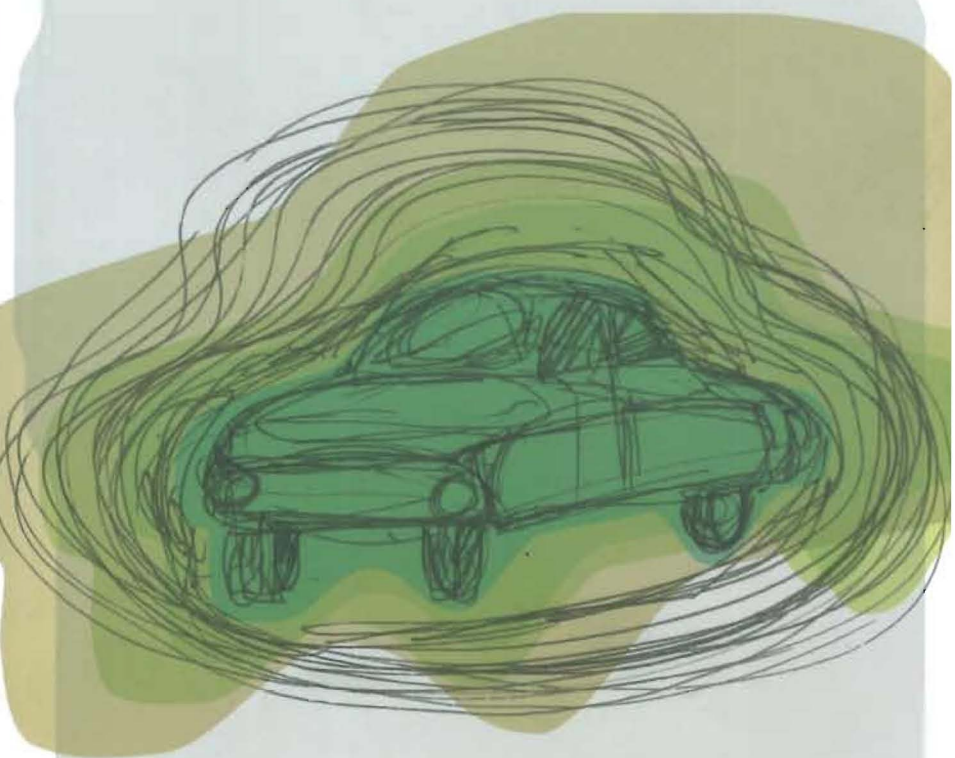




# Desire named development



ADITYA NIGAM

PENGUIN BOOKS

DESIRE NAMED DEVELOPMENT

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PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,  
New Delhi 110 017, India

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014,  
USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,  
Ontario, M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland  
(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell,  
Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632,  
New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Group (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,  
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL,  
England

First published by Penguin Books India 2011

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN 9780143067139

Typeset in Times New Roman by Infosoft Systems, Noida

Printed at Yash Printographics, Noida

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*For Nivedita, for another world . . .*

### **Tilism-e-Hoshruha: Dreamworld of the 'Consumer'**

Once upon a time, human beings produced in order to survive. Then they started producing, with ever-greater refinement, for comfort, enjoyment, and spiritual and aesthetic pleasure. Today, consumption is the activity that determines us; it defines who we are. 'Economies' no longer simply produce objects or commodities for consumption; they also relentlessly produce the 'consumer' on a daily, hourly basis.

The 'consumer' is neither simply a person who consumes in order to survive, nor is she the *rasik* who partakes of aesthetic enjoyment for the sheer pleasure of it. She is also not simply one who just wants to make life a little more comfortable and easy by spending and buying things of utility, comfort or even luxury. The consumer no longer buys a car that will survive a lifetime, but must be possessed by the thought of buying one and keep track of every new model that comes along. The consumer has to want to change cars like one changes clothes. The consumer is someone who lives to buy; who buys

first and then thinks about where the payment will come from. The ‘consumer’ is a special creature, a product of recent times, one who consumes and must consume *in order that* the ‘economy’ may live and prosper. If the consumer ceases to be a consumer, economies can find themselves in crisis. Strange though this may sound, it is not the economy that exists for the sake of the consumer; rather it is the latter that exists for the well-being of the former.

