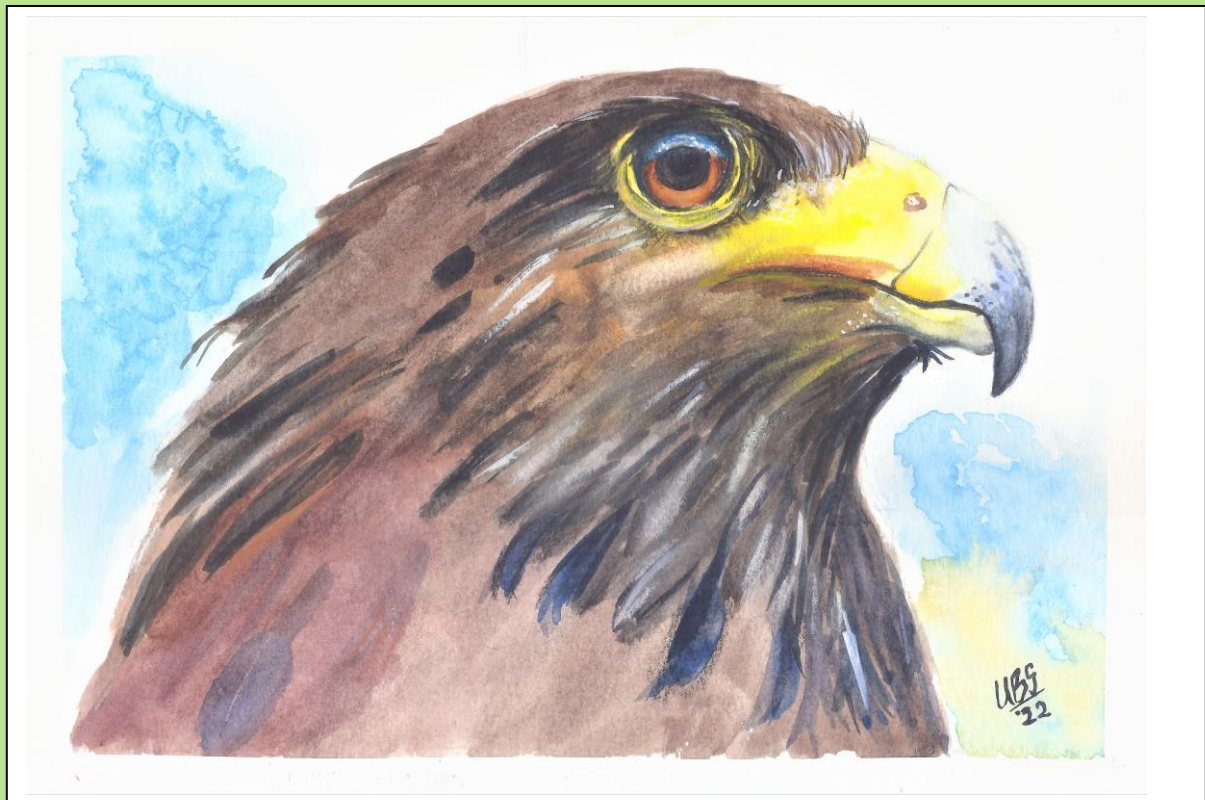


WORKING PAPER

Political Interests and the Environment

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This paper fed into the very heated national and international debate going on in the early 1980s (remember “Poverty is the greatest polluter”), on the seeming conflict between poverty reduction through economic development, on the one hand, and conservation of the natural environment, on the other. The paper referred to examples from Shahdol District in Madhya Pradesh, and Saharanpur district in Uttar Pradesh.

The painting of a Harris’s Hawk, on the cover, is by Uma Bordoloi.

POLITICAL INTERESTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

- SHEKHAR SINGH

Perhaps the most pathetic manifestation of an exploitative social order is the misuse of our natural resources: land, water and air and the fauna and flora that thrives on them. Invariably, this attitude of malicious apathy towards nature first and most tellingly affects the poorest segments of the society. It ensures a progressively increasing inability to procure the adequate raw materials needed for subsistence production by the impoverished and at the same time affects the ecology in a way in which even nature turns against these very people.

Like every other resource, but even more justifiably so, these natural resources belong in equal measure to all living creatures. In other words,, the only just way of allocating these resources would be to consider the total natural resources of the world as belonging to one common pool from which each living creature has a right to his or her share. This, needless to say, is not what is happening.

