

## Crisis as opportunity

### Ecological paths out of the economic collapse

Only a radical change in our economic model and shift in method of governance will stop the colossal destruction of ecosystems, writes **Ashish Kothari**



*This area of Himachal Pradesh has been destroyed for construction of the Parbati hydroelectric project. How much more can we afford to lose? PHOTO: ASHISH KOTHARI*

**A**s the economic crisis viciously grips the world in the early months of 2009, it is easy to slip into a paralysis of pessimism. But every crisis is also an opportunity, a chance to learn from old mistakes and find new paths. We in India, as indeed the rest of the world, can create history by doing some fundamental rethinking of how we want our economies and societies to function. This is of utmost necessity at the current juncture, because a number of crises have come together to shake our belief in existing economic

systems: not only the ongoing financial collapse, but also the catastrophic ecological changes manifested in loss of crucial ecosystem functions, erosion of biodiversity, and climate change, and the water and food crisis that dozens of countries and hundreds of millions of people are facing.

What is wrong with our economic model? Why are we in the midst of these multiple crises? While anything said in a few words would be necessarily simplistic, some essential truths stare us in the face.

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PHOTO: N. RAJESH

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Firstly, the model of 'development' that has gained currency since the 1950s (yes, this universally accepted holy cow is only a half century old!), considers the ecological base we all survive on, as raw material for exploitation, or a vast waste bin to absorb the effluents we produce. Global studies such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment have shown that we are already consuming and dumping far more than the earth can absorb...in effect, we are stealing from our future generations.

In India, a study in 2008 by the Global Footprint Network and the Confederation of Indian Industry came to the same conclusion: we were already well past our national carrying capacity, and eating into our natural 'capital'. India, and the world are on a suicidal path.

Second, while industrialised countries have devised increasingly stringent regulations to protect their domestic environment, recognising that the captains of industry will not do this on their own, they and the institutions they dominate (IMF, World Bank, donors) have preached 'free market' approaches to poor and so-called 'developing' countries.

We in India (or citizens of other countries in our position) have had to 'globalise', to open up our economic boundaries and make things easy for both domestic and foreign industry. This has inevitably meant loosening environmental regulations (as witnessed for instance in the drastically diluted Environment Impact Assessment notification put in place in 2006, and over a dozen changes to the Coastal Regulatory Zone notification making it easier to set up industrial, sports, or port facilities in fragile areas).

Third, the development and free market ideologies that underpin current globalisation, and the Indian economy, have rapidly marginalised already poor or weak communities. Between 30 million and 50 million people have been displaced from their homes in India alone, since Independence, mostly by dams, mines, urban sprawl, expressways and the like.

Though adivasis comprise only about 7- 8 per cent of India's population, they comprise about

40 per cent of those displaced. Even when not physically uprooted, tens of millions of forest-dwellers, fishers, pastoralists, farmers, and craftspersons have had their livelihoods torn asunder by the ecological damage caused by 'development', their cultures and lifestyles characterised as 'primitive' even though they are far more ecologically sustainable than the lifestyles of those who make economic policy. After all this, their status has been, in a cruel twist of logic, converted into legal or ecological violators as they desperately eke out a living by selling firewood, 'poaching' inside a protected area, or squatting on public land in a city.

Livelihoods have also been lost in large numbers due to the cheap imports of agricultural and other goods, in the globalisation phase. Nor are those being displaced from farms and forests and wetlands, adequately being absorbed in the industry or in services. In fact with industry becoming more and more capital-intensive, India has witnessed the strange but not uncommon phenomenon of 'jobless growth'.

Fourth, and linked to all the above, the dominant economic ideology has created huge chasms between the rich and the poor, exacerbating inequities between and within nations. The 'shining' India that the media so loves to project (with its billionaires and its homespun multinational companies we are all supposed to be proud of) has the world's largest number of malnourished women and children, with half its population unable to find enough to eat. And, I am not even getting into the dismal facts relating to access to drinking water, sanitation, and health facilities. Combine this with the lack of employment opportunities among the poor. The growing inequalities are a scary breeding ground for social and ecological conflict, as already witnessed in protests across India. And while rapid population rise cannot be blamed for this situation, it certainly adds to the crisis.