A case in point is the recent debate (September 2009) sparked off by the austerity measures introduced by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in the wake of the recession in the global economy. These measures, quite mild in themselves, entailed some curtailment of expenditure by officials and elected representatives. Sections of the corporate media that have been actively campaigning for probity in public life and have often exposed the unnecessary squandering of public money by government officials, however, went into a tizzy this time. As one English daily put it in an agitated editorial comment, ‘the concern is that now a nominally reformist party and government are trapped into a spiral of moral “correctness” that is rapidly taking on anti-aspiration, anti-“rich” overtones.’ The fear, as the editorial correctly noted, was not about certain party leaders wanting to live simply; it was that, in some indirect way, ‘austerity’ and ‘simplicity’ were being exalted. In other words,

this step was sending out a message that could potentially discourage consumption. We could ask: If some people want to live in luxury, it is indeed their prerogative, but why all this anxiety about others who want to live in simplicity? The answer, of course, is that were this to happen and more and more people were to start enjoying a simple, non-consumerist life, the ‘economy’ would be in crisis.

Economies now no longer produce for ‘needs’, however broadly defined. They produce for strange entities like the ‘Sensex’ or the ‘GDP’ (Gross Domestic Product), which have little to do with what ordinary people produce or consume. The ‘Sensex’ must be kept flying high like the national flag, lest people who should be buying suddenly start selling, for that is a sure sign of crisis. The GDP, an entity that is just about seventy years old, has to keep going up and it can continuously go up even when people’s conditions worsen—for instance, in a war!

Becoming a consumer is not a simple and natural affair. We are not all naturally consumers. We *become consumers*. We are made consumers. In late modern societies, there is a whole elaborate network of systems, processes, apparatuses and relations that keep working in order to produce the individual as consumer. The individual is thrown into a world of fantasy, whose lifeline is ‘credit’—another of those magical things that entice you into the Dreamworld and lure you into becoming a consumer. Economies

in the early twenty-first century would not survive for a day if people were to simply buy what they can afford—in other words, if they were to cease to be consumers. Credit agencies and sellers who seek you out to offer ‘cheap credit’, credit-card agents who offer attractive terms, advertising billboards that beckon you to holiday in style, builders and developers who introduce you to a future utopia that can be yours, the neon lights and the phantasmic night world of the city that carry you into nowhere, the agitated editorial writer, your favourite film stars or cricketers who invite you on behalf of the company that has bought them and whose brand ambassadors they are—all of these form part of a loose but rapidly spreading network of ‘relationships’ that make you a consumer. A car company that invites you to ‘drive home a relationship’ is not necessarily lying. It is actually trying to enrol you in a relationship as a loyal ‘brand consumer’.

The idea of ‘consumer sovereignty’ is the biggest myth invented by neo-liberalism. The consumer is precisely a consumer to the extent that s/he has surrendered to the magical beings of this Dreamworld of Consumption.

In the compendium of tales, the *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*, there occurs a mention of the Magical Land of Hoshruba (literally, that which enchants the senses). Hoshruba has been described as ‘a land of dazzling illusions and occult realms, inhabited

by powerful sorceresses and diabolic monsters’. ‘Hoshruba’, in our late modern times, is this Dreamworld of Consumption inhabited by seductive commodities and images, the glittering lights of the shopping mall, neon signs of global brands and advertisement billboards—all of which have a life of their own. People enter this land and consume. And they go back convinced by these magical beings that they—the consumers—are the real sovereigns.

This fantasy ends the moment you fail to pay the ‘EMI’—your life turns into a veritable hell, the likes of which you might not have imagined in your wildest dreams. But that is another matter. Every society must have the strictest punishment for defaulters and there is nothing wrong with it. After all, you have willingly entered into this deal, with open eyes.

What we know as ‘Development’ today, in twenty-first century India, is a story of the production of the ‘consumer’ so that something called ‘the economy’ can flourish—which, incidentally, has very little to do with people being fed and clothed. And at the very heart of this story is the ‘automobile’.

### **The Automobile of Desire**

We do not drive the automobile; the automobile drives us. The automobile is the Desire that drives us, for it embodies all our other desires: for control,

for speed, comfort, for privacy on the street, for the 'good life'. But it was not always so. Once upon a time, humans did drive cars; just as we were not always consumers. But that was long, long ago. So long ago that we barely remember it.

