privileged group of American corporate, political and military elite and how they formed the dominant fulcrum of that society. The electoral process was undermined by big money, and access to high paying jobs became a factor of the neighborhood you grew up in, and consequently the schools and colleges you went to. As C.

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Wright Mills said, “People with advantages are loath to believe that they just happen to be people with advantages.” Variations of the power elite model became popular in the developing world as international finance capital increasingly shifted industrial production to the global south in the last quarter of the 20th century, attracted mainly to the low wages for labor and unrestrictive environmental and labor regulatory regimes. India fell into that swoop in the 90s and since then a small minority has accrued all the benefits of liberalization.

This elite rule has finally run the world aground, and it’s sobering to look at a recent NASA sponsored study to understand its destructive nature. An inter disciplinary research project titled, the ‘Human And Nature Dynamical’ (HANDY) model used mathematics and natural and social sciences to study compelling historical data about interrelated factors – population, agriculture, water and energy usage and climate – to determine the sustainability of the modern civilization. Their conclusions were quite precise and grim – “the global industrial civilization could collapse in coming decades due to unsustainable resource exploitation and increasingly unequal wealth distribution.” Two passages from the study are quite striking:

“... accumulated surplus is not evenly distributed throughout society, but rather has been controlled by an elite. The mass of the population, while producing the wealth, is only allocated a small portion of it by elites, usually at or just above subsistence levels.”

“Technological changes can raise the efficiency of resource use, but it also tends to raise both per capita resource consumption and the scale of resource extraction, so that, absent policy effects, the increases in consumption often compensate for the increased efficiency of resource use.”

The inequality of resource usage, and the process of resource allocation itself, are, both, rapidly propelling the

world towards destruction. Ultimately, according to the study, the high rate of consumption among the elite will lead to the collapse of civilization. Not surprisingly, though, the elite themselves will be buffeted against that destruction longer than the commoners, and yet their refusal to change will make the collapse inevitable. What is interesting is that the methodology used for the HANDY study was inspired by the 'predator and prey model', which is applied in the mathematical analysis of ecosystems where "species compete, evolve and disperse simply for the purpose of seeking resources to sustain their struggle for their very existence." In the study, the researchers used the human population as the predator and nature was the prey. The symbolic relevance of that functional reality within the model is quite telling. The power elite model has become a predatory system of intense exploitation of nature worldwide.

Nature and Capital

The perniciously dependent relationship between capital and nature was formed in the converging maelstrom of western colonialism and the industrial revolution, beginning in the middle of the 18th century and taking off in the next hundred years. Commons, which were hitherto shared by people, were being enclosed as part of private property for exploitation and extraction. Large spheres of life and social processes, which had been untouched by the logic of profit, were beginning to get commodified by the market. These rapid changes would lead to the stiffening of the distinction between society and nature, a process initiated by European patriarchy with very specific ideas of what it meant to be human. While male dominated societies had been a leading feature of Europe, patriarchy married well with nascent industrial capitalism as the white male with his power over the production process became the embodiment of the society and the rest of the world essentially got categorized as nature to be exploited and subjugated. Maria Mies, the

German eco-feminist described capitalism as “the appropriation of women, nature and the colonies.” Those sentiments find an echo in American environmental historian, Jason Moore’s recent book “Capitalism in the Web of Life” where he succinctly points out that, “capitalism is a way of organizing nature.” The gradual consolidation of that process of organization steadily opened up other perverse dichotomies, which were built on the society/nature dualism and clearly characterized by the use of power, domination and periodic violence by one over the other. In Moore’s own words, “this idea of Nature and Society is very deeply rooted in other dualisms of the modern world: the capitalist and the worker, the West and the rest, men and women, white and black, civilization and barbarism. All of these other dualisms really find their taproots in the Nature/Society dualism.”

The Structures of Dominance and Exploitation

The contemporary socio-political structures through which capitalism operates are all closely related to that system’s dominance of nature and all the other entities that got corralled together with it – women, colored people, workers, developing countries/former colonies etc. The white patriarchal elite has been careful in keeping its class contradictions within check by elevating the status of the white working class above that of the colored subordinates – offering them a psychological wage of superiority along with an added preference in medium and low wage employment, till recently that is. Now, capital, in its quest for endless growth on a finite planet has begun bumping up against the natural limits of the planet and that of nature itself. It cannot continue to enclose new “commons” for exploitation and extraction – fossil based energy sources are becoming scarce and prohibitively more expensive to extract, as are the other mineral resources, which have kept the capitalist machine moving. Consequently, capital has had to off load people from the gravy train and cannot, now, continue to guarantee a sustainable superior role and livelihood to the white

working class. The on-going political disaffection among this group in the United States and its anger at the failure of the system to ensure their well being and preeminence has resulted in new and unforeseen developments in the American body-politic including the rise of the authoritarian figure of Donald Trump.

