

‘HOAX’ OF CONSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

The idea of conservation appears to be very noble and righteous but the ground realities do not support it. Those who have assiduously conserved the resources by consuming the same in the most sustainable manner are the ones who are paying the price for doing so. They have not progressed; instead they have been subjugated and their resources have been usurped by the so-called progressed people. They are at the bottom of the scale of human development. Human progress cannot be halted but in the process human beings establish power relations between peoples and create vast inequalities. While the rich and powerful consume huge resources and endanger the very existence of the resources, new slogans in the name of conservation like sustainable development are being touted. These slogans do not intend to correct the skewed power relations, or address the basic issue of inequality, or curb consumption and control generation of waste. Under these circumstances, this paper argues that idea of conservation is a hoax.

Introduction

The idea about conservation appears to be so noble, righteous and rational that any thinking against it could be considered fanatical and crazy. But the more I analyze the so called human development and progress, the more convinced I am that the idea of conservation is anti-progress, motivated, and a smokescreen for pursuing a variety of vested interests.

Let me begin with the scenario in India. The people who have been called Scheduled Tribes in India form 8.2 percent of the total Indian population generally lead a simple life and have been able to conserve the resources of the region they inhabit. Their wants have been limited. Their technology has been simple. However this scenario changed dramatically once they came in contact with culturally and technologically more advanced people.

They were progressively denied access to their traditional habitats. This process got accelerated during the colonial rule in India. New laws regarding the ownership of land and forest were framed. Many of the forests were declared as protected and reserved. The implications of those declarations were directly on the members of the Scheduled Tribes. They were denied the use of the forest resources though they had been living there for ages. This of course did not mean that the resources of the forest were not exploited by the establishment or their agents. Vast stretches of virgin forests were cut for laying the networks of road, rail, mining and for other productive purposes. Whatever was declared protected or reserved, literally and figuratively was kept 'reserved' for future use, but their rightful owners were denied access to them. Incidentally, many of the rules framed during that period could not be implemented for a variety of reasons. Therefore, in spite of the rules, the tribes could still manage to forage into the forest and collect a variety of items for self consumption, barter or trade. The terms of trade, of course, were most unfavorable and even harmful to them. Besides, they were exposed to goods they did not produce themselves and to habits like taking tobacco and smoking that was harmful to their health. Once dependent on such habits they were ready to barter away even their own sons and daughters. Moreover, they also experienced to their utter dismay that many of their foraging areas had come under plantation in which they had no role to play except to work as wage-laborers. In modern times there is an ambiguous concern for 'conservation'. New policies have come into existence and new rules have been framed. However, ironically, many areas inhabited by the Scheduled Tribes are required for big projects like erecting dams, laying canals, establishing steel or fertilizer plants and so on. From such project areas they are obviously evicted and settled somewhere else. Also some of their areas are declared as bio-sphere reserves, tiger reserves and so on and again they are the ones becoming *persona non-grata* from such areas. New strategies for their development and rehabilitation are being framed. Sustainable development has become a catchword regarding the development of tribes. The ground reality is of course very different. The state, industrialists, contractors, middlemen and all

kinds of 'outsiders' have descended on habitats traditionally occupied by tribes because such areas are generally rich in resources as they have preserved them for centuries. Their technology is simple, and renewable. Their life-style remains the simplest of the simple. Empirically they have come to the conclusion that they must leave enough scope for regeneration of resources. In other words, technically they can be considered the very epitome of conservation. But as development is progressing they are the ones who are paying the price for practising conservation for ages. The rich, the powerful and the 'educated' are teaching them the new slogans of conservation. No doubt spectacular development has taken place in almost every field but the tribes are almost at the bottom of the human development scale¹. To drive my point home, let me quote some statistics released by the Government of India in respect to the scheduled tribes.

Government Statistics

Despite several campaigns to promote formal education ever since independence, the literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes is only 29.60 percent compared to 52.21 percent for the country as a whole (1991 Census). The female literacy rate is only 18.19 percent compared to the national female literacy rate of 39.29 percent. Although tribal people live usually close to nature, a majority of them need health care on account of malnutrition, lack of safe drinking water, poor hygiene and environmental sanitation and above all poverty. Nearly 85.39 lakh (8.54 million) tribal had been displaced until 1990 on account of some mega project or the other, reservation of forest as national parks, etc. Tribes constitute at least 55.16 percent of the total displaced people in the country. It is, however, a matter of serious concern that about 5000 forest villages do not have minimum basic living condition and face a constant threat of eviction. "Primitive Tribal Groups" have not benefited from development activities. They face continuous threat of eviction from their homes and land. They live with food insecurity

and a host of diseases like sickle cell anemia and malaria. (Draft National Tribal Policy, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, 2004).