Anybody living in Indian cities knows from the sheer experience of living and going about the daily business of work that life in the city has changed drastically in the last two decades. The initial entry of the 'automobile'—especially the private vehicle—was experienced by many, by those who could afford it, as a kind of liberation. This was especially so in a city like Delhi that had only known a highly temperamental state-run bus service and an equally capricious network of autorickshaws. In those days, it was a normal part of one's everyday routine to wait for hours before one could get the bus one wanted—and even when it came, one had to prepare oneself to see it whiz past one without stopping. Old-timers, of course, tell us of the earlier Delhi when trams plied in the old, walled city of Shahjehanabad and a network of cycle-rickshaws and horse-driven tongas connected commuters to their destinations within relatively smaller distances in specific parts of the city. But for the new generation of middle-class migrants into the city who came here in search of better opportunities, travelling within the city was no easy job in the late 1960s and 1970s, even a large part of the 1980s.

Working-class migrants, of course, had no option but to wait endlessly and put their lives in danger as they clung to overcrowded buses to reach their workplaces. But what does Development have to do with the working class or the poor? At least it no longer does. Quite some time ago—when it meant *roti, kapda aur makan* (bread, clothing and housing) or *bijli, pani, sadak* (electricity, water, roads)—it was different. It has been a long time since we left all that nonsense behind us. As any economist or editorial commentator will tell you, that was an obsession of Nehruvian 'socialism' and it is all for the better that we left it behind.

So, we were talking about the middle class, its travails, its expectations, its desires and its frustrations in Indian cities of the 1960s and 1970s. Things began to change with the entry of the private automobile—especially the car, but also the two-wheeler. It gave many working women a new-found sense of liberation, a sense of space and control over their own lives. The coming of the private vehicle was a liberation from the continuous threat they had often felt when walking the streets of the city—the threat of sexual molestation, harassment and worse. It would surely have come as a great relief to many men too, making their lives so much easier. And how can we forget families. A 'family outing' was an unaffordable business—whether you wanted to go out to a cinema, theatre or music performance,

a picnic or just meeting relatives—if you did not have a private vehicle. Some cities like Kolkata or Mumbai, with alternative means of transportation like tramways and suburban train networks, were somewhat better off in this respect. All this changed quite fundamentally with the coming of the private automobile.

In a different way though, its advent also provided others with a new kind of space—a mobile, but private space—and another sense of control. Before the 1990s we rarely heard of something like rape in a moving vehicle or speeding cars mowing down sleeping pavement dwellers. In the period since the 1990s the car has become a virtual space for the playing out of desire—exhilarating and liberating on the one hand and a space of darkness and crime on the other. The car became an extension of the male self—a vehicle for the display of sexual prowess and, probably, displaced sexual gratification through speed.

We have not even begun to study the massive cultural transformation that the entry of the private automobile wrought in the life of the Indian city. Apart from the kinds of transformation of interior lives and notions of privacy referred to above, the private automobile also transformed the external landscape of the city in fundamental ways. Very soon, it became the vehicle of a new kind of desire: not the private desire of the middle-class individual

but also the symbol of the collective desire of India's much-vaunted 'arrival into the twenty-first century'. Denizens of the city of Delhi might recall the passion for driving fast nurtured by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, also the author of the slogan: 'Going to the twenty-first century'. Rajiv Gandhi never lived to see that 'arrival' but he did set us on the road to it.

In the two last decades we have seen the lives of Indian cities restructured around the automobile. Over the years, the car certainly became a symbol of status and power. But soon, with the availability of easy credit, it also became a commodity that anybody could purchase and possess. That was also the point when the car became critical in the production of the mass consumer. Gradually, status and power were determined not merely by the ownership of the car, but also by the number and size of cars that one possessed.

And then, at one point, the car ceased to be something external to its possessor. Sitting behind the steering wheel brought out a part of the self that we did not quite know ourselves. The car did not merely become the symbol of status and power at home, in the areas of residence; it became an instrument of domination on the roads. Domination of the street through sheer size and speed produced a new sense of palpable power among many wayward sons of the bourgeoisie. Fast-moving automobiles



soon crowded out slower traffic—especially cyclists and pedestrians. In other words, another grammar of power appeared on the streets and public spaces.

