



“Summary of article by Jayanta Bandyopadhyay and Vandana Shiva: Development, Poverty and the Growth of the Green Movement in India” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics. Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 311-314

Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being

“Summary of article by Jayanta Bandyopadhyay and Vandana Shiva: Development, Poverty and the Growth of the Green Movement in India”

In pre-colonial times economic processes in India did not cause serious environmental problems. The arrival of the British, however, resulted in major changes in natural resource use, as resources were increasingly used to meet demands in Western Europe. Resources such as water, forests and minerals, which had traditionally been part of the commons, now came under the control of the British; peasants were forced to cultivate indigo and cotton, forests were felled to promote ship building and meet the requirements of the expanding railway network, and control over water resources was monopolized. These changes resulted in new forms of poverty and deprivation, and in local protests as people sought to regain control over their resources.

GANDHI: EXPLODING THE MYTH OF RESOURCE INTENSIVE DEVELOPMENT

The end of colonial rule saw the control of natural resources transferred to the new, politically independent state. However, the institutions set up under the colonial system to control natural resources did not change as the state pursued the goal of "economic development" in the name of meeting the basic needs of local people. That the nature of these institutions and their ideological underpinnings made them unsuitable for meeting this new goal was not seriously considered. Gandhi warned, however, that if India followed a Western industrial pattern of economic exploitation of natural resources the consequences could be disastrous. He advocated a resource-prudent development strategy to meet the basic needs of the Indian people. However, his call was ignored, due in part to pressure on the newly independent nation to develop, and in part to the fact that natural resource parameters were not included in the framework of conventional economics.

The educated elite have been the main beneficiaries of economic development, while the mass of people have experienced increasing poverty. The natural resource base has been exploited and degraded to support the urban enclaves where commodity production is concentrated. For example, the revenues of commercial forestry companies have increased through expanded production of timber and pulpwood, but this has had detrimental effects on those people who are dependent on other forest products such as leaves, twigs, fruits, nuts, medicines, oils, etc. Destruction of the forests has also affected climate patterns, with adverse impacts on agricultural production. One response to this ecological destruction and environmental deprivation has been the initiation of a new politics by ecology movements to protect the interests of minorities, including women, tribals and poor peasants.

ECOLOGY MOVEMENTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The number of ecology movements in India has increased both as a response to threats to the survival of local people, and in order to demand the conservation of vital life-support systems, including clean air, water, forests and land. These movements are present throughout the country, and they have opposed the exploitation of forests and mineral resources and the construction of dams that have detrimental ecological consequences. Though these movements are of local origin, their impacts are both national and global. This micro-macro connection results from the existence of "two Indias" - one that is poor and less powerful, and the other rich and powerful - competing for limited quantities of natural resources. The ecology movements are bringing the inherent injustice in the present process of development to the forefront, and they are attempting to redirect the development process in favor of those demanding a right to survive. This new process seeks to ensure justice with sustainability and equity with ecological stability. These movements question not only the impacts of individual projects, but the very foundations - political, economic, scientific and technological - of the existing development paradigm as well, as they seek to create a new economics for a new civilization.

A linear view of progress, with origins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, underlies the dominant development paradigm. This view, best articulated in Rostow's "stages of economic growth," equates development with economic growth, market economies, modernity and consumerism, while non-market economies are equated with backwardness. However, productivity - in the sense in which it is used in the dominant paradigm - comes at the cost of environmental deterioration and declining resource productivity. In Rostow's framework, the first stage of economic development consists of traditional society, while the second stage is seen as a temporary co-existence of the "dynamic and progressive" modern sector and the "stagnant and backward" traditional sector. Rostow's third "take-off" stage envisions a breaking down of "old blocks and resistances" and the spread of the modern sector throughout society. The problem with this view of development is that inherent in it is an internal dynamic by which the impoverishment of the traditional sector is necessary to pay for the material basis of the modern sector. The underdeveloped sectors are not those that are yet to be affected by economic growth, but rather those that pay the economic and ecological costs of growth, while others benefit.

The dominant paradigm has paid attention to the use of natural resources for commodity production and capital accumulation, while neglecting the processes responsible for regenerating natural resources. The neglect of two vital economies - the economy of natural resources and natural processes, and the economy of survival - has resulted in ecological destruction and threats to human survival. Ecology movements in the Third World are a reaction to these threats, which have been caused by expansion of the market economy.

It is naive to view the critique of the market economy as a critique of all forms of intervention in nature, but neither can the solution to current ecological and environmental crises be found either by following the same strategies of growth that gave rise to the crises in the first place, or by simply adding an environmental aspect to the old development process. Ecological and economic crisis should not be seen as separate. The emerging ecology movements are set on a path of improving living standards without undermining ecological stability; implementing a new holistic development process will be their major task.