This is not an exceptional story. Right from the day Columbus and other explorers set out from Europe in search of new pastures, death warrants of the indigenous people around the world were signed. The story of the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and numerous islands of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans are living testimony to mass killing and maiming of the indigenous peoples, evicting them from their habitats and overpowering them. In case of those who could not be liquidated their labour and knowledge was used by the European colonizers.

Tribes are known to have successfully preserved the natural resources of their respective habitats. They even have achieved a certain degree of harmony with nature, but they are seen as not utilizing their resources for the “larger” cause of human progress or national development. Thus, they continue to draw the attention of ambitious and powerful people with access to modern technology and corridors of state power. Such people eventually succeed in subjugating the tribes by controlling their resources. This has been happening everywhere in the world even today.

Modern researchers have shown that there is very little difference between the genetic make up of human beings and that of other primates. But that little difference has made a huge difference between human beings and non-human beings. Not only is the proportionate size of the human brain larger than that of the primates but the same is also richer in quality. Among other things the human ability to explore, to be curious, to be adventurous, to accumulate experience and experiment, to establish power relations and be ruthless have played an important role in the progress of human kind and in establishing its hegemony over other beings as well as over fellow human beings.

Progress & Conservation

The story of the progress of human beings began the day they began to fashion tools to hunt, to collect and store food. One technology led to another from simple domestication of animals, to cultivation and to industrial production. These developments not only allowed for mass production but they also led to further discoveries, inventions and to the enhancement of human knowledge. As a result of all this, it is possible today to talk in global terms as well as to probe the other planets. However, the path of progress human beings have chosen is opposed to conservation. The day human beings began to chip off stones to make some tools they were interfering with the fauna, flora and with the nature in general. Since then the path of progress has expanded enormously along with extensive exploitation of the resources of nature many of which are non-renewable. The same abilities of human beings have made it possible for them to colonize different parts of the world some of which are located in most difficult places. Such efforts have enabled them to identify new sources of energy and also have opened up innumerable future possibilities of research and understanding. There is, however, a serious snag attached to progress. Progress needs specialization. Specialization requires maximum fragmentation of knowledge and understanding. Obviously this path of science leads to a myopic sight and diminishes the vision of whole. As against this the idea of conservation is based on an integrated and holistic understanding of the nature. However the relentless pursuit of progress is compulsive. It forces people to probe into the minutest of the minute, which requires maximum isolation of the problem. Therefore howsoever attractive the idea of conservation may be the pursuit of progress can neither be given up nor retraced; it may only be slowed down to some extent by persistently raising the danger of total destruction. But the kind of cut-throat world we live in, even that does not seem to be a possibility in near future.

Progress and Power

The path of progress is closely related to acquisition of power. Progress has never been equal among all human beings. Those who

have progressed more have acquired more power. Right from the early stages of development human beings have seen the advantages in the use of power over other human beings. The less powerful have been killed or subjugated, and their resources have been forcibly acquired and used to enhance the power of more powerful people. This has been the story of human beings throughout this planet, though there are instances of some peaceful co-existence and innumerable teachings for universal brotherhood and gentle approach towards nature and fellow human beings. Despite these noble thoughts the quest for power is relentless. In the process, some nations have acquired so much power that with just a push of a button the whole world could go up in smoke. This is in spite of the full awareness of the dangers for accumulating power. Amassing so many arsenals and continuously enhancing the destructive capacity leads to enormous consumption of vital resources. Such powerful countries also use vital resources for their conspicuous consumption and luxurious living. Such living styles generate enormous waste which further pollutes the already endangered environment.

The tragedy is compounded by the fact that the great majority of the people in the world, particularly in the so called developing countries have an urgent need for resources for survival. The scenario is ironical that a small percentage of the people in the world consume a very high proportion of the resources of the world. The same people not only have a 'high standard of living' but have also placed themselves on the top of the scale of human development. Further, the same people continue to set the model for development to the rest of humanity. This model of development is based on high consumption and equally high generation of waste. The way India and China, the two most populous countries of the world, are developing in the wake of globalization they will soon confront the world with real issues such as environmental pollution and global warming. Just one example may suffice. The rate at which both these countries have started producing automobiles, with or without partnership of multi-national companies, it is not difficult to visualize the extent of air pollution in these two

countries in near future. The whole race in the third world countries is about approximating the standard set and enjoyed by the first world.

