

Can Economic Growth & Ecological Security go together?

Is economic growth and ecological security always compatible or complementary to each other? Or are they always inimical to each other? Normally these are the standard questions raised in any discourse on the interface between economic growth and ecological security. But these are false questions and bogus points raised out of ignorance about the class-cost and class-benefit analysis of economic growth and ecological destruction. Right answers demand right questions. And in this debate on economic growth and ecological security, the pertinent question is whose economic growth is causing whose ecological insecurity? Whose subsistence base is being sacrificed at the altar of whose economic growth? Who pays the price of ecological insecurity and who benefits from economic growth? This question is more fundamental than the topic of this debate as to whether economic growth and ecological security can go together? In this debate, we must address the political economy of economic growth and ecological insecurity.

It is nobody's case that there should not be any economic growth so that we can enjoy air and water of Himalayan standards. However, we must know as to how much of economic growth is too much for ecological security. We must draw a Lakshman Rekha (threshold line) for economic growth. We have to strike a balance between economic growth and ecological security. We must ask ourselves as to whether prevalent economic growth models are prepared and geared to factor-in environmental sustainability. The need and challenge of the hour is to mainstream ecological security in economic growth. Our economic systems and pricing practices must learn to pay for the ecological services of the nature. So far ecological destruction has been calculated as economic growth in many cases. There are innumerable examples of this insanity globally and locally.

We also need to ask as to whether economic growth and free markets by themselves are capable of ensuring planetary balance? For getting a clearer understanding, let us see two examples here - one local, another global. The local example is that of pollution in Ganges and the global one is Climate Change.

If economic growth and higher GDP alone were to ensure better protection of natural resources, then why in the last 20 years of the Ganga Action Plan during which period India's GDP has multiplied, have we not been able to clean up Mother Ganga, not just a river, but to quote Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, "the story of Ganga is the story of rise and fall of Indian civilization". But we are still waiting for the magic of the market to clean up the most sacred river of the planet. Therefore, we can argue that economic growth and free markets by themselves are no guarantee for ecological security.

Global Example:

In his latest trip to Russia, President Bush was preaching the virtues of "democracy and rule of law" to President Putin. None of the high-tech and super-informed journalist friends asked him as to whether refusal of the Bush administration to sign the Kyoto protocol despite US being the largest polluter of the world is an example of **rule of law**

or rule of the jungle. Double standards seem to be the unwritten guiding principle of the self-declared super-power of unipolar world.

Global Warming is potentially the biggest weapon of mass destruction in human history. The largest manufacturer of this weapon could attack Iraq and kill thousands of innocent civilians without having a single credible evidence of any weapon of mass destruction. But the report of the IPCC (Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change) constituting over 4000 best scientists of the world, many of them Nobel laureates, holding human activity and economic growth responsible for dangerous level of global warming, is not sufficient proof for Bush Administration to join Kyoto Protocol and stop manufacturing greenhouse gases-the most lethal weapon of mass destruction.

In the previous leg of the same trip, President Bush was shouting in Paris, “Iran must abandon [the] nuclear option for the sake of global security and peace”. But the western media forgot to ask as to what about the security and peace of communities living in the coastal areas of Maldives, Bangladesh and Kiribati who face imminent drowning due to climate change? Of course, these poor communities’ security, right to life and human rights can be sacrificed at the altar of American economic progress and consumerist lifestyle.

This debate is a very tiny effort to tilt the balance of economic history in favor of long-term sustainability over short-term profit, in favor of agriculture over industry, in favor of rural over urban, in favor of communities over corporates, in favor of developing over developed and in favor of poor over rich. This is not an effort against economic growth but just a small attempt to reverse the political ecology of economic growth.

