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INDIA: WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

- RETHINK
- EDIFY
- DELINEATE



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- ▶ Working Out Change
- ▶ Collective Action
- ▶ Inner Engineering
- ▶ Lilliputian Trap
- ▶ Enduring Ideas
- ▶ Finite Planet

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GREAT INDIAN DREAM FOUNDATION PRESENTATION

“JUST ENVIRONMENTS” ANALYZING THE POLITICS OF POLICY-MAKING ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT



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Contemporary India's developmental and environmental challenges are tagged to a strange paradox. Most of the mineral and forest resource rich areas are inhabited by tribals, by far the most marginalized people within Indian society. The fact that apparent opportunities are right where poverty is most intensely concentrated is like a dream come true situation for those comfortable with SWOT analyses. However, the situation as of today couldn't be further removed from the ideal: we are witness to intense economic, political, and cultural struggle around the questions of environment and development in these resource rich areas inhabited by the poorest of the poor. How did we end up in 'Operation Green Hunt' instead of focusing our attention on fighting poverty and marginality of a sizeable section of India's citizens? Why couldn't we work on what looks like very optimistic outcomes of our SWOT analyses?

On the one hand, this paradox exposes the futility of reified economic analyses couched in terms of GDP and growth rates, and drives home the point about the significance of cultural and political dimensions of the development process in a hugely diversified and complex society such as ours. This article is an attempt to focus on some of the prominent lapses in our understanding of India's development processes, an analysis which is then employed to understand the linkages between economic growth, social justice, and ecological sustainability. Finally, the article also sketches what management jargon refers to as Key Responsibility Areas (KRAs) vis-à-vis the domain of development, broadly understood, to address the fundamental goals of social justice and ecological sustainability. The article begins by developing a political economy perspective on India's experience in the fields of environment and development.

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(Re)Tracing Our Development Trajectory

The development of capitalism in India differs significantly from that of its western counterparts. First, universal suffrage came to most of the western democracies only after the industrial revolution had matured. Thus the western economies didn't have to pay attention to the demands of a democratic polity (Varshney 2007). More importantly, as Sudipta Kaviraj (1990) argues, in Europe capitalism emerged in institutions within civil society and the state was later used as an instrument to correct inequities generated by capitalism.

In India on the other hand, the state was instrumental in initiating and supporting the rise of (state-led) capitalism (ibid.). Therefore, the corrections made through state intervention in Europe were not successful in India. In fact, because of high levels of inter-group inequity in access to and control over state authority, the state has practically worked as an extension of social and political elites (Kohli 1987).

At the same time, as far as so-called socialist policies are concerned, other than the international political economy that may have compelled policy makers to put in place a protectionist regime, there is evidence to believe that state control over economy was exercised because it also afforded the ruling party the opportunities to control the flow of licenses and permits in favor of those who sponsored elections campaigns (Varshney 1999). This is indeed a far cry from loud pronouncements overemphasizing the social concerns informing economic policies. As a result, we have not been able to put in place an effective welfare system, something that all industrializing western economies benefitted greatly from (Dreze and Sen 2002; Varshney 2007). Thus, our economic policies differ significantly from those of western democracies

either in the origins or in ambience.

Let us now turn our attention to the arena of environmental policies. While a lot has been written about environmentalism of the poor as manifested in a variety of environmental movements in India, state policies too have had its own environmental focus. Even while Indira Gandhi was shining in the afterglow of her “poverty is the biggest polluter” Stockholm speech, her government was putting in place the Wildlife (Protection) Act. Implementation of the act arguably pushed several million forest dwellers further into poverty as they were denied basic amenities for health, education, water, and sanitation.

Forest dwelling communities have lived in and around forest areas for generations. In the middle of nineteenth century, the British colonial administration declared as public forestlands the vast areas of ‘wilderness’, already inhabited, cultivated, and collectively protected by forest dwellers and tribal communities. Similarly, the colonial administration put in place several national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. As the cliché goes, with a stroke of a pen, tribals and other forest dwellers were robbed of their livelihood rights. But that could be attributed to the nature of colonialism.

One would have hoped that once we attained independence, such colonial wrongs would be rectified, particularly given that the Indian Forest Act 1927, which is the basis for our forestry administration, provides for elaborate processes of ensuring that all prior claims and rights are settled before finally notifying a land as public forestland. However, notwithstanding the repeated government resolutions (Asher and Agarwal 2007) and endless promises made by ruling politicians, we have not only failed to rectify historical injustices, but have also continued to violate democratic norms by discriminating against forest dwellers by systematically ignoring their basic development needs (Guha 2007). At the same time, the forest department and environmental NGOs tried to push the issue under the carpet and tried to continue with business as usual as if the problem didn’t exist. The Parliament of India did finally manage to promulgate the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, to rectify these and

other historical injustices meted out to forest dwellers. However, it looks as if a section of the establishment is not willing to give in to democratic decision-making (Bijoy 2008), arguing that the agenda of environmental conservation cannot be held hostage to populist politics (Suykens 2009). If at all one could put aside the question of human costs involved, the record of the Indian state in maintaining its control over forests could arguably be called overzealous. Unlike the West where civil society has to push their governments really hard to take stringent environmental measures, Indian governments or at the least, sections of the bureaucracy and political leadership have for long demonstrated a stated enthusiasm for environmental protection (Visvanathan 2002). Ironically, this apparent enthusiasm of the state is directed at almost solely at controlling the livelihoods of forest dwellers without making good of the constructive

