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## The Issue is Earth Itself

### *Development and Planetary Disaster*

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The notion of development, in theory and in/as practice, has had widespread acceptance the world over. Indeed, very few ideas have generated such a quantum and extent of *consent* as the notion of development. The ideology of development has surpassed, in terms of acceptability and effectiveness, most other ideologies historically. In fact, most ideologies have also claimed development as one of their basic planks. Development is the magic wand that would supposedly remove deprivation and turn every place into a land of milk and honey. The notion of development is dear as much to a bureaucrat, a technocrat, an entrepreneur and a contractor as it is to a Liberal, a Marxist, a Leninist, a Maoist, and a fascist of all varieties; the homegrown as well as overseas (of course, there are some 'basic' differences). In short, development is, undeniably, an *article of faith*. The most notable dissenters in this regard may perhaps be the Gandhians. But then, their influence over the dominant ideas and models of development have been negligible, to say the least.

Development is inextricably bound up with the idea of *modernity*. Its roots can be traced to the very beginnings of modern

western philosophy. It is from this time on that the subject-object dichotomy comes into the organized thought process. Man as the subject and nature as the object that has to be engaged with, worked upon and conquered; nature as the giver of its bounties and man as the taker. Closely linked to this idea is the conviction that man is the most exalted of all the species and that this planet is meant for man. This idea was expounded with utmost clarity by Rene Descartes, considered to be the father of modern western philosophy.

Descartes, in his *Discourse on Method*, operated on two assumptions, one ancient and the other, entirely new. According to Peter Schouls "The ancient assumption is that there is a rational God who has created a world which operates on rational laws or principles, as well as human beings in this world whose nature it is to be rational and free. The new perspective is that rational human beings should be able to *use* this world to make it work for them through the sciences of 'mechanics' (no more sweat in the provision of daily needs), 'medicine' (no more pain and indefinite postponement of death), and 'morals' (no more anxiety resulting from interpersonal and international quarrels)" (2000: 5-6).

Schouls observes that "this new perspective is one which rejects preoccupation with a paradise lost in a distant past or paradise to be regained in a non-earthly future through the grace of God, and which accepts as a challenge the use of human rationality and 'generosity' to create on earth the good life of freedom from labour, illness and anxiety. It is an attitude which makes the world of 'nature' an object of instrumental value (it exists primarily to serve human needs and aspirations), and which firmly plants the idea of infinite progress in the western mind" (ibid.).

The greater man exerted himself, the greater the earth would yield. The ideology of labour, of perseverance ('industry'), of science and the scientific method, of devotion to work and, correspondingly a work ethic were at the core of the development of capitalism. Saint-Simon, a pioneering sociologist, celebrated the development of industrial civilization. To him, mankind had reached the adult stage with the advent of the modern period. Herbert Marcuse observes that, to Saint-Simon "The new era is

that of industrialism, which brings with it a guarantee that it can fulfill all human potentialities. Society as a whole is based on industry. Industry is the only guarantor of its existence, and the unique source of all wealth and prosperity. The state of affairs which is most favourable to industry is, therefore, most favourable to society. This is the starting point as well as the goal of all our efforts" (Marcuse, 1941: 330-31).

Marcuse observes that "Saint-Simon began with a predominantly optimistic view of industrial society—the rapid progress of all productive forces, he thought, would soon blot out the growing antagonisms and the revolutionary upheavals within the modern social system. The new industrial order was above all a positive one, representing the affirmation and fruition of all human endeavour for a happy and abundant life." (ibid.). Thus, Saint-Simon became the founder of modern positivism which has been most conducive to the idea of man as subject and nature as object. Further, the progress of the industrial system presupposed that the struggle between classes became transformed into a struggle against nature, in which all the social classes joined (ibid.: 332). Thus, Saint-Simon visualized an eventual societal consensus to emerge, a consensus regarding (industrial) development as bringing about a society of supreme happiness and prosperity.

The above positive reading of society can have one wondering whether Saint-Simon, as well as Auguste Comte, another pioneering social thinker, would have implied, as many do today explicitly, the 'end of history', the 'end of ideology' and so forth, a couple of centuries back itself!

Meanwhile, even Marx's position lent itself favourably to the idea of what later came to be considered as development. In his introduction to Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Maurice Dobb observes that, "whereas for Hegel the dialectic as a principle and structural pattern of development started from abstract being as mind or spirit, for Marx the dialectic of development started from nature, and from man as an integral part of nature. But while part of nature and subject to the determinism of its laws, man as a conscious being was at the same time

capable of struggling with and against nature of subordinating it and ultimately transforming it for his own purposes. This he did by consciously devised productive and creative activity. This human activity that differentiated man from nature and from most animate creatures was productive labour. Human history accordingly began from this dialectic of man's struggle with nature, and essentially consisted in the various forms and stages assumed by productive labour in its development and progress" (Dobb in Marx, 1970: 7).