Sustainable Development

Considering the above scenario, some well meaning and sensitive people have brought a twist in the tale; they are talking about sustainable development. Their approach is self-contradictory. They concede that the present path of development is not sustainable, let alone meet the basic needs of food, water and shelter of all the people in the world. Some enthusiastic environmentalists have demonstrated that with some persistent efforts some forests, some wild life, some water and some air can be saved. Without undermining such laudable efforts, I am tempted to call them a 'hoax', blinkered and illusionary for they tend to avoid the basic parameters on which the development process is based. They derive some solace by organizing a protest meet against a mega project here and another there but has that changed the power relations between nations, or reduced the production of pollutant wastes or demand for more and more fancy and sophisticated goods? The problem is not where waste can be safely dumped but the accelerating scale of production of waste itself and the rate at which the resources are being consumed. Further, the 'innocence' of the sustainable development approach gets exposed for the following reasons:

- 1) Sustainability without paying attention to the most vital issue of equity is unjust. The fact is that the gulf between the haves and the have-nots is expanding very rapidly everywhere. Can we talk about sustainability after disinheritting the local communities of their command over their resources and using those resources for industrial growth elsewhere? This process keeps on enlarging the gap between five-star (based on luxury and wastage) people on the one hand and pavement dwellers, rural poor and tribes, on the other. According to India's first Social Development Report released recently (January 2006) 26 percent of Indians live below poverty line which accounts for 260 million people. It is a huge

number. Of this, 43.8 percent belong to the Scheduled Tribes (*The Hindu*, January 28, 2006).

- 2) The present development process has fragmented the communities and has brought forward the individuals in the forefront - individuals who are enterprising, have skills and abilities, and individuals who have been facilitated by globalization. Is it possible to have unlimited individual prosperity as well as sustainable development? The number of have-nots has increased everywhere. They do not even lead a life of dignity. What kind of stakes can they have in sustainable development? They have to worry about their immediate sustenance. Is it possible to ask them not to worry about their next meal but be concerned about the future meals? In a situation where market forces have created an illusion for a 'desirable style of life', which is bound to create tremendous pressure on resources considered scarce, is it possible to ask the masses not to run after them, as they are wasteful and destroyer of vital resources but 'essential' for minority elite classes? Who is shedding tears and for whom?
- 3) There is no possibility that the minority elite classes will give up their wasteful high standard of living and privileges they enjoy. The history of the development process, the denial of resources to the vast majority of people, and their abject poverty are not allowed to be understood as a consequence of what high standard people have been continuously doing.
- 4) Similarly the nations which have acquired enormous power cannot be expected to shed away their power. Every attempt is made by such powers to liquidate any rival nation resulting in a unipolar world that we live in today.
- 5) Science and technology progress by asking questions and seeking their answers individually and maximally. Conservation, on the other hand, is focussed on holistic understanding. Hence there is a basic methodological contradiction between progress

and conservation. Holism, therefore, is an antiquated idea for those interested in science, technology and progress.

- 6) Coming back to the people who lead a simple life and conserve the resources, they are in fact a people who have lost the path of progress. They are not just the lowest in the scale of human development their very knowledge is of the lowest significance.
- 7) Nature itself does not have much respect for conservation. Countless species and other systems have disappeared in the process of evolution.

Thus, the slogan of conservation, sustainable development etc is basically socio-political in nature. They are designed to keep the skewed power ratio in tact. They do not challenge the basic issues of inequality and power. Is it possible that the seemingly beautiful and noble idea of conservation is voluntarily embraced by the enormously powerful and wealthy nations? There is no such possibility. Thus at best the conservationists are able to sell their dreams to common people to lull them to deep slumber and not to get bothered by relentless destruction of forests, wetlands, coral reefs, ocean bottoms, etc. and not to be disturbed by the ever shrinking resources of wild foods. Not to think of the large-scale soil erosion and salinity. Not to think about depletion of major energy sources such as fossil fuel, oils, natural gas and coal. Not to worry about the fact that most of the fresh water is being used up for irrigation, industrial and domestic purposes. Not to panic on enormous release of chemical waste into the rivers or the global warming. And not to be bothered to know that an average citizen of USA, Western Europe and Japan consumes 32 times more resources and puts out 32 times more waste than the inhabitants of the third world. However, the edifice of the conservationist begins to crumble by realizing the consequences of rising living standards of the people in third world countries. Look at the irony - conservation was never an issue when indigenous population of the world were devastated and their resources were usurped, and many third world countries came under imperial domination.

Conservation has become an issue now when the third world countries have woken up to the idea of 'progress' as defined by the first world. Should this Orwellian doublespeak of the first world be tolerated? Sometimes it is worth asking questions that clearly have no answers.

Notes & References

The roots of this paper lie in the realization that each time I spoke or wrote in favour of conservation, I felt that I was indulging in self-deception and evading the basic contradiction. Finally, after I read Jared Diamond's (2005) *Collapse: How Societies Chose to Fail or Succeed*, New York, Viking Penguin Private Ltd, I was inspired to do this paper. Many of my friends have contributed to sharpening my thoughts expressed in this paper. I thank them all.

¹See Social Development Report 2006, *The Hindu*, January 28, 2006.

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