The Rise Of Authoritarianism

Sustained attempts are underway, both, in India and the United States in disassembling the long established egalitarian tenets and promise enshrined in their respective constitutions. A palpable socio-political power grab is afoot at displacing the democratic order situated on institutions and practices, and to replace it with the authority of a person or a group of people who would run the polity on the basis of a moral order underpinned by an ethno-religious majoritarian affinity. It's increasingly apparent that these efforts are now strengthening themselves since the arrival on the political scene by President Trump as well as Prime Minister Modi in India. Similar trends are evident in other parts of the world, too. The Egyptian Spring, for instance, offered a glimpse of the people's power but eventually muddled through the rule of an obscurantist religious party to end up in the arms of an ex-army general. The ethno-religious upsurge in Eastern Europe is a cause of much concern regarding the fate of its shaky democratic structure. The clenching hold over power of the autocratic regimes in China, Russia and North Korea shows no signs of slackening. Even in South America, popular progressive experiments have come to a grinding halt, as ruling groups are unable to unshackle themselves from the hold of developmentalism and neo-extractivism on their imagination, or to overcome the cult of personality driven transformation to figure out societal solutions. The betrayal of the revolutionary cause by Syriza in Greece is yet another example of how liberal democratic models are failing the people, as they ignore the need to build political capacity amongst people at large,

towards more radical democracy.

The rise of authoritarianism and the failure of liberal democracies are predicated on the inequality inherent in the capitalist mode of development and its intensely destructive impact on the earth's climate and environment.

Neoliberalism is incapable of offering meaningful solutions to the current global emergencies like climate change and acute wealth disparity. In fact, capital perpetuates those problems for its own survival and to effectively retain a crucial hold on the power dynamic. Not surprisingly, then, in the face of an assertive populace seeking remedies to their economic struggles and that to the worsening environmental situation around them, the ruling elite has devolved back to the templates that have served it well in the past. The time tested psychological undervaluation of the "other" as seen in caste and race based discrimination in India and the United States or its violent manifestation in the rapidly increasing cases of lynching of Muslims and "untouchables" by Hindu mobs in India, and police brutality against the blacks in the U.S., as well as the rise of proto-fascist white supremacist groups are unambiguous displays of that societal power dynamic. It's not surprising that "lynching", an American invention for authoritarian subordination of the "other", has translocated so seamlessly to India. The creation of a second-class citizenry is essential for the appropriation of the diminishing resource base for the elite in both countries, and an authoritarian regime makes it easier and certain to fabricate the gradual cessation of the democratic expectation of egalitarian access to resources.

The Search for Alternatives

There has to be a way out of this distressing and bleak situation that we find ourselves in, and many attempts are being made all over the world in search of that path. As discontent with the current economic, political, environmental and social dispensation, and its dodgy structures continues to grow, it is increasingly becoming

clear that change will only come through collective action and mobilization of people. Political resistance to climate apathy, exploitative capitalist overreach, patriarchy, racism, elite corruption, social inequality and authoritarian politics is gaining ground all over the world. Indigenous people all over the world are organizing against the pressures of neo-extractivism. There are strong protests being organized against the neoliberal structure of the G20 and WTO. Even in the United States there is growing progressive resistance to the Trump agenda. People are beginning to question the fundamental threat of the capitalist ideology, which has consolidated its hold based on patriarchy and other forms of concentration of power, to the very existence of the earth. But, given the consolidated and universal nature of the threat that capital and neo-liberalism pose to the planet, as well as the dexterity and suppleness of their physical and ideological flow around the world, movements of resistance do face a sneaky adversary to nail down.

While environmental, social and economic justice movements are built around ethical ideas and principles and often manage to extract significant concessions from the ruling elites, they now have to think of and work towards alternatives, which take the society on an ecologically secure and socio-economically egalitarian path, and away from societal self-destruction. Many such attempts are taking place all over the world. The pertinent question is, how many countries have achieved development decades after the notion of 'development' was spread around the world? Frankly, only a handful of countries can be called 'developed', others are merely struggling to emulate them, and all are doing this at enormous ecological and social cost. The international power elite has introduced new ideas like "green economy" to address this issue of the development lag and to enable economic growth and investment while increasing environmental quality and social inclusiveness. It's a fig leaf of an idea, which diverts attention from the problems of concentration of economic and political power

in the hands of an elite, the wasteful dominance of consumerism on the popular psyche and the resource intensive nature of the production process.

