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# Development Hurts

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When farmers in Pen and Raigarh in Maharashtra recently gathered to protest the takeover of their lands for a special economic zone, they were expressing a growing discontent among India's rural masses.

Similar agitations have sprung up among Adivasis in Orissa to protest the acquisition of their lands for mining and steel plants, among fisherfolk in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa against the occupation of coastal areas for ports, and among slum-dwellers opposing evictions to make way for shopping malls and luxury housing.

Those who dismiss such protests as simply a means to get greater financial compensation, or as an outcome of vote-bank politics, miss the point.

These represent a growing anger over what can only be called the second colonisation of India. At stake is the ecological foundation of India, and the livelihoods of millions of people. Also, the one central government agency that should have acted against such a process, the ministry of environment and forests (MoEF), has become a party to it.

Successive governments have encouraged massive takeover of forest land, farmland, wetlands, and coastal areas for mining, dams, expressways, industries, ports, and the like.

Laws like the Land Acquisition Act (enacted, not surprisingly, by the British) have been used by the government to forcibly take over land, while ignoring constitutional safeguards for vulnerable populations like Adivasis.

Even central legislation on forests and wildlife contains enough loopholes to allow elephantine projects to slip through. From 1980 till 2003, for instance, about 847,000 ha of forest land has been legally diverted for 10,118 projects.

How much more was taken away illegally, and how many other (non-forested) ecosystems and farmland were destroyed, is anyone's guess.

The consequent displacement of people is also mind-boggling, with available figures of those evicted since Independence ranging from 25 to 50 million.

Environmental damage is believed to cost countries like India as much if not more than their gross domestic produce, in terms of soil loss, water insecurity, adverse health impacts, erosion of genetic wealth, and now, the impacts of climate change.

We are eating into our natural capital. If we were to dig into our financial capital and make ourselves bankrupt, we would be called foolish; but when we mine our natural resources beyond the rate of regeneration and recovery, we call it development.

MoEF is diluting environmental regulations. The existing environment impact assessment (EIA) notification and the Coastal Regulation Zone notification are being replaced with much weaker regulations.

Another dangerous proposal of the government is to allow corporations access to forest lands for afforestation. Two previous proposals to this effect, in the 1980s and 1990s, were dropped after nationwide protests.

This time around, however, the government has been clever, proposing that industry enters into collaboration with local communities for the purpose.

Knowing the skewed power relations between a corporation and a village, the latter is hardly likely to benefit.

The government's excuse that it needs the private sector to regreen India is bogus; its own satellite imagery shows how successful communities have been in doing this, given half a chance.

Another recent move which will have alarming consequences is the creation of special economic zones (SEZs), backed by a law enacted in 2005.

Though they are proposed over tens of thousands of hectares, most environmental norms do not apply to SEZs. There is no obligation to organise public hearings among affected people.

That is why the farmers in Maharashtra had to resort to public agitation, stating clearly that they were not interested in compensation or giving up their productive lands.

Meanwhile, progressive processes initiated by the government some years back have been put on hold. This includes the National Wildlife Action Plan (formulated in 2002, but still unimplemented) and the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (a final draft of which has been pending with the government since 2004).

A number of factors have contributed to the present situation. The need of a globalising economy for ever-increasing quantities of natural resources is a major factor.

Of all the forest land diverted in 23 years after 1980, about 45 per cent of it occurred during 1999-2003. A process of reviewing environmental regulations, funded by the World Bank, has added to the problems.

Called 'environmental capacity building', this process has led to proposals for reviewing EIA and clearance procedures. It is also possibly the genesis of the recently finalised National Environment Policy (NEP).

Developed without consultation with local communities and grass-roots organisations, the NEP recommends changes in EIA procedures, based on recommendations of the Govindarajan committee, to reduce delays in clearing economic investments.

As economic investment at any cost becomes the mantra, MoEF clears projects in ecologically and culturally sensitive areas, including biodiversity hotspots such as the western ghats, north-eastern Himalayas, and central India.

Habitats of many threatened wildlife species, and of millions of Adivasi and non-Adivasi farmers, fisherfolk, and artisans, are under attack.

India should explore alternative paths that do not require sacrificing the environment and local livelihoods.

They involve long-term land-use planning, safeguarding ecologically and culturally sensitive areas, building sustainability criteria into all infrastructure planning, computing the true value of nature's services, and so on — with ordinary people at the heart of decision-making.

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