In this new grammar of power, it was not merely the street that was transformed. The new entrant in our lives now demanded space and more space. Like the fabled tale of the Arab and the camel, its demands for space turned out to be insatiable. It gobbled up every bit of available land in and around residential and market areas. Places where people would go for walks, where people would get together for a cup of tea by the wayside—everything was colonized by the automobile, in motion or parked. When every open and relatively unoccupied area was taken up by it, it went for the green spaces in the cities. Finally, its greedy eye rested on the poorer settlements of the cities.

There isn't a single Indian city where settlements of the poor have not been ruthlessly torn down to make way for this new creature. Its advent has decisively spurred the colonization of urban space in favour of the rich. Increasingly, owners of cars, who have paid only for their vehicles, now have access to and control over the land where they park their vehicles in different parts of the city. As a result, areas of the city which were earlier used either as green or living spaces of the poor are now completely taken over to build car parks or shopping malls and other consumption sites where 'parking

facility' becomes the 'unique selling point' of the business concerned. It is estimated that one car occupies the static space of one jhuggi or hut of the poor. Add to this the fact that the car does not occupy mere static space, but actually a mobile space and can, in the course of the day, occupy five or six times the space of a jhuggi.

The private automobile transformed the grammar of power so much that soon all of 'Development' began to revolve around its needs: its speed, its unrestricted flow and its 'rest'. From multilevel, air-conditioned car parks in the midst of acute electricity shortage to endless flyovers, freeways, privately maintained expressways and roads that had to endlessly expand sideways for more and more lanes—everything was now subject to the demands of this new creature that had entered our lives. Irrespective of whether we personally can ever possess it, the car has changed the grammar of our being in the city.

So much has this logic begun to seem 'natural' that government planning for transport is now always with the private car at its centre. Thus, for example, rather than try to make key shopping and city centres (say Chandni Chowk or Connaught Place) car-free, the first 'ban' is on the movement of slower-moving, less-polluting and less-hazardous modes like rickshaws and cycles, followed by bans on two-wheelers like scooters and motorcycles.

The result of this is that governments see it as their business to go on endlessly catering to the requirements of the automobile. For instance, a recent news report in the *Times of India* (3 July 2009) points out, on the basis of the *Economic Survey of Delhi*, that the Ring Road that circles Delhi has already far exceeded its designed capacity of 1,10,000 vehicles per day and plans are being considered to widen it to an eight-lane road. However, given the fact that there are nearly 1000 new vehicles being added to Delhi's roads every day, these eight lanes will have to be expanded to twenty-four lanes a mere two years from now. Where this road space will come from is, of course, anybody's guess. Equally important is the way this skews the financial allocation made by various governments for the transport sector. Thus, while the allocation doubled for this sector between 2002-03 and 2006-07, as much as 80 per cent of it was earmarked for road-widening work that is clearly weighted in favour of car users.

Today, well into the twenty-first century, we are seeing the ways our cities have become dangerous places, where life is fragile—and the private automobile is at the very centre of this change. Compared with 1971, the number of traffic fatalities had increased five times by 2001. This is clearly related to the twenty-fold increase in the number of vehicles (cars, taxis, buses and motorcycles

together) on the roads in the same period. It goes without saying that the maximum number of people killed in road accidents are either cyclists or pedestrians or scooter and motor-cycle riders. In Delhi as high as 50 per cent traffic fatalities are pedestrians, 10 per cent cyclists and 21 per cent motorcyclists. Add to this a whole range of new crimes (like kidnapping, loot, carjacking and rape) enabled by the peculiar space of the moving vehicle that has emerged over the past two decades, and you have a picture of the increasingly dangerous places that Indian cities have become.

But life is not endangered simply because of these very obvious factors. One of the most significant of the less visible, silent killers is air pollution, for which, too, vehicular pollution is the prime offender. Allergic respiratory disorders—asthma in particular—have been rising dramatically. While some of this has something to do with genetic predisposition, a study by doctors in Bangalore in 2002 found a strong and direct correlation between the incidence of asthma and urbanization and air pollution. Their hospital-based study on 20,000 children below the age of eighteen, covering the years 1979, 1984, 1989, 1994 and 1999, showed an increase of 9 per cent, 10.5 per cent, 18.5 per cent, 24.5 per cent and 29.5 per cent respectively in respiratory disorders for these years. They also conducted a school survey in twelve schools on

6550 children in the six to fifteen age group and found that the prevalence of such disorders among children from schools in heavy-traffic areas was 19.34 per cent, among children from heavy-traffic areas and low socioeconomic population was 31.14 per cent, and among children from low-traffic area schools was 11.15 per cent.