The shameful statistics of farmer suicides (and now, of suicides of workers who get laid off during the financial crisis) should be indication enough that something is terribly wrong with models of



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*Communities are ready to assert their opposition to large dams. Here, women gather en masse to protest construction of dams on the Narmada river. PHOTO: ASHLESH KOTIARI*

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agricultural and industrial development followed in the recent past. Such consequences will only increase unless we make some fundamental changes in macro-economic and governance policies.

**Towards alternatives**

One of the first mistakes we must immediately correct is the imposition of one economic model, or indeed one model of governance, education, health, and environmental management, on the enormous diversity of ecological and cultural situations that defines India. (Take this onto the global scale, and the monumental folly of impos-

ing one worldview on all communities and countries and ecological conditions, as is the wont of the globalised economic model, is mind boggling). It is ironic that even biodiversity conservation laws can be monolithic, as is the case with India's Wildlife Protection Act.

Moving away from such uniformity and the domination of one worldview, would entail giving respect and recognition to many ecologies (with different ecosystems and species having varying needs), and many human ways of living. These would include systems once considered valuable but now considered outdated and 'primitive': subsistence economies, barter, local haat-based trade,

oral knowledge, work-leisure combines, dignity of labour, the machine as a tool and not a master, local health traditions, handicrafts, learning through doing with parents and other elders, frowning upon profligacy and waste, and so on. This does not mean an unconditional acceptance of traditions — indeed there is much in traditional India that needs to be left behind (including various inequities such as women's subjugation and the exploitation of dalits) — but rather a re-examination of the past and building on the best of what traditions offer.

And lest anyone mistake this to be the kind of revivalism that the Hindutva camp talks about, let me hasten to add that communalism of this or any other kind should have no place in the India of the future. Traditions need to be rescued from those who use them in a bigoted way.

A key plank of the alternative futures will be localisation, a trend diametrically opposed to globalisation. This is based on the simple but powerful belief that those living closest to the resource to be managed (the forest, the sea, the

coast, the farm, the urban facility, etc), would have the greatest stake, and often the best knowledge, to manage it. Of course this is not always the case, and in India many communities have lost the capacity to manage their surrounds because of two centuries of government-dominated policies. Nevertheless a move towards localisation of essential production, consumption, and trade, and of health, education, and other services, is eminently possible.

The thousands of Indian initiatives at decentralised water harvesting, biodiversity conservation, education, governance, food and materials production, energy generation, and others (many of which were featured in previous editions of *The Hindu Survey of Environment*), are testimony to the power of localisation. These are still a drop in the ocean, but serve as forerunners to a growing trend that will emerge as globalised economies collapse. Taking the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments regarding decentralisation to their logical conclusion would well be possible through such initiatives.



*Chinese researchers look at progress in Hivare Bazaar. Village-level, ecologically-sensitive development initiatives such as this one in Maharashtra inspire similar initiatives abroad. PHOTO: ASHISH KOTHARI*

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initiatives at decentralised biodiversity conservation, food and materials, and others (many previous editions of *The Hindu*), are testimony to these are still a drop in the bucket to a growing globalised economy under the 74th Constitution. Decentralisation would well be possible

The local, and the small scale, are however not adequate. For, many of the problems we now face are at much larger scales, emanating from and affecting entire landscapes (and seascapes), countries, regions, and indeed the earth. Climate change is an obvious example, but there were many well before it: the spread of toxics (remember the story of DDT found in penguins in Antarctica, thousands of miles from where this pesticide may have been sprayed?), and desertification, to name two. Landscape and transboundary planning and governance (also called 'bioregionalism', or 'ecoregionalism', among other names) are now exciting new approaches being tried out in several countries and regions.