Perhaps the fragmentation of the world into nation-states makes such a universal and equitable distribution of the world's resources politically impossible. The unit is immediately reduced from the

world to the nation, and justice then demands both that each nation live within its own resources and that these resources be equitably divided within the nation. This, again, does not happen.

Figures in support of the statement that, whichever way you look at it, whether from the global perspective or from the national, resources have not and are not being equitably distributed, are plentiful and well known. Many books on the environment use the formula that one Swiss consumes as much natural resources as 30 Somalies. Even if we make allowances for different climatic conditions requiring, for subsistence, different levels of energy consumption, international consumption of energy in 1972 was something like this:

*

Energy Consumption per capita (adjusted for temperature)

1. India	450	4. U.S.A.	11,000
2. Guinea	200	5. Canada	9,200
3. Burma	100		

(Source: Environmental Fund Sheet on 1972 Energy Consumption and UN Statistical Year Book, 1973)

* In pounds of coals equivalents.

In fact, the bogey of population growth in India, especially the interest that the western world takes in it, stands exposed through such an analysis. Considering an average American consumes about twenty times the resources that an average Indian does, USA, with a population of 230 million is consuming seven times the world's resources than India, with a population of 700 million. If, then, the growing population of the world is a threat to the World's resources, much greater efforts should be made to control the American population.

So much for the international distribution of resources. Similar patterns, unfortunately, also emerge when one looks at the national scene, especially of India.

A 'planned economy', as we understand the term in India, seems to imply a right of the state to pool all the natural resources and then use them in a manner which is optimum in terms of both efficiency and distribution. However, under the name of such 'planning' what actually happens is that the resources, say forests, existing socially and geographically within one segment of the society are denied to the traditional owners as, it is argued, they must be

used for the collective good of the total society. Further, valuable wood, it is maintained, ought not to be burnt in Chullahs, for such a use would be inefficient; such wood should be converted into furniture, or ply or paper or rayons.

Theoretically, no one can argue against a scientific and efficient management of our natural resources, for such a management promotes production. However, what really happens is that these natural resources, while being denied to the traditional users who are mostly poor, are utilised to satisfy the luxurious demands of mainly the rich urban citizens, and all this without providing the original users with any substitute to get on with the task of working, living or even surviving. The Forest Act, for example, seeks to prevent the collection of wood for the village hearth, while allowing the felling of trees and other forest products for conversion into paper, furniture and other objects of primarily urban needs. The poor deprived villager, however, is invariably provided with no plausible alternative.

Instances of such exploitation are many, and can be listed in detail. Perhaps two brief examples might help show the strategies involved.

Paper Industry

The paper industry is commonly regarded as a highly polluting and environmentally destructive industry as it not only consumes wood and bamboos as raw material but also throws out highly toxic effluents. Mainly because of its environmental undesirability and as a result of the rising consciousness of people in the developed world regarding issues of environment, there is now an effort to shift production units of paper to countries of the developing world. All types of incentives and coercive pressures have and are being used by some western countries to this end. Efforts are made to attract industrialists in developing countries into this sector and to use economic pressures to make governments co-operative in this effort. Obviously the objective is that these mills, when set up in developing countries, would procure raw materials at cheap, subsidised, rates without having to pay the real cost of replacement, as has become essential in the developed countries. Also, apart from cheap labour, the costly methods for treating waste from the factories could be dispensed with, making the production of paper very cheap for the industrialist, but extremely expensive for the host country and its people.

To see how these forces work in a micro framework, it is interesting to look at the case of the Orient Paper Mill (OPM) set up at Amlai, in Shahdol District of Madhya Pradesh.*

The OPM was set up in 1965 with an investment of about Rs.30 crores. Almost the entire plant and equipment was imported.

"The Mill, over the last 15 years has chopped up all the nearby verdant bamboo forest and converted them into paper, earning the mill a declared gross profit of Rs.8.95 cores last year. Now bamboos, which constitute 80% of its feedstock, have to be got from as far as Balaghat, Hoshangabad and Betul, some 500 km. away. Hardwoods are obtained from Himachal Pradesh." (Planning the Environment, p.64)

Apart from the destruction of forests, this Mill has at least two other disastrous repercussions.

First, the Mill requires 32 cusecs of water, while the Son river, which flows nearby, has a flow of between 7 and 14 cusecs. The Mill owners, as such, dam the river every December to satisfy their requirement. This earthen dam is washed away by floods every July.

