

## *Development as war (and its alternative)*

### *The Indian experience and its future*

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*"Freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means."*

Amartya Sen

- 25 years after the Berlin Wall came down, a wall much thicker, longer, taller and more invisible, has gone up around the global world, increasingly dividing it into what one writer has called "tourists" and "vagabonds" (Bauman).
- Amartya Sen's characterization of 'Development as Freedom' is a highly idealistic (prescriptive, more than descriptive) interpretation. The ground reality is that development, at least since 1991 (if not since 1947) has been unfolding as a form of warfare. War, not freedom, is the right grid for making sense of the processes of development.

Some features common to both development and war:

- The aim is victory. Both are global, internationally played out, 'games' meant to have winners and losers.
- The means and modes (rules) of war - in particular, *competition* - have become the rules of economy and society everywhere.
- Around the world, *strategy* plays as key a role in development as it does in warfare.
- Development, like war, generates *insecurity* in human societies, even where it 'succeeds'.
- *Uncertainty* now plagues industrialising countries as much as the industrialised world.
- *Exclusion*, often *elimination*, is as much of a structural feature of development as of war. It is also intrinsic to the success of development that it eliminates any alternative to the dominant role of corporations, before pronouncing TINA.
- Both war and development generate *collateral damage*. Among other things, the natural world is a victim of both war and development.
- **Development has been, from its modern inception, an imperial doctrine.** (The important work of Gilbert Rist tells the full story in detail.) It has served imperial goals of resource access and business expansion since the early days of the World Bank (1944) and President Truman's Second Inaugural speech in 1949, which deployed the category of 'underdevelopment' for the very first time. Suddenly, the decolonizing world was perceived to be 'underdeveloped' and the great powers had an obligation to 'develop' them. This is the fundamental reason why no model of development which leaves out corporations will be understood by most people today as 'development'.
- Importantly, no significant leader during the Freedom struggle, certainly not Gandhi and Tagore, or even Ambedkar and Nehru, thought of India's problems and challenges in terms of the notion of development. **Development was not part of the discourse of the freedom struggle.** In an important chapter in his book written from Ahmednagar jail *Glimpses of World History*, Nehru expressed deep skepticism about the rise of a new form of imperial domination and colonial

exploitation represented by the United States, whereby direct annexation was not essential to control a country's destiny.

- Significantly, **the word development makes just two humble appearances in the Indian Constitution**, in Articles 38 and 243.
- But **development in India, as in many other countries, is as inevitable as it is impossible**. It is inevitable because that is how, in a globalised world, global elites think of human betterment and “progress”. There is no other imagination for “the good life” (conceived differently, for instance, by some movements in Latin America, as “buen vivir”). No matter how unsustainable and unjust the prevailing trajectory is, powerful decision-makers are unable/unwilling to think outside the box they find themselves in. Development is also impossible, as we have seen from the repeated failure of trickle-down policies for the generation of jobs and reduction of poverty and hunger. It is also impossible because of the ecologically unsustainable nature of the growth of recent decades. A 2013 World Bank report shows that at least 5.7% of India's GDP is being lost every year because of loss of the natural resource base for the economy. With time, the deteriorating natural environment (including, especially, but not only, energy supplies and climate change) will act more and more as a brake on growth.
- Development is also impossible in India because there are at least **5 reasons why the expected development transition is unlikely to happen** here (*Churning the Earth*).
- Marxist and Left economists have thought of India's challenges in virtually teleological terms, as though development was ultimately possible, perhaps under a socialist regime. But **they have always thought of human society in terms of exploitation, not redundancy/exclusion/elimination!** The modes of stratification in a speedily globalizing world are driven by technologies of finance, office and factory automation, extraction, transport, communication, security and surveillance. Most importantly, in a world of smooth capital flows and tightly regulated labor mobility, the power to move determines the fate of people.
- **We need an ecological, not merely an environmental, perspective on the economy**, if it is to ever approach sustainability. The latter treats the natural world as an afterthought to the world of human society and economy, when in fact it is the basis and the precondition!
- From a world of mountains and oceans, rivers and lakes forests and pastures, we have been invited to live in a world of hubs and corridors. But geographical place is ecologically more determinate than abstract space and will ultimately have the last laugh. To align with such a world again, **we need a refreshing of cultural cognition** (which must form the basis of ecological education in schools and colleges), so badly fractured today by media hype and commercial propaganda.
- While the big winners of the global economy are busy trying to build a “smarter planet”, everyone, without exception, is now caught in the crossfires of **the war that is unfolding between capital and nature**, between Mammon and the elements. The primary global axis of conflict and tension is now between the weightless, opaque abstractions and transactions of global finance and the weighty, transparently concrete realities of ecology and the natural world. The physical economy and human society lie on the vulnerable gradient between these two powerful vectors. The predicament of different countries around the world is best captured through the metaphor of “cars racing on a sinking ship” (*Churning the Earth*).
- While the West has moved from feudal to bourgeois to mass to, now, global society, India lives in all four phases simultaneously, depending on where you look. Yet, it has to be granted that the hegemonic discourse - via the media - now fastens its attention on **the global Indian**.
- As Karl Polanyi had expected, the subjugation of human society by the market is now virtually complete everywhere. This is clear when you notice how nobody feels much shame when, in administrative matters, society has been reduced to ‘the social sector’. Every country on the planet is being remodelled in order to make it “smarter”. Ferdinand Tonnies' late 19th century observation that *gemmeinschaft* (face-to-face, informal community social relations) was being overtaken by *gesellschaft* (formal, contractual, legal social relations) now needs to be updated. *wirtschaft* - business and the economy, with their multiple practices, all oriented towards the maximisation of profits, revenues and economic growth, fundamentally reorienting human social