These are as yet fledgling in India, but some are worth learning from. A people's effort, the Arvari Sansad (Parliament) in Rajasthan, has aimed at managing a 400 sqkm river basin through uniting all the villages in the basin and making integrated plans and programmes for land, agriculture, water, wildlife, development, and even law and order.

In Orissa, a bold effort at bringing several thousand sqkm of the Chilika lagoon and catchment hills under integrated and participatory planning (with the creation of a Chilika Development Authority) has run into rough weather for various reasons, but even as a partial success (or failure!), it contains important lessons.

The combination of localisation and landscape approaches also provides massive opportunities for livelihood generation, thus tackling one of India's (and the world's) biggest ongoing problems: unemployment. For many years now, civil society organisations in India have been saying that land and water regeneration, and the resulting increase in productivity, could provide one of the country's biggest sources of employment, and create permanent assets for sustainable livelihoods.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), as also other schemes such as the National Urban Renewal Mission, could well be oriented towards such environment-employment combinations.

Building on decentralised and landscape level governance and management, and in turn providing it a solid backing, would be a rational land use

plan for each State and the country as a whole. This plan would permanently give country's ecologically and socially fragile or important lands some form of conservation status (fully participatory and mindful of local rights and tenure), including biodiversity hotspots, sacred sites (especially of traditional communities), territories of vulnerable adivasis and fishers, community conserved and government managed protected areas, water catchment forests, and so on. Mining, ports, industries, and so on, could simply not come up here. Such a plan would also enjoin upon towns and cities to provide as much of their resources from within their boundaries as possible, through water harvesting, rooftop farming, decentralised energy generation, and so on; and to build mutually beneficial rather than parasitic relations with rural areas from where they may still need to take resources.

The greater the say of rural communities in deciding what happens to their resources, and the greater the awareness of city-dwellers on the

impacts of their lifestyles, the more this will happen. Ultimately as villages get vitalised through locally appropriate development initiatives, rural-urban migration which today seems inexorable, would also slow down and may

even get reversed, as has happened with villages like Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra.

If communities (rural and urban) are to be the fulcrum of the alternative futures, will there remain a role for the State? Or for non-State actors such as civil society organisations and the business sector? Yes indeed. The State will need to retain; or rather strengthen, its welfare role for the weak (human and non-human), facilitating their voices in decision-making.

It will assist communities in situations where local capacity is weak, such as in generating resources, providing NREGA kind of schemes, and ensuring security of tenure. It will rein in business elements or others who behave irresponsibly towards the environment or people (rather than rein in people protesting the takeover of lands and resources by the industry, as it is doing currently). Civil society and business will serve communities, the former also acting as watchdogs against misuse of powers by any sector.

