

**DEVELOPMENT AS DESTRUCTION**

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**I**

There is a Sonnet of Shakespeare's that begins with the words "As an unperfect actor on the stage/ Who with his fear is put besides his part...". That describes my present situation. My nervousness arises from the knowledge that what I am going to say will run counter to the mainstream view and will elicit strong disagreement and disapproval from some of those present here. Well, having agreed to speak, I must shake myself free of my hesitation and proceed.

Given the limitations of time, I cannot hope to do justice to the difficult and complex theme of this debate. I must content myself with commenting briefly on two statements that are often made. The first statement is that there is no necessary conflict between development and environmental concerns and that the two can be harmonized. This is supplemented by two related sub-points, (a) that in the event of a conflict, primacy should be given to development, and (b) that primacy should be given to the human over other forms of life and over nature. The second statement is that technology will provide answers to all problems, including problems created by technology. I disagree with both those statements, and propose to state my disagreements in a forthright manner without qualifications and nuances, speaking "not dogmatically but deliberately", if I may borrow Dr. Samuel Johnson's words.

## II

My short answers to the first cluster of points are the following.

- (a) It would be right to say that there is no conflict between economic development and the environment *if and only if* our understanding of what constitutes `development' undergoes a radical change.
- (b) The idea of according `primacy' to development in the event of a conflict rests on the assumption that such a choice is available, i.e., that environmental (or to be more precise, ecological) concerns can be set aside and `development' achieved. That is a wrong assumption.
- (c) Similarly, the postulation of a dichotomy between humanity on the one hand and flora and fauna on the other is wrong and shows a failure to understand the ineluctable relatedness of all of nature.

Those are terse and perhaps cryptic observations, but I do not have the time to elaborate them. However, the idea of `development' is central to this debate and needs to be gone into a bit further.

## III

Taking my cue from Amartya Sen's phrase, `development as freedom', I began to formulate expressions such as `development as sustainability', `development as harmony', `development as sanity', `development as wisdom', and so on, but found all of them to be problematic and in need of verbose explanations. I then hit upon a negative formulation that seemed both striking and immediately intelligible: `development as destruction'. That apocalyptic phrase seems to me to be an apt description of the prevalent understanding of what constitutes `development'. Let me annotate that statement.

Consumption is at the heart of the prevailing notions of development. There is an implicit assumption that the higher the level of consumption the greater the degree of development, or in other words, that a civilization which consumes more is more

advanced than a civilization which consumes less. Consumption requires production; and so we genuflect before the twin gods of consumption and production. Given the demonstration effect of Western ways of living on the rest of the world, and given the reluctance of the West and in particular America to accept any significant changes in their lifestyles, it seems improbable that there is going to be a general adoption of more modest ways of living. 'Development', then, will mean to most people that the world's goods of all kinds must be on offer. Not only must there be a bewildering range and variety of products and services to choose from, but they must keep changing all the time. Designs must change, models must change, frills must be added, packaging must change, and of course new products and services must be introduced from time to time. It is ironic to talk about consumer sovereignty: the consumer is continually under pressure to throw away a still useful product and buy a new one - the latest on offer. Good, sensible, serviceable products are not enough: they must be 'world class'. In this kind of developmental process, it is not possible to remain stationary at a certain level of production and consumption; each year's production and consumption must be higher than the previous year's, or else stagnation and decline will set in. Thus those who wish to pursue ever-rising standards of living are firmly and inescapably mounted on the treadmill of growth. Inevitably, the draft on natural resources and the pollution and contamination of soil, air and water can only increase. The dysfunctional relationship between humanity and nature is creating a profound disorder, and this is increasing rapidly and seems irreversible. The word 'entropy' comes to mind, but I dare not venture into the area of science.

There are of course two views on this. Some believe that disaster lies ahead, and others are convinced that such fears are grossly exaggerated. Some would even question the motivations of the doomsayers. All of us have heard of, and some have read, the book 'The Sceptical Environmentalist'. Well, I can only place before you in all earnestness my view that what we call 'development' is irreconcilable with what the title of this meeting refers to as 'ecological security'.