relations in a commercial direction - has now become the mainstay of human societies. The world increasingly lives not so much in a society as in an economy.

- **The Facebook metaphor** describes the manner in which real communities have been destroyed to enable an artificial, commercially redeemable society to form on the internet.
- Yet, India's (and perhaps much of the Third World's) case is different from that of the West. In Britain, Mrs. Thatcher could win three successive elections while brazenly declaring that "there is no such thing as society". If an Indian politician were to come out openly and say "*samaaj jaisi koi cheez nahi hoti*", s/he could not even win a Panchayat election! It means that *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft* still live a powerful, subterranean existence under the globally agile forces of *wirtschaft*. **Community relations still define the primary social identity of most Indians and people in the developing world** in a way foreign to the Western, industrialised world where citizenship (with respect to the State) and consumer and professional status (with respect to the corporate economy) define and virtually exhaust a person's social identity. Till recently, India has escaped what one writer has called the "forceful individualisation of destiny" (Bauman). This gives India and the developing world a huge advantage over the industrialised world in creating sustainable local and regional economies, given reams of research which shows **how important communities are in securing the health of common property resources**, to take just one example.
- Within *gesellschaft*, the state is now decisively corporate, the compensations of a welfare state in retreat everywhere. In India, the corporatization of the State is revealed by policies which are all investor-friendly now. **Investor sovereignty**, not consumer sovereignty, as the rhetoric would have it, is the law of the day. Given that investors are the among the few elite players not bound by place and location, economically consequential decisions are made through remote-control mechanisms. In India, given the enormity of the country, it turns development, ever more, into outright war, as in Chhattisgarh and Odisha. Security and surveillance industries profit as the garrison State grows.
- The massive mobilisation of land, water-bodies and forests over the past two decades has turned India rapidly into a **rent-seeking economy**, where profits are high and quick as opposed to genuinely productive sectors where they are low and slow. The fact is directly related to the growing phenomenon of political entrepreneurship in multiple forms, explaining the growing hundreds of dollar millionaires both in and outside Parliament.
- Inequality is the natural outcome of this process of "predatory growth" (Bhaduri). What India has been experiencing is inequality-led exclusive growth. The story is captured through the metaphor of "the drunken stunted dog" (*Churning the Earth*).
- Inequality is not merely a matter of concern insofar as socio-economic justice is concerned. **There are reasons beyond justice that metropolitan elites should be worried about growing inequalities, for it concerns their very ecological survival**, as the Mumbai floods of 2005 indicated. As metropolitan elites retreat into more seemingly secure "green bubbles", they have less and less everyday contact with the natural world and its decline and are thus more likely to push policies which endanger the climate and far-flung habitats (for instance, the Himalayas) whose ecological health has implications even for those living seemingly far from them.
- The metaphors of **the gilded fly-swat, the gilded fan-squat, and the fan of globalisation** describe visually the impasse of development in a world run by global finance, the cloud elites and the mining mafias.
- **The future? Success will be the worst failure!** Consider the possibility that policy elites succeed in moving, over the next 15-20 years 80-85% of India into cities, or convert villages, in situ, into "smart cities". What then? How will 1500 million people be fed? What happens to the natural world in a scenario where most people in this country are living outside the rhythms of nature? (Reductio ad absurdum)
- Ultimately, a radical shift, whose signs are not even remotely present in the prevailing dispensation, is needed in the policy frame itself, if India is to be greeted by a future of ecological, economic and cultural well-being. We need a veritable revolution in human thought! A

**consensual ecological democracy** (*Harit Swaraaj*), with determinate law-making powers for the third tier of government, is the proper framework within which to think of the correct approaches to challenges like conservation and livelihood generation beyond agriculture. Crafts, for instance, used to be the very basis of early manufacturing in European countries. In India, despite the tremendous promise, they have languished because of indifference, neglect, and even, hostility. However, there are bright, new, shining examples emerging now (for instance, Jharcraft from Jharkhand). Dreaming of export-led excellence, Indian policy-elites think back from trade, instead of “up from craft”.

- Entailed in an ecologically intelligent map for a changed world, a **completely new town-country relationship needs to be thought of in an age of the universal urbanisation of the human mind** (even when people have never left their village). Tagore has more insight here than Gandhi or Ambedkar.
- To get there (ecological democracy) from where we are, society itself must be defended first! (Tagore, Gandhi, Bourdieu, Foucault) It must be rescued from the devastating tentacles of the economy.