However, as the *dialectic* unfolded, it was becoming clearer that, capitalism even while making nature an object of exploitation, had made living and dead labour also as objects of 'exploitation'. Radical critiques and ideologies such as Marxism and anarchism now articulated *riposte* measures, made prognoses and desired a transcendence of capitalism. But then the argument was for the 'meek inheriting the earth', if it may be put that way. It was for ending the exploitation of man by man but not exploitation of the earth by man. Quite inevitably, at this stage, a Robert Thomas Malthus could be made to look like a clown.

At this stage, what was opposed was not 'accumulation' but the distribution of the social cake. The main contention was *how* it ought to be distributed. This question could be most favourably answered depending on what sort of society and social structure would be brought into existence. Hardly any 'organic' intellectual of the time then thought of the earth question. It was either the 'human' question or more specifically to some, the 'class' question. The earth was taken for granted; it was a given. Not to exploit it was a sin.

It thus came to pass that both the world views, ideologies and practises of capitalism and socialism came to rest solidly on the base of *industrialism*. On this aspect, a Saint-Simon, a Marx, a Lenin, etc., can be observed to be in full accord. As mentioned earlier, Saint-Simon had observed that what was good for industry was good for society. The Marxists would have only added the word 'socialist' in parenthesis. Thus, the model of development whose chief features were rapid industrialization, increased use of sophisticated energy-demanding technology, urbanization, etc.,

originating *organically* in the early starting nations, became, deliberately, a societal and cultural *choice* in post-colonial societies. The state became a developmental state, a welfare state, a state that worked for economic growth with social justice. It stood for the last man assuring that everyone would have a place under the sun. Even our home-grown 'Marxist-Leninist' intellectuals read positive signals in the state though reserving their ambivalence for appropriate occasions!; such as when deliberating in learned circles, on its 'class' character. They were also instrumental in spawning a new school of thought called 'development planning'. Today, it is no longer the privilege of that esoteric section of society called the economists. Any roadside NGO promoter can call himself a development expert. In a way, his own development if not survival is assured depending on which corporate-originated foundation sponsors him and from which part of the world. The NGO person is the latest to qualify as a mercenary.

Today, the role of the state in development has been undergoing a redefinition. It is not required for the state to participate directly in the development process anymore. What is now required of it is to act as a *facilitator*. The state has to basically provide for the infrastructure—roads, communications, etc., and leave the rest to private capital and international agencies who know what is best for them. The state is also expected to remove 'roadblocks' to foreign investment in almost all sectors of industry, commerce and services. Not to do so would send the wrong signals to global investors and would be against the spirit of globalization and liberalization. Saint-Simon advocated in his time that what is good for industry is good for society. The protagonists of industry and development say much the same today. The process of globalization has only accentuated this advocacy much further. This is the background to the problem being posed in this paper.

### **The Problem**

The basic problem addressed in the present paper is regarding the sustainability of planet earth, of its ability to sustain future life. More than two centuries of capitalist development has been making

for a bankruptcy of the resources of the earth that is believed to be largely non-renewable, at least in the short and medium run. Planned development efforts are also following the same models and principles. Historically, capitalism meant production of commodities whose main characteristics are exchange-value, exploitation of labour and more and more accumulation of capital. 'Development' also stands mostly for this type of value-creation predicated on the exploitation of the earth's resources apart from generating a phenomenal quantum of waste. Today, a situation is being reached where "humanity's production and waste consumption exceed the earth's capacity to create new resources and absorb waste. Natural capital is being exploited at high rates to support current resource use reducing the earth's ability to support future life" (Sagar Dhara, 2006).

There have been several empirical studies and theoretical texts that have highlighted the problem. Apart from certain tendencies within Marxism, the critiques have also emanated from Gandhian thought, by think tanks such as the World Watch Institute, Club of Rome, etc., and individuals such as E.F. Schumacher. But the problem has been much more complex. Meanwhile, humans have been eroding their natural capital. According to ecological studies, the *ecological footprint* of human society started exceeding the earth's biocapacity by around mid-seventies in the last century. Today, nearly 1.4 times the earth's biocapacity is needed to sustain the current level of human activity. "Ecological footprint is a measure of the amount of nature's biocapacity required annually to sustain a population. By comparing a population's footprint with its biocapacity, ecological footprint analysis suggests whether the population is living within its ecological means" (ibid.).

### **What is to be done? ... And by whom?**

The present dominant models of development do not effectively question the degradation of the earth including the catastrophic levels of pollution being experienced today. Development policies and practises only tend to draw more and more people into the ambit of the capitalist world. People become, on one hand, the