I must take note of the view put forward by some that `development' is not merely not incompatible with the health of the environment but will in fact bring about an improvement in the environment. The argument is that as basic needs are met and countries become more prosperous they will become more concerned about the state of the environment and will have the necessary resources to bring about improvement. It is indeed possible that as we grow richer we will begin to look after our surroundings better. However, this applies only to the immediate surroundings. London and Washington may improve the condition of the Thames and the Potomac, but their draft on the world's resources will continue and may increase – as will India's draft as it becomes richer – and may cause devastation elsewhere. Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai may become cleaner, greener and prettier, but the sources from which their needs are met may deteriorate.

I repeat that as all countries aspire to reach the condition of America (I am using America as a symbol), the combined effect of their `higher standards of living' will cast an impossible burden on Planet Earth. It is simply not true that `development' as now understood can be reconciled with `environment' (using that as a shorthand term). Sustainable development, as proposed at Rio and reiterated at Johannesburg, is a limited and imperfect formulation, but even that seems to be a non-starter.

(In passing, may I refer to the power of the giant transnational corporations that exceeds the power of Governments, and the uncontrolled and uncontrollable operations of speculators who move astronomical sums across the world destabilizing governments and countries? Those subjects fall outside the purview of today's theme.)

#### IV

Let me turn now to the second point that I mentioned at the beginning, namely, that technology has all the answers. Technology is of course part of our lives, and has always been. The sharpening of a stone to turn it into a weapon, the appearance of the wheel, the turning of the first sod, the use of fire: all these were instances of technology. The Pyramids, the 2000-year-old Grand Anicut in Tamil Nadu, and the 3000-year-old Maribu

Dam in Yemen, were technological achievements. Even the use of pulley, rope and bucket for drawing water from a well is technology; so are the humble screwdriver and pencil-sharpener. We use technology all the time.

However, it is clear that after the Industrial Revolution there was a dramatic change in the magnitude, scale and complexity of technology, and a Technological Revolution began. Soon the pace of technological change began to accelerate. It is my thesis that that pace has now become autonomous and uncontrollable. Technology is no longer humanity's servant but its master. At a meeting some years ago, a scholar referred to "the mindless pursuit of technology". I would reverse that formulation. It is no longer we who pursue technology; it is technology that pursues us. Humanity is now under the tyranny of technological change.

There is a story – I think Nabokov mentions it somewhere - that some caged apes were taught to draw and that the first picture they drew was that of the bars of their cage. Similarly we seem to be prepared to celebrate the treadmill on which we are mounted. It does not occur to us that the ever-accelerating pace of technological change is not necessarily an indication of health but could be a pathological state. Consider the following illustrative instances of technology:

- deep power-driven borewells and tubewells sucking aquifers dry;
- mammoth dams that kill rivers (that may not be true of all dams, but it is certainly true of the big American dams);
- giant trawlers devastating marine life;
- gigantic oil tankers transporting crude and petroleum products, with the inevitability of oil spills from time to time, with dire consequences for aquatic life and for coastal areas;
- large modern metallurgical, chemical and petrochemical industries operating under horrendous temperatures and pressures, with the related grave risks, and causing pollution and contamination on a scale that is impossible to remedy or control;
- the obscene exhibition of 'smart' weaponry that we have seen in recent wars;
- and so on.

Life in the modern world is no longer human; it is daemonic. Consider the 'mad cow' disease in Europe and the outbreak of bird-flu in Asian countries, and the ensuing slaughter of millions of animals and birds: these bizarre outcomes of what goes by the name of 'civilization' are pointers to a deep sickness, brought on or mediated by daemonic technology. Again, the infliction of unbearable pain on and the sacrifice of millions of animals in medical research as well as in the pharmaceutical and cosmetics industries is an aspect of technology that we prefer to ignore. The well-known photograph of a monkey strapped to a chair with probes protruding from its head is as *defining* a picture of modern science and technology as the photograph of a girl running with her back burnt by napalm was of the Vietnam war. Modern technology is a kind of Faustian pact with the devil: riches may possibly be showered on us for a while, but a price will be relentlessly extracted in the end. In fact, the process of paying began long ago: catastrophes such as Bhopal, Chernobyl, Exxon Valdes, etc, are not incidental occurrences but ineluctable concomitants to the process of technological change that we have embraced ardently. I need not remind this audience of the disappearance of species after species, the emission of greenhouse gases, and the phenomenon of global warming which is no longer in dispute.

