

Economic Development and Environmental Sustainability: Exploring the Relationship with Gandhi

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Abstract

The relationship between economic development and environmental sustainability has been one of the most debatable issues in contemporary discourses. The development of modern science and technology and the corresponding expansion of industries and markets has, in one way, led to the ever increasing production of goods and services, resulting in a sharp rise of comforts and luxuries for the humans. But, on the other hand, it has also contributed to endangering the very essentials on which life on this planet rests. This paper tries to explore the difficult relationship between economic development and environmental sustainability, questioning the very rationale of the current model of economic development. As a solution to the current crisis, the paper tries to establish the Gandhian idea of holistic existence.

Keywords: economic development, environmental sustainability, pollution, tradition, modernity

Introduction

The relationship between economic development and environmental sustainability has been one of the most debatable issues in contemporary discourses. The development of modern science and technology and the corresponding expansion of industries and markets has, in one way, led to the ever increasing production of goods and services, resulting in a sharp rise of comforts and luxuries for the humans. But, on the other hand, it has also contributed to endangering the very essentials on which life on this planet rests. Seitz observes, "The relationship between the environment and development has not been a happy one. Development has often harmed the environment, and the environmental harm has in turn adversely affected development. Industrialization brought with it many forms of pollution, pollution which is undermining the basic biological systems upon which life rests on this planet. It took millions of years for these systems to be created...Industrialization everywhere has brought dirtier air. From factories and transportation systems, with their tell-tale smoke stacks and exhaust pipes, toxic fumes are emitted into the air. In a few spectacular instances in various countries in the twentieth century large numbers of people have become ill or died because of the toxic gases in the air they breathed...Development to date has tended to turn clean water into dirty water as often as it has turned fresh air into dirty air...Whenever development has occurred, its effect on the land has been profound. The economic growth that comes with development increases the amount of goods and services available for human consumption. More natural resources from the land are required for the production of these goods, of course, and their extraction disturbs the land greatly. But even more widespread are the changes to the land which come with the disposal of the goods after they are no longer of use, and of the wastes which were created in the manufacture of the goods. Many of these wastes are artificial substances which never existed before in nature; thus nature has few, if any, ways of breaking them down into harmless substances." (Seitz 1990: p. 117-126). Seitz observes that the most visible and dangerous drawback of economic development is that it distorts the five basic elements on which life rests. Ironically, in the utter disregard of the five basic elements, economic development threatens the basis of its own viability.

Some believe that a balance can be achieved between development and sustainability. Such believers support the idea of sustainable development. On the other hand, some believe that the real issue is the incompatibility of the traditional and modern worldviews. Modern worldview is secular and individualistic in essence, for which satisfying the ever increasing this-worldly (secular)/materialistic desires of the individuals is the only desirable end of life. This worldview and its corresponding end of unlimited growth and development is unsustainable in nature. Even a simple application of common sense can reveal that unlimited growth and development is an impossibility, if the fact of availability of limited resources is considered. Therefore, what is possible and desirable is limiting our desires and wants, if we really want a guarantee of happiness and sustainability. Gandhi observes, "The more we indulge our passions the more unbridled they become. Our ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgences. They saw that happiness was largely a mental condition. A man is not necessarily happy because he is rich, or unhappy because he is poor. The rich are often seen to be unhappy, the poor to be happy. Millions will always remain poor. Observing all this, our ancestors dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures. We have managed with the same kind of plough as existed thousands of years ago. We have retained the same kind of cottages that we had in former times and our indigenous education remains the same as before. We have had no system of life-corroding competition. Each followed his own occupation or trade and charged a regulation wage. It was not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre. They, therefore, after due deliberation decided that we should only do what we could with our hands and feet. They saw that our real happiness and health consisted in the proper use of our hands and feet... They were, therefore, satisfied with small villages... The common people lived independently and followed the agricultural occupation. They enjoyed true home rule." (Gandhi 1939: p. 53-54). For Gandhi it was important to be spiritually active and materially passive if we want to live a self-satisfying life, devoid of cut-throat competition and ill-will. The spiritual realm is the realm of abundance but the material realm is the realm of limitations and this is the reason why Gandhi believes that the Earth can fulfill the needs of everyone but cannot fulfill all the desires of even one person.