The genuine alternatives to the destructive juggernaut of corporate and finance capital are emerging as much from contemporary progressive resistance as it is from the wisdom of indigenous peoples' and other traditional community world-views, which have survived the disastrous colonial and imperial onslaught on their land as well as consciousness over the last four centuries. This includes *buen vivir*, a culture of life with different names and varieties in various regions of South America; *Ubuntu* with its emphasis on human mutuality in southern Africa and several equivalents in other parts of the continent; *Swaraj* with a focus on self-reliance and self-governance, in India; and many others. Borne out of the soil, the climate and the geographical and environmental coordinates of a particular area, these efforts, in fact, are the original ways of being which are beckoning us to an ancient future of ecological resilience and democratic egalitarianism and multiple ways of knowing and being; importantly, many inequities inherent in traditional cultures are also being challenged in these re-assertions. They are complemented by more recent alternatives such as *ecofeminism*, *ecosocialism*, and *degrowth*, or recent reframing of old systems such as the *commons* and *solidarity economies*, many of which question the destructiveness of unilinear modernity. (Ashish is involved in bringing out a compilation of several dozen such alternative world-views from around the world, a Post-Development Dictionary. He moderates a conversation with other participants in this effort, elsewhere on the site).

Radical Ecological Democracy

“Radical Ecological Democracy” (RED) is one such emerging paradigm based on which we can fashion a meaningful future. It has emerged from the grassroots experience of communities and civil society practicing or conceiving of

alternatives across the range of human endeavor in India (where it is becoming known as 'eco-swaraj' or 'prakriti swaraj'), but has resonance in all other regions of the world. RED is a framework that respects the limits of the Earth and the rights of other species, while pursuing the core values of social justice and equity. With its strong democratic and egalitarian impulse, it seeks to empower every person to be a part of decision-making, and its holistic vision of human wellbeing encompasses physical, material, socio-cultural, intellectual and spiritual dimensions. Rather than the state and the corporation, it puts collectives and communities at the center of governance and the economy, an approach that is grounded in real-life initiatives across the world. The RED approach recognizes that it is only one of a large diversity of such approaches, with some mentioned above, and does not seek to replace them or become an overarching framework.

The RED approach rests on the following intersecting spheres: ecological wisdom and sustainability, economic democracy, social wellbeing and justice, direct political democracy, and cultural diversity. Fundamental to it is a set of values that include diversity, autonomy, cooperation and solidarity, rights with responsibilities, equity and justice, inclusion, simplicity and sufficiency, respect for all life, non-violence, interconnectedness and dignity of labor. RED is an evolving approach, not a blueprint set in stone. In its very process of democratic grassroots evolution, it forms an alternative to top-down ideologies and formulations, even as it takes on board the relevant elements of such ideologies.

The Website

The RED website is an effort at exploring some of the ideas, practices, hopes and visions that can contribute to the evolution of our formulation of Radical Ecological Democracy. We would like REDWeb to become the hopeful home for all the people thinking about, working towards and fighting for transformation, and of course not necessarily

under that banner, but rather respectfully open to a diverse range of radical alternative paradigms and worldviews.

Here are a few thoughts about what REDweb would aspire to be:

- REDWeb should be a place for the expression of original ideas through new articles – how are people thinking about climate change, environmental stress points, assertions for community and individual human rights, ecological politics, new power dynamics, socio-cultural expressions through fiction and poetry and art, conceiving alternative ways of structuring the economy and polity, society and culture ... towards fundamental, structural, systemic transformation.
- a venue for access to relevant news stories – what's happening in the fields of research, grassroots initiatives, activism, public policy, legislation, economics and politics.
- a bulletin board for action oriented information – what kinds of struggles are taking place in various parts of the world; what kinds of protests need support; where is there an immediate need for financial assistance; what are the forthcoming conferences, workshops, festivals, meets for people; what kinds of legislative initiatives are disastrous and need to be opposed; what are the places where people have triumphed over corporate and political exigencies.
- an access point for information on indigenous, community, feminist, spiritual and other (old and new) ways of being, worldviews, cosmologies, and wisdom that are radical alternatives to the currently dominant system.
- a reference point for the old and new thoughts on economy, ecology, politics and society – from Marx to Gandhi to Ambedkar to Tagore to Arendt to Gramsci to Schumacher to Luxemburg to Poulantzas to Bookchin to Carson to Illich to Ocalan to Marcos and a host of indigenous peoples' and local community voices.

With this agenda in mind and critically conscious of the

submergence of the socio-political discourse under free market fundamentalism, patriarchy and statism, we have initiated the RED website to create a new synergy between movements and the search for alternative ways of being, by facilitating the possibility of learning from and shaping radical and revolutionary narratives.

In solidarity,

Ashish Kothari and Pallav Das

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Ashish Kothari and **Pallav Das** are co-founders of Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group

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