Prof. Amitabh Kundu (JNU): “Ground water has become a commodity over time. Now we know that we’ve serious problems of agrarian inequality. And that agrarian inequality is linked basically with the land distribution. Our land distribution was highly unequal and we tried in the 50s to bring down the inequality in the land distribution. We did not succeed. Now if we allow ground water to be also utilized as the commodity, we are multiplying the agrarian inequalities. Because the ground water then would be really dependent on affordability, a farmer or large farmer can pump out the water at the cost of the neighboring small and marginal farmers. There is market for ground water. The urban users around Chennai are taking water from rural areas, and there is serious crisis. The urban water market is causing serious environmental problems in the surrounding areas. And basically water inequality is going to be much more serious in terms of ecological disorder. I’d like to therefore link the agrarian inequality with the ecological insecurity. They are very much inter-twined, because the capacity of people of different income levels to go down and tap the aqua for different levels are different. It is basically your affordability, which allows you to tap aqua for different levels. I’d therefore think there is strong need for ground water legislation.”

Distinguished Economist, Dr. Surjit S. Bhalla: “the government is spending thousands of crores of rupees for alleviating poverty. Our country is spending about 15,000 crores as subsidies on fertilizers. Around 95% of this fertilizer subsidy goes to the firms, which

produce the fertilizers, but not to the farmers as is purported to be. So Rs. 15,000 crores is there and there is another Rs.11000 crores through budget allocation is now earmarked for 'Food for Work Program'. And then there is another Rs. 20,000 crores allocated to the FCI's functions. And an additional of Rs.40-50, 000 crores we are spending today to alleviate poverty and to provide ecological security and to provide growth. Now deeply ponder over how much money will really be spent for Food for Work program and how much for poverty alleviation. Think about it? Whether poverty can be completely removed or not? This is million-dollar question.

We have institutionalized corruption practice in the name of policies and in the name of pro-poor policies that we had for the last 40-50 years. It is very normal for everybody to feel morally righteous to be corrupt and why? The bureaucrats say why should we give our money because I know it is going to go down the drain. And that is the cost that we are paying heavily for our misguided policy we had.

We are now less dependent on agriculture than before and the agricultural policies have led us down the path. And very bad respect for Ecology .It is precisely in the name of pro-poor policies, which are not meant to benefit the poor have led us to the sad state of affair as far as the nature and environment is concerned. And thirdly our system has been such that it has allowed most if not all people to participate approximately or evenly in this process.”

Eminent environmentalist Dr. Ashok Khosla: “My reasoning is that you cannot have development of the country without Ecological security. And its causal relationship is in that direction. It's not that you get Ecological security by getting development and you cannot have the development without looking after your country's natural resources. And it's not 600 million people who depend upon Ecology. 1.1 billion people live in our country and every single one of them is dependent on nature either very directly in the case of farmers or of tribals or of variety of people in the countryside or indirectly like you and me.

Eco Systems are key to the sustainable development. And they play key role is equity and efficiency. We have to make sure the benefits of nature that Nature provides reach everyone. And they are efficiently used so that we don't waste them. And that is where you get the empowerment. And the reward on the other side of the door through which you put this key in to the keyholes is sustainable livelihood jobs of various types. This is genuine source of empowerment. And Eco System services are Nature's subsidies to society and to our economy. Caring for the environment does not attack on development. It is in fact source of it and it is probably the best investment you can have to accelerate it.”

Dr. Khosla further said, “Ultimately we will need very deep changes and got to dematerialize past, we need to introduce full cost accounting. In other words we have to learn to value what we are rather than what we have. Actually the kind of material progress that we've borrowed from West is very destructive of Nature and of ourselves. And we have to find other ways in which to redesign what we can call real progress.”

Parshuram Ray, Director, Centre for Environment and Food Security (CEFS): There is another very interesting revelation, though relatively less known. Of late, economists, policy planners, think tanks and governments all over the world have been so mesmerized by the Chinese Economic growth model that they are touting it as best path of progress and chanting it as “Economic Growth Mantra”. However, there is another, less known side of the Chinese economic miracle.

A senior Chinese official who is deputy head of the State Environmental Protection Administration, Mr. Pan Yue, told the BBC on 23 rd Sept 2004, that China’s environmental problems have reached crisis levels. He said “China’s industrial development was unsustainable, because its resources could not cope.

On 7th March this year, Mr Pan Yue of the Ministry of Environment, speaking to a German Magazine, Der Spiegel, again acknowledged, “The Chinese Miracle will End Soon”.