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Development initiatives  
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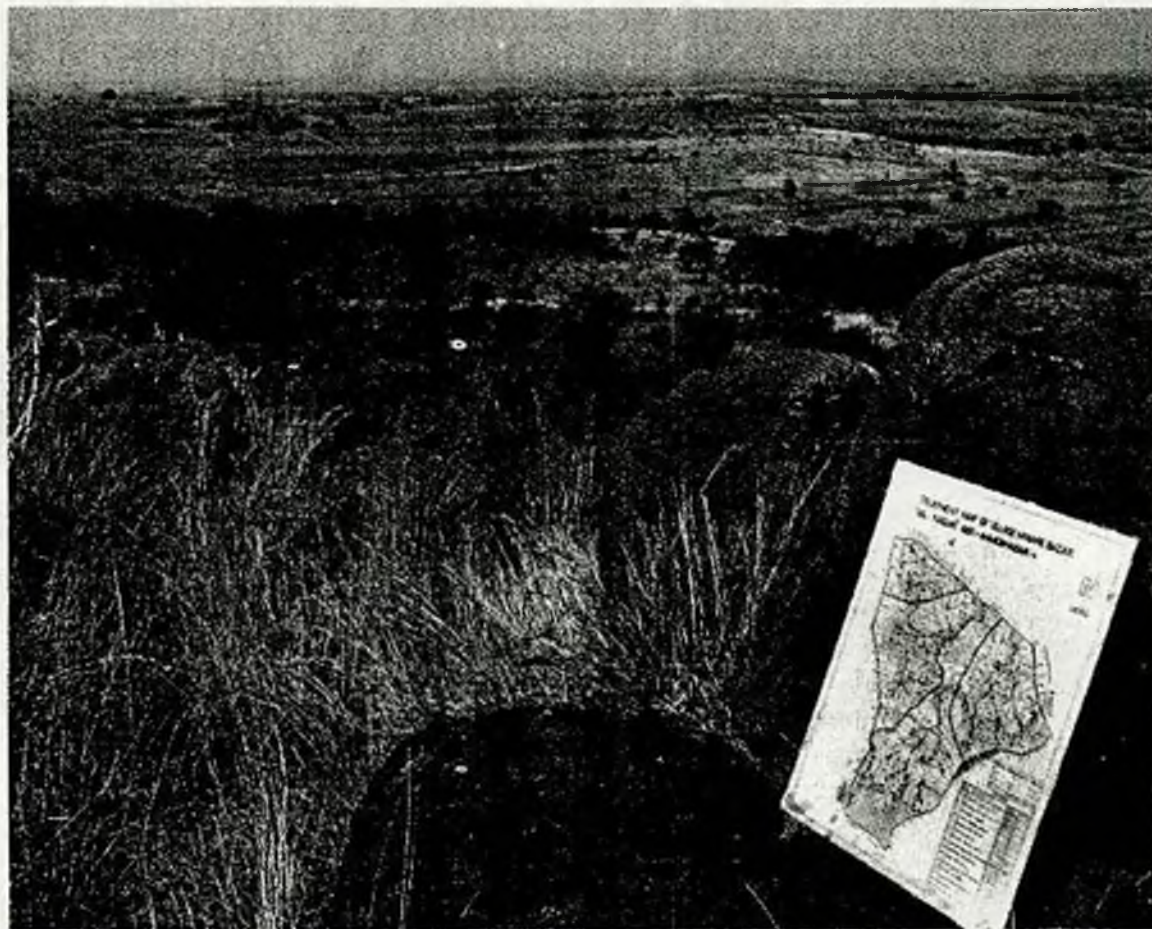
Markets will once again be, at their core, local, emphasising trade amongst people who can relate to each other; with national or international trade being built on this core, and subject to local ecological and social considerations.

**Conclusion**

None of this means that global interactions will or should cease to be. Indeed there has always been a flow of ideas, persons, services and materials across the world, and this has often enriched human societies. A reversal of economic and financial globalisation does not mean an end to such relations; indeed it may make the meaningful flow of ideas and innovations much more possible

than when everything is dominated by finance and capital, especially if local control and capacity are simultaneously getting stronger.

These are huge shifts in governance, and will encounter considerable resistance from today's political and corporate power-centres. But initiatives such as the use of the Right to Information Act to challenge corruption and opaqueness in government functioning, tribal self-rule in some parts of central India, 'communitisation' of education and health in parts of Nagaland, the Arvari Sansad in Rajasthan, village-level planning in Kerala, organic farming and local women's control over food distribution networks in deccan Andhra, community conservation of forests in at least



*Ecosystem renewal supports greater biodiversity. Another view of the Hivare Bazaar project. PHOTO: ASHISH KOTHLARI*



