

THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

The ongoing Pandemic has created a health and economic crisis worldwide. In India, we hope to attract several companies that may shift their operations from China. It is seen as an opportunity to propel India to be an economic power house.



Meanwhile we see pathetic visuals of migrants trying desperately to return to their villages. Between the jubilation of China-based industries shifting to India and the long march of the migrants is a message that will determine our future.

India's path to development has been an environmental disaster. Vast swathes of Forests have been destroyed, rivers polluted and the very air that millions of Indians breathe is toxic.

The lock down provided welcome relief to the environment; the air became clearer and the Himalayas were visible from afar, rivers and streams sparkled and wildlife appeared to frolic! However, this scenario will not last long as the nation springs back to life for economic reasons.

Be that as it may, the real danger facing us that in our zeal to get the economy back on track, to achieve our targets of GDP, kick-start the economy and revive employment, we will be putting added pressure on our already stressed environment.

Dr NH Ravindranath, former professor, Indian Institute of Sciences states “A vaccine or drug will be the silver bullet for the Pandemic, but there will be no silver bullet for the looming threat of climate change”. This entails that the economic recovery post the pandemic should not take us back to ‘business as usual’ and it should take us along a new path of sustainable development with respect for the environment.

Once we have crossed the ‘Tipping Point’ of climate change, there will be no going back; perhaps humanity will then be playing out the end game- - - . Claude Alvares from Goa Foundation visualizes an exodus from the coastal areas of Kerala due to rising sea levels. These climate refugees may have to be relocated in the Western Ghats at the cost of the precious forests that bring us the South West Monsoon. Millions will flee our coastal cities including Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai. Time is our enemy! We do not have the luxury of time. Incredulous though it may seem, most scientists seem to have ignored the phenomenon of Permafrost melt in the Arctic and other snow covered regions. Permafrost melt will set off a vicious cycle of Carbon Dioxide release which in turn will result in more rapid permafrost melt.

Climate scientists have warned that to keep global temperature below 2 degree Centigrade, Carbon Dioxide levels have to be cut by 45% by 2030. However, if permafrost melt is factored in, then we do not have even that much time! Be that as it may, these are matters for global negotiations and commitments. What is the way forward for India?

Subsidies should shift to electric vehicles, solar energy, clean cook stoves etc. If production units move from China to India, they must be accepted only with the latest clean technologies, located away from existing industrial hubs and metropolises and set up in regions where forests and catchment areas are not sacrificed. While Carbon Dioxide is the known villain, we have opportunities to

buy precious time by drastic reduction in Black Carbon emissions. This has been brought out with amazing clarity in Jonathan Mingles' book, 'Fire and Ice'. We also have opportunities for regional cooperation in reducing Black Carbon. My paper on the 'HIMEK Alliance' envisages a regional cooperation of eleven countries to mitigate climate change in the Himalayas and the Mekong Basin through a strategy of reduction of Black Carbon emissions coupled with large scale forest land restoration programs. The HIMEK proposal has been endorsed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the Asian Institute of Technology.

Mahatma Gandhi said that the Future of India lies in its villages. As we watch lakhs of migrants returning home, we are reminded of his words. Decades after Gandhi, Anna Hazare championed the cause at Ralegan Siddhi.



With watershed management as the main area of focus he strengthened the village community, fought corruption, brought prosperity to the villagers and reversed migration to cities.

The present exodus from cities back to villages has exposed the glaring fact that the rural poor have been exploited to enable growth of metropolises that are imploding under their own weight. It is time to reconsider the very paradigm of 'Development' and the mad rush towards improving the 'GDP'. We must move to the Bhutanese philosophy of 'Nine Domains of Gross National Happiness'. These include Psychological well being, Health, Cultural Diversity & Resilience and Ecological Diversity and Resilience.

These domains cannot have meaning if village communities are compelled to leave their homes and made to live in crowded, unclean slums in far away cities! Moreover, while the Government may be genuinely concerned about the plight of farmers, destruction of catchment areas for multilane highways, railways, dams and power lines have resulted in droughts that drive them to debt and suicide. It is also a factor that acts as a catalyst for migration to cities. There is a strong case for agriculture to be made lucrative by eliminating middle men and providing well thought out subsidies. MGNREGA schemes should ensure gainful employment through work on watershed development and forest land restoration. Populist schemes need to be restricted lest we create a generation that thrives on doles.

The one big worry is that we will act in haste to revive the economy and create a situation on environment and climate change that create scenarios that are worse than the ones prior to the pandemic. Hence there is a need for extensive consultations and deliberate planning.

We also need to plan ahead and carry out proper landscape management of the country with a vision for the future. We can then protect our catchment areas [perhaps we should rename them as water producing areas for better effect!] and food producing regions while developing industrial hubs and population centers in a pragmatic manner with a time line of 2050 and beyond.

In fact the urgency to revise and dilute the laws regarding Environment Impact Assessments and the Finance Ministers' announcement that private parties would be allowed to carry out coal mining are very worrying. This indicates that the Government will carry out activities that will cause further damage to the land and forests, and give a greater impetus to coal. We will see more destruction of forests and Eco-sensitive areas for mining, quarrying and for infrastructure projects such as multi-lane highways, railways and power transmission lines. We have to tread with caution and the old narrative must change. Continued assault on the environment in the name of development will ultimately lead to economic ruination.

Industrialization is a reality, and 'Smart Cities' are certainly needed. But at the same time let us also create 'Flourishing Villages' with healthy rural economies. Gandhi's vision, coupled with the Bhutanese philosophy of the 'Nine domains of Gross National Happiness' could be the Mantra for India!

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