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possibilities. For instance, the environmentalist critics of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) pretend to ignore a key aspect of the act. The FRA also gives communities the statutory right to collectively protect and manage their forests, something that the analysts believe is crucial in building a strong community forestry movement in the country (Kothari 2009). Anyone interested in promoting ecological conservation should have lapped this

provision up. However, the critics, aided by a section of English media, are only interested in propagating the FRA as a land grants program that stands to destroy all of India’s forests.

On the other hand, record shows that the state has not shown any urgency in protecting India’s forests and other natural resources from the environmental impact caused by industrial projects. Take for instance, the case of diversion of forestland for non-forestry activities. It is interesting that about 45% of the total forest land diverted in 23 years since 1980, has taken place in the period 1999-2003! Noted conservationist Ashish Kothari (Kothari Undated) believes that the trend is clearly linked to the process of India’s adoption of liberal economic policies and maturing of these policies by the end of the 1990s. Indeed, there have been gross violations, such as in the case of energy-industrial enclave being devel-

oped by M/s Vedanta Alumina Limited in Orissa. According to the Central Empowered Committee appointed by the Supreme Court, the state government and the Union Ministry of Environment & Forests, worked over-time and against the statute in rushing to grant Vedanta permissions for mining in a protected area important culturally and in terms of biodiversity (Anon 2006).

Considering the evidence above, it may be reasonable to argue that assessments of ‘environmental impact’ of different kinds of activities described above do not seem to be based on the science of conservation. Rather the policy responses seem to have been molded to fit the long-standing power relations. The poor and marginal certainly seem to be at the receiving end of our economic as well as environmental policies. By virtue of their marginal social and political position, tribals and other forest dwelling communities have been put at a disadvantage rather systematically. This inference is quite far from the rather cynical depiction of politics among the opinion-makers in our society, namely that policy-makers pander to the masses at the cost of “national interests” (as if the national interests had nothing to do with the masses). This profound gap between reality and the received wisdom about how India’s polity functions needs to be understood, communicated, and debated within our society. The next section offer introductory illustration of such an approach to understanding policy-making processes.

The Politics of Policy-making: Authoritative Allocation of Values

It seems pertinent to recall eminent political scientist David Easton’s words: “Every society provides some mechanisms, however rudimentary they may be, for authoritatively resolving differences about the ends that are to be pursued, that is, for deciding who is to get what there is of the desirable things.” (Easton 1953 in Mitchell 1961 p. 81) Elections and other pillars of democracy, viz. legislature, executive, judiciary, and media constitute such mechanisms. For these institutions to function as democratic mechanisms, they should have proper representation of the masses within a society. However, despite the continuation of affirmative

action policies, marginalized communities, particularly tribals, are grossly underrepresented within higher echelons of politics, bureaucracy, judiciary, and media (Xaxa 2001). Even when they do make it to these bodies, a lack of intra-party democracy, and a poor ideological footing of our electoral democracy, means that the leaders remain grossly under-informed and effectively disempowered. To illustrate, a tribal Member of Parliament (MP) from Madhya Pradesh who also was a former union cabinet minister, and who this author met in connection with a research on environmental governance, believed that policy-making was really the job of bureaucrats and all that elected representatives could do was to raise questions in parliament. While this may be the case by default, a proper understanding of democratic authority of elected representatives is the critical first step in elected representatives exercising their authority in practice. Recent

research by this author shows that such imperfect understanding of our democratic institutions and their own role as elected representatives is quite widespread among political leaders representing marginal communities. Clearly, in a polity that is run almost wholly on the basis of caste and other group affiliations (Bardhan 2001), marginalized communities are certainly put at a representational disadvantage.