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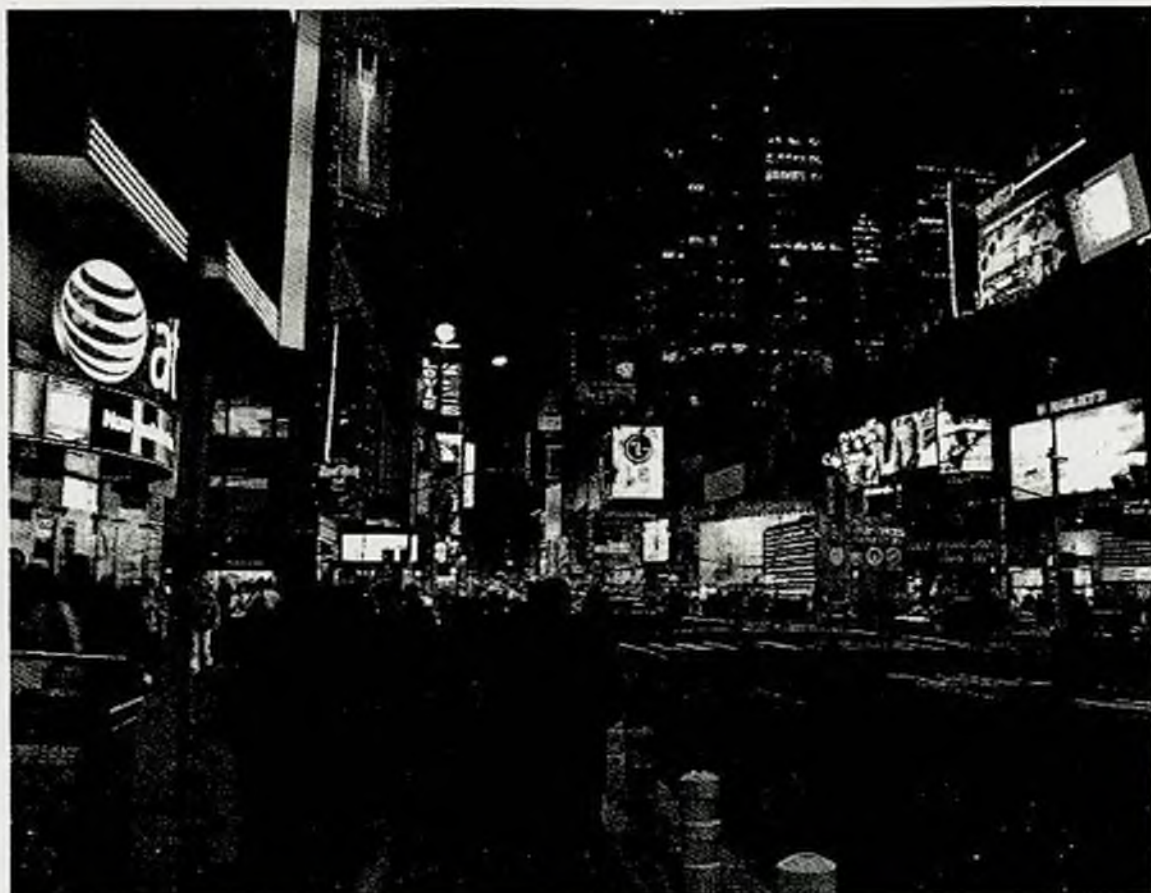
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*Unbridled consumerism is the leading cause of unsustainable development and dangerous levels of resource extraction. PHOTO: ASHISH KOTHARI*

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a dozen States, and so on, are indicators that such change is possible. Indeed it is happening even in the most globalised economies of the world, as in the localisation movements in the USA and Europe.

India is perhaps uniquely placed to lead in such a transformation, for a variety of reasons: its thousands of years of history and adaptation, its ecological and cultural diversity, its resilience in the face of multiple crises, the continued existence of myriad lifestyles and worldviews including of ecosystem people who tread the earth most lightly. But of course it cannot do this alone, it will need to convince, teach, and learn from, other countries and peoples.

The alternative worldview sketchily presented here may well be considered 'idealistic' and uto-

pian. But I submit that it is no more unrealistic than those who think that the current model of 'development' can sustain us forever. We are collapsing, and taking the earth down with us. We have no option but to think boldly of different directions if we want to remain afloat.

Ashish Kothari is a member of Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group.



PHOTO ASHISH KOTHARI