The argument that technology by itself is neutral and that it is the abuse of it that does harm is simplistic or disingenuous. Given the availability of deep borewell/tubewell technology, the depletion and contamination of aquifers is inevitable. Given the availability of advanced mining technology, the stripping or disemboweling of the earth was bound to follow. Given the possibility of the bulk transport of oil across oceans, oil spills and the resulting damage must be expected from time to time. If atom or nuclear bombs exist, as they do, someone is going to drop them somewhere at some time. The dangers are inseparable from the technology, and control is very problematic. Further, the belief that the answers to all the problems created by technology can be found through more technology is both naïve and dangerous.

I am well aware of the difficulties of this line of argument. How much technology is good? At what point does it become bad? Was there a stage in the past – say, before the

Industrial Revolution – when humanity could have said “We have enough technology, let us stop further technological development”? The answer is that at each stage the next step in technological change seems logical, inevitable and welcome; at no stage are we conscious of crossing a *Lakshman rekha*; and once a certain step has been taken, it is difficult to go back. Even if we feel, as I do, that humanity is now on the wrong path, it is impossible to identify the particular stage at which we entered that wrong path, the particular moment when technological change acquired a momentum of its own and began to grow like a cancer.

We have come a long way from that hypothetical point. We cannot rewrite history; we have to live in the present. However, it is one thing to say that we cannot go back to the past and take a different path, and another to say that we must proceed further unthinkingly towards doom and destruction. Drastic changes are necessary, but there are no signs of their being made or even contemplated. That is too large a subject to be gone into here. Let me merely say that I cannot bring myself to celebrate our enslavement to the monster that we have created.

## V

I hasten to add that I am not insensitive to the remarkable demonstrations of human ingenuity and power that we see all around us. Some human achievements have been awe-inspiring, and I am as susceptible to that sense of awe and wonder as anybody else. I also thrill to the sheer beauty of some engineering marvels: for instance, suspension bridges, the most notable one being of course the Golden Gate bridge. Nevertheless, I do believe that ‘civilization’ as it has emerged in the West and has been adopted by the rest of the world is not a healthy condition but a sickness. Earlier I offered you the phrase ‘development as destruction’. A variant of that could be ‘development as disease’. In *The Magic Mountain* Thomas Mann puts a striking sentence into the mouth of one of the characters: "A paradox is the iridescent surface of the rotting mind". The shine and glow of giant modern metropolises seem to me the glow of fever. Having regard to the capacity of modern civilization to inflict harm and damage on Planet Earth, the late Anil Agarwal

described it as a `toxic' civilization; but that is only a part of what I am talking about. Consider life in a modern metropolis: unsafe streets, random violence, apartment blocks barricaded like fortresses, and so on. These are almost indices of development: if your streets are safe and you can leave your doors open at night, your country is clearly underdeveloped. (I am not talking about the new preoccupation with security following the emergence of international terrorism. I am referring to the world as it was long before 9/11.) In the midst of this madness we had a powerful voice of sanity in this country: that of Gandhi. Unfortunately we have abandoned him. It is unrealistic to talk about Gandhi because nobody is going to listen.

## VI

I must now conclude. Lest my maverick views be described as `Luddite' and obscurantist, let me clarify that I am not excoriating development but calling for a change in our understanding of what constitutes development. Development need not be destruction or disease; it could be sanity, balance and wisdom. Similarly, I am not asking for the abandonment of technology, but suggesting that it should be humanity's slave and not its master. And of course transnational corporations and international finance capital need to be brought under control. How these transformations are to be brought about, I do not know. Like Abhimanyu who could break into a *chakravyuha* but could not get out, I have entered into large issues but find it difficult to extricate myself. No neat conclusion suggests itself, and I do not propose to attempt a peroration. Let me abruptly stop here. Thank you.

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