When quality representation is not achieved, as seems to be the case in India, social preference for democratic values of equality and justice is a must for broad basing development. Unfortunately, the otherwise rich traditions of our ancient civilization may not be of much help on this count. Socio-economic equality is not a value traditionally held dear by a majority of Indians as Dr. Ambedkar clarified during the Constituent Assembly debates. Dr. Ambedkar remarked that “democracy was only a top dressing on an Indian soil that was essentially undemocratic” (Beteille 2002). Indeed, Indian religious traditions emphasize charity-driven notions of welfare rather than development and empowerment rooted in ideas of citizenship rights. This has far reaching implications for our current paradoxes. Sans a societal preference for equity, concerns of uneven gains from economic development or costs arising out of environmental conservation may be brushed aside by the ruling elite, or

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Disempowering “Environments”: Irony of Misplaced Priorities

Environmentalism in our day and age is being defined by climate change. While the debate is couched mostly in jargon incomprehensible to the layperson (Monbiot 2009), the message seems to be that it is a global problem affecting everyone equally, and planting as many trees as possible is going to save us from extinction. Whether it be the National Mission for a ‘Green India’, or the state level initiatives such as Gujarat’s much hyped ‘Climate Change Department’, large scale plantations seems to be in vogue. Such a focus makes a travesty of vast experience we have gathered over the years in environmental conservation. If there is an undeniable lesson that we should have imbibed all these years, it is that plantations don’t survive and they are not an answer to our environmental concerns. When a large number of nurseries were promoted as part of a social forestry program in the 1960s, community members in Gujarat warned NGOs that their efforts would be futile. “Why don’t you help us protect natural forests”, asked a village elder (Rathwa 2009)? Very few NGOs took his or others’ words seriously even as hundreds of communities have proved this by successfully regenerating natural forests on the same sites that the forest department tried to ‘afforest’ in vain. Despite all the rhetoric about community participation, our forest department and environmentalists have largely failed to listen to, work with, and support community initiatives. This failure is illustrated rather starkly in the (sad) story of Joint Forest Management (JFM) in India.

For those new to the subject, JFM was a program launched with great fanfare with the basic principle of seeking community participation in conservation of public forests. Communities were to get anywhere between 50% to 90% share of the timber harvested in addition to all of the selected non-timber forest produce from forests protected by communities. Forest department was supposed to assist communities in this endeavor. Almost twenty years after the Government of India brought out the JFM circular, experience from around the

country would suggest there is very little to contest of the following: hundreds of communities’ have successfully protected and regenerated forests around their own villages. On the other hand, in most cases, forest department has erected insurmountable walls of bureaucratic excuses to rob communities of the shares in forest produce due to them as per JFM rules. Moreover, promoters of JFM, have singularly failed at offering moral as well as material support to the participating communities. In a nutshell, as of today, communities may justifiably feel that the government is not really serious about forest conservation. Moreover, they have come out of this experience with a feeling of being cheated by all those who promised them large dividends if only they could help protect the forests that they lived around.

Let us now gaze the “mainstream” economy. The Government of Gujarat, for instance, has come up with a self-declared revolutionary idea of “green credits”. It aims to motivate industry to undertake green initiatives, earn green credits, and then feel entitled to spend these green credits in being able to pollute in the industrial production process. Anyone who has been watching the government’s response to community efforts at forest protection cannot help but wonder what local communities may have to do to earn their

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green credits. Why hasn’t the same government made any announcement to hundreds of communities throughout the state that have already protected their forests for decades? While the communities have been rather systematically deprived of the benefits they were promised, their livelihoods will certainly be affected adversely if the lands in rural and tribal areas were to be developed with a plan that does not

take into account their livelihood needs. In addition to large scale plantations, many of the other initiatives launched apparently with an aim of mitigating climate change, such as biodiesel plantations, will adversely affect both natural resources and the people whose survival is linked to these resources.

The key insights that the analyses above offer are the following: the rhetoric of democratic populism and social welfare has not been translated into real achievements. Therefore, it is futile to label past policies as having favored



the poor. Our development policies and programs have been an utter failure and society needs to own up to this. Second, assuming that parliamentary democracy is the framework within which we want to pursue our societal goals, we will have to devise mechanisms through which developmental goals and aspirations of all sections our population can be taken care of. This is the only way in which we are going to make good the opportunities of developing our mineral and forest rich areas where the poorest of our fellow citizens live (Narain 2009). The concluding section attempts to outline elements that could effectively operationalize our democratic intent.

Looking to the Future: The KARs

One of the fundamental goals of any development framework has to be to achieve a balance between the powers of the state and those of market players, each of which are likely to play a

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significant role in defining our development trajectory in the future. Such balancing requires a robust ‘civil society’. Though civil society is one of the most confused terms, Prof. Andre Beteille offers a simple and profound formulation of the concept. He argues that civil society must be understood as a combination of three distinct components: State, citizenship, and mediating institutions (Beteille 2002).