* Details from Planning The Environment, A.K. Roy, etc. Vidhushak Karkhane, Anuppur, District Shahdol, M.P., 1982.

Apart from the fact that it is illegal to build a private dam and to impound a public river, this damming also deprives the hundreds of villages downstream of water for drinking and cultivation. However, despite the illegality, this process has gone on more or less uninterrupted for the last 17 years as the large industrial house who owns the Paper mill ensures the non-interference in its machinations.

Secondly, the effluents of the Paper mill are released into the river and flow downstream. The effluents are highly toxic and contain, among other things, sulphite waste liquors, like sulphur chloride and Gas; Black liquor; Hydrogen Sulphides, Methyl Mercaptan, Sodium Sulfide, Sodium Hydroxide; Sodium Carbonate; Turpentine (resins); Methyl Alcohol, etc. All these chemicals are harmful to either human or animal and aquatic life. In fact, surveys done in that area and reported in Planning the Environment show that a large number of villagers who have to cross the polluted river frequently suffer from various forms of rash and other painful skin ailments directly traceable to the effluents of the Mill. Similar results are seen in surveys regarding cattle deaths, gastric disorders from consumption of the water, reduction in the birth of calves, and milk yield

per
per cow/lactation period; in fact in some regions downstream the fall in milk yield from the production levels before the Mill was set up (pre 1965) to those of 1973 was over 80%.

It is not that these negative effects are inevitable, for they could be contained to a large extent by bringing in proper methods for treatment of toxic effluents. However, this would mean cutting down the profits, which of course is unacceptable to most industrialists.

Minor Forest Products: The Bhabhar Grass

Another manifestation of the politics of environment can be seen in the Saharanpur District of U.P. In this district an estimated 40,000 families are engaged in producing ban, which is a type of rope most commonly used in making beds (charpoys). This ban is made from the grass locally known as bhabhar which grows wild in the foothills of the Himalays.

Traditionally these ban makers, many of whom are harijans or economically backward muslims, used to cut the grass from the foot-hills and pay a minimal royalty to the owners of the forest. In 1951 the Forest Act was implemented in U.P. and the ownership and control of the forests was taken over by the Government.

* Eulaliopsis binata (Graminae).

The Government then started auctioning the grass to big contractors, who would have it cut and then sell it to smaller contractors. It started reaching the actual producers of ban after passing through the hands ^a of/series of middlemen. As could be expected, the cost of the raw material shot up and as the cost of the finished product, as usually happens, did not show a corresponding increase, the incomes of the poor ban workers went down considerably.

This system continued till 1982. One of the most objectionable aspects of this arrangement was that whereas the ban worker was, in the late 70's and early 80's, getting the grass for between Rs.80 and Rs.100 per quintal, the same grass was being sold by the government to paper mills, on a quota basis, for Rs.30 to Rs.35 per quintal.

In 1982, the bhabhar trade was taken over by the newly formed U.P. State Forest Development Corporation. However, instead of this move benefiting the poor ban worker, it further aggravated the problem, for the corporation, instead of selling the bhabhar directly, started giving out contracts to the same big contractors for the cutting of grass. This grass was then stored in hastily constructed depots and auctioned out in lots of 100 quintals or more. The users now found that by the time this raw material came down to them it was

costing 25% to 35% more than what it did the year before. This has literally brought the ban trade to a standstill and a nearly 40,000 families are finding starvation a real possibility. Incidentally, through all this, paper mills are still being provided this grass at Rs.40 per quintal.*

Conclusions

'Environmentalists' who argue for a preservation of our natural resources even at the cost of slowing down, or stopping, all developmental processes, are not to my mind being realistic. There are today a large number of 'Super Powers' waiting to walk-in to any country whose weakened economy provides them with the slightest excuse. If, then, one slows down beyond a point the process of development in order to preserve the environment one would be inevitably opening the gates to foreign exploiters who would, with great glee, ravage the very environment that was in the first place sought to be preserved.

* Based on a study done recently by the author in Saharanpur District. The details of the problem are published by the author in an IIPA Working Paper.

But this does not mean that we should not seriously ask ourselves: to whom do these natural resources belong, who uses them, for what, to whose benefit, and why?

When we start denying to the people the very basis of their production, the raw material for their house, the fuel for their fires, the water for their fields and when we start polluting the air they breathe, the water they drink and the environment within which they live, then 'ideology' and 'strategy' stop having relevance and a struggle for existence starts anew.

