

Environment, Growth and Death

Bharat Jhunjhunwala

Environmentalists are seen as obstructing economic growth by putting roadblocks in the path of infrastructure projects. Tribal rights are invoked against mining. Preservation of Yamuna riverbed is invoked against constructions for the Commonwealth Games. Pilgrim's right to worship is invoked against hydropower projects. Environmentalists are thus seen as an impediment to raising the standards of living of the people. This perception is due to misinformation supplied by the shortsighted political leaders. They do not appreciate that destruction of environment will lead to short term economic growth. But long term economic collapse will be the logical culmination.

Four thousand years ago the Indus Valley Civilization prospered on the banks of Indus and Ghaggar Rivers. Grand cities of Mohanjodaro, Harappa and Kalibangan were wholly made with burnt bricks. These cities produced cloth, incense, wine and beads for export. Economic progress was at heights unknown previously. Large amount of fuel wood was required for the manufacture of these goods. So the ancestors cut the jungles for securing this economic growth. At that time a few tree lovers like the Bishnois must have objected to felling of trees. They were perhaps ignored and seen as obstructing economic growth by putting roadblocks in the path of export-led economic growth. In the long term, however, this attitude of the leaders proved fatal. Cutting of forests led to denudation of the river banks which led to soil erosion. Large amounts of silt flowed into the riverbed. Level of the river waters rose and led to the flooding of the grandest of the cities mankind had known. That civilization was obliterated from the face of earth.

Similar happenings took place in Soviet Russia about fifty years ago. Derek Scissors of the Heritage Foundation says in a web posting: "For more than 30 years after World War II, the Soviet Union boasted an extremely impressive industrial expansion. Yet under the surface, ecological destruction had actually begun to reduce life expectancies and eventually led to prolonged economic stagnation."

Scissors casts doubts on the sustainability of China's present high rates of growth. He says: "China may very well match the now extinct USSR's astounding levels of environmental degradation, inefficient indigenous industry, and eventual economic stagnation. China faces a water crisis. Starting at the top, the Himalayan glaciers are melting. Winter 2008 levels on the Yangtze were the lowest since record keeping began in 1866, and the Yellow's outflow is a shocking 10 percent of what it was 40 years ago. Water consumption has already soared and will naturally continue to rise with population growth, urbanization, and industrial expansion. If glaciers can no longer provide sufficient water, rice output will plummet beyond possibility of domestic replacement. Groundwater use, falling water tables, and subsidence occur in every eastern city, costing \$75 billion to date, with the promise of far greater costs to come. In rural areas, the Ministry of Health labels over 40 percent of drinking water unsafe. Receding water is also reducing the amount of available arable land. In 1996, arable land stood (officially) at slightly over 130 million hectares. In 2007, arable land slipped below 122 million hectares

and the loss is accelerating. The degradation of air quality is bad enough to be fatal. Chinese cities account for the majority of the world's 20 worst urban air environments, and perhaps three-quarters of a million people die annually due to air pollution."

The UN Committee on Environmental-Economic Accounting says in its report of 2005: "Ministries of Finance need to know whether their development strategy is laying the basis for long-term economic growth or not... For example, a forest ministry considering the award of logging concessions (should) know now the volume and method of logging will affect water supplies to downstream cities, production of non-timber forest products that are critical to livelihoods of poor households, and opportunities for agriculture and tourism." The problem is that short term benefits of felling forests obtained from timber, hydropower and mining are accounted while the long term costs of loss of drinking water, incomes of the poor households, tourism, global warming, loss of biodiversity etc. are not accounted.

The true conflict is not between environment and economic growth as made out to be. The conflict is between short term and long term economic growth. Environmentalists want to preserve the environment so that economic growth sustains. The proponents of growth, on the other hand, are only looking at immediate benefits and not examining whether the short term growth may lead to destruction of the economy in the long run as happened in the Indus Valley and Russia and appears to be afoot in China presently.

Hydropower projects provide cheap electricity for 100 or, maybe, 200 years. But they trap the silt being carried by the rivers to renourish the coasts which is leading to huge coastal erosion in Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat. In the long term India may become a smaller country than it is at present. Mosquitoes breed in hydropower reservoirs and help in the development of virulent strains of malaria. The number of deaths from malaria is rapidly increasing in the country for this reason. The inflowing organic matter like carcasses and larvae settle in the bottom of reservoirs where they ferment and release methane gas which contributes much more to global warming than burning of coal. The river water loses its contact with air, sun and earth while flowing in tunnels and loses freshness. As a result, pilgrims bathing in the rivers do not obtain peace and that may lead to increasing violence in the society in the long run.

The Ganga Expressway proposed on the banks of the Ganga is similarly likely to lead to a long term economic disaster. The water level in the river will rise. The drain water coming into the river will flow backward and spread through the cities giving rise to myriads of health problems. The less spread of river waters will reduce air moisture and affect the insects and animals living on the riverbanks. The loss of these life forms will lead to increase in pollution. Running of vehicles on the riverbanks will close the pores of the earth and reduce recharge of groundwater. Similar impact will take place of less spread of flood waters. Huge amounts of poisonous Carbon mono-oxide and harmful Carbon dioxide will be emitted near the river. These gases will be absorbed by the river waters and again harm the riverine flora and fauna. The project developers of the Expressway are only concerned with immediate gains from the sale of land near the highways. They are least concerned whether this development will sustain or push the entire economy into a collapse like happened to India's ancestors of Indus Valley. □□□