To put it briefly, we have to make sure that a constitutional State, which runs purely on the basis of the rule of law, needs to be nurtured and protected. Building upon the analyses already presented above, one could list umpteen instances where the state authorities have failed the rule of law when it comes to the entitlements of the poor and the marginal. It is in the interest of all those concerned to see a developed Indian democracy that we partake in social efforts at protection of the constitutional state. This could happen only if we believe in the notion of citizenship, again a concept that is new to Indian civilization. At the risk of sounding romantic and clichéd, it must be stated that our success at effectively addressing our developmental and environmental challenges is closely tied to the sanctity that we accord to the notion of citizenship and citizens’ rights. However, considering the level of inter-group inequities, lack of accountability of the state

officials, and poor enforcements of the rule of law, the importance of ‘mediating institutions’ cannot be overemphasized.

As an illustration, let us consider the case of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which was hotly debated before its inception. Many objected to it saying that we could not afford the resources in a time where we needed to be fiscally responsible. Though fiscal concerns are no doubt important, it is also important that once a legislation has been put in place, a similar concern is also demonstrated to demand effective implementation. After all, it is the hard work of citizens of this country that goes into funding any of our state investments. Gram Panchayat are supposed to conduct social audits of NREGS implementation. Selected social audit facilitated by NGOs have revealed significant irregularities, which has received some media attention. However, in the absence of a facilitative role played by NGOs or individual activists,

ordinary villagers, who are constrained by existing power structures find it difficult question local elites (lest rural folks are accused of inaction, let us think how many city dwellers could demand accountability of their municipal council representatives). A lack of interest among educated and salaried citizens means that local government officials who want to escape accountability have an easy escape despite mechanisms like social audits being in place. And, the profligate wastage of our public resources program after program continues. Fortunately, in India we have had several remarkable civil society initiatives that we can learn from. A few examples, pertinent to the discussion on environment and development policies, are below.

Prajateerpu (<http://www.prajateerpu.org/>), literally translated from Telugu as 'the people's verdict', is a combination of public hearings, action research, and policy advocacy, first initiated to allow public deliberation over the Vision 2020 proposed by Government of Andhra Pradesh. The process has connected the local to the global by bringing in views of ordinary Andhra peasants and taking them to national and international fora. For instance, findings from Prajateerpu were the basis for debates in U.K. parliament regarding development aid extended to the Government of Andhra Pradesh by the Department for International Development (DFID).

The second example relates to a public hearing conducted in May 2001 by eminent academics and journalists at Indpura forest village, in Harda district of Madhya Pradesh. The event was organized to listen to the grievances of the forest dwellers deprived of fundamental freedoms unaccountable forest officials acting in the name of participatory forest management under the rubric of JFM. In the preceding months, local tribal groups taking out a protest march against the undemocratic practices of forest department officials had been shot at (Sundar 2001). The Harda public hearing brought to the national stage the challenges of environmental conservation given our feudal past, over-empowered state, and dysfunctional civil administration in remote rural and tribal hinterlands.

Another notable illustration of such a mechanism at the

national level is the National Advisory Council (NAC)¹, constituted by the first UPA government. NAC was set up as an interface with Civil Society in regard to the implementation of the National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP) of the Government of India. The council comprised of distinguished professionals drawn from diverse fields of development activity who served in the capacity of enlightened and experienced citizens. Through the NAC, the Government had access not only to their expertise and experience but also to a larger network of Research Organizations, NGOs and Social Action and Advocacy Groups. Unfortunately this highly commendable and reasonably successful effort has been abandoned since its first term expired in March 2008.

Public hearings and consultations, social audits, and citizens' councils are the weapons of democracy that we need

to put in place. Such mechanisms, if designed and run properly, have immense potential in holding the state and market players accountable to the ordinary citizens of this country. This insight, arrived here from the analyses of the ground situation, and the author's understanding of making functional the ideals of our democracy, has also been recognized in an authoritative history of global democracy penned by John Keane (2009). Talking about substan-

tive democracy, Keane argues, "there are signs as well that the theory and practice of democracy are mutating, that its significance is changing because its institutions are being stretched into areas of life in which democracy in any form was previously excluded, or played little or no role. Once seen as given by the grace of a deity, democracy is viewed pragmatically as a handy weapon for use against concentrations of unaccountable power"². That should be one of the KRAs: to work towards putting meat on the skeleton of democracy that was put in place by the framers of our constitution. It is the responsibility of all of us – academics, doctors, lawyers, business executives, media professionals, artists, and elected representatives to be part of and support a variety of citizens' initiatives, which in turn will work as, in the words of Prof. Beteille, the social counterparts of our political institutions. Only if this is done, will we be able to address questions of

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social equity and environmental conservation, and in the process protect the constitutional state that was visualized by our founding fathers. [IER](#)

End Notes

- ¹ This paragraphs draws liberally upon the NAC details offered on the Prime Minister's official website <http://pmindia.nic.in/nac/welcome.html>
- ² http://www.thelifeanddeathofdemocracy.org/glossary/glossary_monitory_democracy.html

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