Mr. Pan said, “the economic strides made by China comes at a huge cost to the country’s environment which will soon overwhelm the country creating millions of “environmental refugees.” He further said, “We are using too many raw materials to sustain this growth. To produce goods worth \$10,000, for example, we need seven times more resources than Japan, nearly six times more than the United States and, perhaps most embarrassing, nearly three times more than India. Our raw materials are scarce, we don’t have enough land, and our population is constantly growing. Cities are growing but desert areas are expanding at the same time; habitable and usable land has been halved over the past 50 years. Acid rain is falling on one third of the Chinese territory; half of the water in our seven largest rivers is completely useless, while one fourth of our citizens do not have access to clean drinking water.”

Speaking of the severe deteriorating China’s environment, Mr Pan further added, “One third of the urban population is breathing polluted air, and less than 20 percent of the trash in cities is treated and processed in an environmentally sustainable manner. Finally, five of the ten most polluted cities worldwide are in China. In Beijing alone, 70 to 80 percent of all deadly cancer cases are related to the environment. Lung cancer has emerged as the No. 1 cause of death. Even now, the western regions of China and the country’s ecologically stressed regions can no longer support the people already living there. In the future, we will need to resettle 186 million residents from 22 provinces and cities. However, the other provinces and cities can only absorb some 33 million people. That means China will have more than 150 million ecological migrants, or, if you like, environmental refugees.”

The World Bank estimates that air and water pollution cost China US\$ 54 billion per year, or about eight percent of GDP. The World Bank further estimates that, every year, just the air pollution in excess of China’s own air quality standards results in 6.8 million emergency room visits, 346,000 hospital admissions, and 178,000 premature deaths. In addition, air pollution causes some 7.4 million work-years to be lost annually.

Prof. P. S. Ramakrishnan (JNU) : Watching traditional society and trying to understand the way they look at nature and natural resources and the way they perceive their developmental pathways is quite different from the pathways that we have, the so-called enlightened society has.

It drew me into a kind of an exercise during the last three decades to look at what is the kind of knowledge system that they have and what values that knowledge system has from the point of view of — managing our natural resources in a better manner and from the point of view of having a developmental paradigm which is different from what have we been used to so far.

So far, only a few selected scientists have been able to cross the barrier between the sequestered states of science. And we are all custodians of that sequestered states of science and the real needs of the people. There is an emerging conviction now that intellectual and perceptual diversity is requisite for continuance in this world. And that is what a knowledge system is all about.

We need to forge a developmental initiative that tries to link up the traditional knowledge with the formal knowledge system in order to be able to develop a hybrid technology.

This hybrid technology can empower the people to the extent that we can take them forward for the next couple of years and then leave them alone to decide for themselves what they want to do and that not show them the pathway that we have chosen since we think that we are the custodians of the knowledge and therefore try to give the people what we think is very important for their developmental point of view.

And it has been projected time and again what have we been doing in the process. We have been disrupting their society, degrading their natural resources in order to be able to manage a developmental paradigm which we think is very important from our own point of view and in the process converting these people, in the name of developmental poverty alleviation with the result of allowing them to live as destitutes in many parts of the country.

Unless a critical mass of scientific community, developmental planners and other agencies come together and try to create a developmental paradigm which is in agreement with a value system that these people understand and appreciate and enable them to have terminal strategies for development and empower them in that manner, so that they can take their own decisions then only shall there be a mind and body connection in an environment which can be termed as a cultural land. And unless we stake a cultural landscape perspective for development, I don't see much of a future for the kind of things that millennium of this man is aiming to achieve by 2050.

Dr. Kanchan Chopra, Institute of Economic Growth : If we look at the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment we can see the importance in the context of this question. Because when we think of a question like economic development and ecological security, both of these are basically, intended to further human well-being.

Since the year 2000, a number of people from all over the world, experts in natural and social sciences have been brought together by UN agencies to look at this problem and see what exactly this is and how are we linking human well being with eco system services and how is development and poverty connected with this whole issue.

There is a warning at the heart of this assessment, that human activity is putting a strain on the natural functions of the earth, on the ecosystem to sustain future generation and these can not be taken for granted for too long.

In India we need to look for alternative strategies of development, where we still have options and where we can create different path roads for development.