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'The obsession with economic growth treats the natural environment and related livelihoods as fodder for exploitation' | Photo Credit: S. RAMESH KURUP

There is a need to balance India's developmental needs with the

sustenance of its ecological foundations

Chipko. Silent Valley. Narmada. Koel-Karo. Growing up in the 1970s and the early 1980s, many of us who were passionate about environmental issues were inspired by these and other movements. As the government too responded with a series of forest, wildlife, environment-related laws and policies, there was hope that India would be able to balance its development needs with the sustenance of its ecological foundations. As India celebrates 75 years of Independence, has that hope been sustained?

An earth under stress

The prospects today seem far gloomier than they did in the 1980s. Four hundred and eighty million Indians face the world's most extreme air pollution levels. According to NITI Aayog, "600 million people in India face high to extreme water stress... with nearly 70% of water being contaminated; India is placed at 120th amongst 122 countries in the water quality index". Land degradation and desertification are taking place over 30% of our land, according to the Indian Space Research Organisation. Average levels of land productivity are one-fourth or one-fifth of what they could be; pumping in artificial fertilizers restores a bit, but at the cost of pushing the soil further towards death. Food items in most cities have pesticide residues well above human safety levels. The World Bank – itself partly responsible for pushing India into unsustainable pathways – reported in 2013 that India was losing 5.7% of GDP due to environmental damage. The latest global environmental ranking by Yale and Columbia Universities puts India at the bottom among 180 countries; while flawed in many respects, including how it lets rich countries off the hook, it is nevertheless reflective of what is happening on the ground.

Favouring corporate access

All this evidence has still not penetrated the minds of politicians and economists setting development priorities. The obsession with economic growth – despite growing evidence of GDP being a very poor indicator of human well-being – treats the natural environment (and related livelihoods) as fodder for exploitation. Despite public posturing about the Sustainable

Development Goals, the natural elements without which we would all be dead – land, water, biodiversity, air – continue to be ignored or mauled.

In fact, the Government is dismantling environmental and social security policies to favour corporate access to land and natural resources, such as the latest proposals to amend forest and environment laws, and the Environment Impact Assessment notification. Its priority programmes include building massive physical infrastructure that only disrupts the natural infrastructure we desperately need to protect. For instance, the 2022-23 Budget has an allocation for highways that alone is 40 times greater than the Budget of the Ministry for Environment, Forests and Climate Change. Of what use is faster and faster mobility, if at the end of the journey we still have air and water and food that are killing us?

Given the hopeful signs of the 1970s and the 1980s, how did we come to this pass? In our book *Churning the Earth*, Aseem Shrivastava and I analysed in detail a significant turning point – the economic ‘reforms’ beginning in 1991. With greater integration into the global economy, the entry of multinational (and big Indian) corporations into every sector, and increasing exports of natural materials and imports of toxic waste, the issue of environmental sustainability was relegated to the background. Mining projects crept into previously safe areas including wildlife protected areas and Adivasi territories, the oceans became a target for major commercial extraction (and will be even more so with the new Deep Ocean Mission), and big infrastructure became a holy mantra.

While wildlife and biodiversity have been major sufferers, there are also severe socio-cultural costs. Over 60 million people have been physically displaced by ‘development’ projects in the last few decades with very poor (if any) rehabilitation, and according to the former Planning Commission, a disproportionately high percentage of these are Adivasis and Dalits. Ironically, a component of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s vision of Aatmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) is new coal mining in central India, displacing already self-reliant Adivasi communities and rendering them dependent on government and corporations.

Extreme events

The climate crisis severely compounds all this. This year's super-hot summer should be a warning, even if we have not yet learnt from earlier events of extreme temperatures, erratic rainfall, cloudbursts and cyclones. In recent trips to Ladakh, I learnt that many villages (e.g. in Zaskar) are being abandoned due to water shortages caused by receding glaciers. A *Lancet Planetary Health* journal article says that extreme temperatures in India are responsible for 7,40,000 excess deaths annually. The majority of these are likely to be labourers, farmers, and other vulnerable sections who have to work, live, and commute in these temperatures without access to air-conditioning, appropriate clothing, etc. And we are not at all prepared, with abysmally low budgets for adaptation measures. The Climate Action Plan got a meagre ₹30 crore in the 2022-23 Budget.

Enabling sustainability

So, India's biggest challenge: can ecological sustainability be ensured while generating livelihood security and dignity for more than a billion people? Answers do exist, in thousands of initiatives across the country, as documented in the Vikalp Sangam process. Five thousand Dalit women farmers of the Deccan Development Society have demonstrated how organic, rainfed farming with traditional seed diversity can provide full food security and sovereignty.

Several hundred handloom weavers in Kachchh (Gujarat) have shown how dignified, creative livelihoods can be revived based on organic Kala cotton and a mix of traditional and new skills. Indeed, India's crafts have sustained several hundred million people in the past, and can do so again if the incredible traditional and new skills in textiles, footwear, cleaning agents, vessels, pottery, furniture, architecture and construction, water-related technologies, and a range of household items are given priority. Community-led ecotourism, such as homestays in Uttarakhand and Ladakh and Sikkim, has combined increased earnings with ecologically sensitive visitation. Community conserved areas have shown a democratic approach to wildlife protection very different from the top-down 'protected area' model. As advocated by the United Nations

Environment Programme, public transportation, organic farming, land and water regeneration, renewable energy, community health, eco-friendly construction, ecotourism, and small-scale manufacturing can significantly enhance job creation. Linking programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act with such activities, as happening in some States, also has huge potential.

Needed, a mobilisation

Such an orientation entails fundamental restructuring of economy and governance. It will mean a shift away from large infrastructure and industrialisation, replacing mega-corporations with producer cooperatives, ensuring community rights over the 'commons' (land, water, forest, coasts, knowledge), and direct decision-making powers to *gram sabhas* and urban area *sabhas* while tackling gender and caste inequities. It will entail respect for both human rights and the rights of nature. But since this will inevitably (and desirably) cut into the profits and consumerism of India's ultra-rich, and reduce the centralised power of the state, it will not happen through government action alone. It needs the collective mobilisation of industrial workers, farmers, fishers, craftspersons, pastoralists, urban and rural youth, women in all sectors, the 'disabled' and LGBTQ, and those speaking on behalf of wildlife, all of whom are marginalised by dominant elites. Then only will India finish its century of Independence as a nation that has achieved genuine well-being – a real 'amrit kaal' and not the seductive but poisoned chimera promised by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the Budget 2022-23 address.

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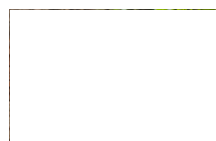
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