Against this traditional/Gandhian worldview, the modern world view is only interested in speed, than in direction. In trying to conquer nature and his fellow beings, modern man is surpassing the limits of nature, which has resulted in highly destabilizing man-man and man-nature relationship. The moral fiber that has sustained these relationships since eternity has never been torn apart in such a way, as nowadays. Never has man, in search of an illusionary happiness, knowingly destroyed the essentials of his own habitat. This is the reason why Gandhi labelled modern civilization as 'satanic'. Parekh observes, "Based on the beliefs that unless one was constantly on the move one was not alive, and that the faster the tempo of life the more alive one was, modern civilization was inherently restless and lacked stability. It aimed to conquer time and space and developed increasingly speedier modes of transport and communication. Cars were replaced by trains, and the latter by planes, but no one asked why one needed to travel so fast and what one intended to do with the time saved. Thanks to its restlessness and 'mindless activism', mistakenly equated with dynamism and energy, modern civilisation undermined man's unity with his environment and fellow men, and destroyed stable and long-established communities. Being concerned only to get on in the world and lead a comfortable life, modern man not only saw no value in the purity of his soul and quality of his motives but also found such preoccupations a hindrance. Not a generous, reflective, self-critical, sensitive, and tender-hearted but a tough, aggressive, ambitious, and self-centred person was the ideal and the necessary basis of modern civilization." (Parekh, 2005: 81-82)

In contrast, Indian tradition accepts man as essentially a moral being. This essential morality can be deduced from the fact that in the whole cosmos, only man possesses free will. Hence, human existence is more about duty than indulgence. God has created man in his own image, and therefore, he should focus on the performance of his ordained duties for the sustenance of the cosmic order. Parekh observes, “Gandhi followed Indian traditions in taking a cosmocentric view of human beings. The cosmos was a well-coordinated whole whose various parts were all linked in a system of *yajna*, or interdependence and mutual service. It consisted of different orders of being ranging from the material to the human, each governed by its own laws and standing in a complex relationship with the rest. Human beings were an integral part of the cosmos, and were tied to it by the deepest bonds... Since the cosmic spirit pervaded or infused the universe and was not outside it, the so-called natural world was not natural or material but spiritual or divine in nature... Since everything in the universe bore the mark of divinity, it needed to be approached in a spirit of cosmic piety and *maitri* (friendliness)... The universe was a common inheritance of all living beings, who were equally entitled to its resources and should live in a spirit of mutual accommodation. Being rational, human beings were the custodians of the rest of creation and should respect its rights and cherish its diversity. Since their very existence so required, and since nature constantly reproduced and replenished itself, they might help themselves with such natural resources as they needed to live in moderate comfort. They had no right to take more, for that amounted to ‘theft’, not to undermine the regenerative capacity of nature by polluting and poisoning it, by rendering land barren and infertile, or by exhausting its resources... The body needed food, which contained life, required the use of insecticides, and involved cultivation with its enormous destruction of life. Gandhi called the body the ‘house of slaughter’ and was deeply anguished by the violence its survival entailed. Since violence was built into the human condition and thus unavoidable, he thought the only moral course of action was to minimize it by reducing one’s wants and to compensate for it by taking tender care of nature.” (Parekh, 2005: 49-51)

If we really want to take tender care of nature, we must first renounce the liberal idea of an ‘unencumbered-self’. Our very existence depends on the existence of others, and therefore, we are essentially indebted to others. “That human beings were necessarily interdependent and formed an organic whole was another ‘basic’ truth about them according to Gandhi... For Gandhi human beings were ‘born debtors’, and involuntary inherited debts that were too vast to be repaid. Even a whole lifetime was not enough to pay back what they owed their parents, let alone all others. Furthermore their creditors were by their very nature unspecifiable. Most of them were dead or unknown, and those who are alive were so numerous and their contributions so varied and complex that it was impossible to decide what one owed to whom... Given that the debts could never be repaid and the favours returned, all that human beings could do was to ‘recognise the conditions of their existence’, and continue the ongoing universal system of interdependence by discharging their duties and contributing to collective well-being. They should look up on their lives as *yajna*, an offering at the universal altar, and contribute to the maintenance and enrichment of both the human world and the cosmos. As Gandhi put it, ‘*Yajna* having come to us with our birth we are debtors all our lives, and thus forever bound to serve the universe.’” (Parekh, 2005: 51-52)

What kind of service are we rendering to the universe by distorting the five basic elements on which the very life rests? Therefore, it not only becomes important, but also urgent to review the current model of economic development for the sake of environmental sustainability and for the sake of life itself. It's an utter disregard of human reason to term the destruction of life as development. As rational and moral beings, we must bring ourselves out of this slumber of ignorance.

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