This is consistent with global developments—and as recent figures indicate, about 20 million Americans suffer from some kind of asthmatic attack or the other and 5000 die annually due to it. As experts put it, it is not that plants are suddenly pollinating more; it is the diesel fumes hanging in the air that are to be blamed. According to them, air pollution caused by exhaust fumes from cars, factories and power plants is singularly responsible for these asthma attacks.

Two of every five residents of Delhi are said to suffer from a respiratory disease, and hospitalization rates for pollution-induced conditions like asthma, lung disease, chronic bronchitis and heart damage are continuously rising. It is estimated that 70 per cent of Delhi's air pollution comes from vehicles. This is hardly surprising since the number of registered vehicles in Delhi rose from 1.5 million to 4.5 million between 1997 and 2006. Since about 1000 new private vehicles are being added to the city's roads every day, pollution levels can only be kept in check temporarily—they cannot be

substantially reduced by monitoring and rigorously enforcing pollution standards.

But arguments about the larger common good apart, private automobiles are turning out to be self-defeating even for their owners. After all, it does not take much effort to see that with lakhs and lakhs of new vehicles crowding into our cities, the speed and mobility that cars were supposed to provide are increasingly becoming a thing of the past. In cities like Delhi and Kolkata it is often faster to travel by Metro than by cars in areas where Metro coverage exists. How self-defeating this whole logic is can be seen from the fact that the average roadway speeds for motor vehicles in Mumbai fell from thirty-eight kilometres per hour in 1962 to fifteen to twenty kilometres per hour in 1993—and that was long before the full and proper manifestation of the automobile revolution. In Delhi the average road speed, about twenty to twenty-seven kilometres per hour in 1997, was reduced to a mere fifteen kilometres per hour in 2002. In Chennai the average speed is around thirteen kilometres per hour and in Kolkata, about ten kilometres per hour. In Delhi the peak hours now last for over five hours and are constantly increasing. And, lest we forget, this is despite the endless building of flyovers, freeways and bypasses, and expanding road widths.

So does making more flyovers and bypasses really ease the situation? Take the recent Bandra-

Worli Sea Link inaugurated in Mumbai in June 2009. The very first day's report was that traffic was literally crawling at less than one-fourth the permitted speed on the road. Subsequent reports have confirmed that despite shortening the distance, the time taken remains almost the same and traffic movement is extremely slow.

And thus it happens that air pollution, noise pollution, the always-present threat of deaths and injuries on roads, the endless demands on rapidly depleting energy resources, fast-disappearing urban spaces and a whole range of new diseases—all these trace their lineage back to a single desire, the desire for the automobile.

In the next section we will take a quick detour to trace the history of the emergence of the automobile. The colonization of roads by the motor car began with the United States of America and we must understand that history in order to understand the transformation of Indian cities and roads.

### **The Automobile, Oil and Energy Crisis**

It is not as if the emergence of the automobile is a natural stage of the development of the economy. It is certainly not the case that as economies developed, people became rich, and as people became rich, they bought cars. Matters are indeed far more complex.

The first thing to note is that motorization has not happened to the same extent everywhere. The United States of America leads the world in this respect. It has something like 834 registered vehicles per 1000 people—50 per cent more than western Europe. By 1929, as much as 55 per cent of American families owned a car and about 10 per cent owned two or more. This fact is not unrelated to another: that by 1929, automobile production was the main industry of the US and its automobile factories produced 85 per cent of the world's cars.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the initial spurt of demand for cars and small trucks in the US was from the rural areas—especially farmers, since it helped them commute vast distances for which no other mode of transport was easily available. But this was also the time of rapid urbanization, and by 1930 more than 56 per cent Americans were living in the cities. Scholars, transport historians in particular, have shown that this was considered by the automobile companies to be an obstacle to the further development of their market. Believe it or not, the urban rich *preferred not to buy cars* and used public mass transit systems.

In the 1920s, most American cities had a system of light railways (known as the electric streetcars, somewhat like the tramways in Kolkata). The 'motorization of America', which was high on the agenda of the automobile companies, required that

this system be dismantled. Initially, this was replaced by petrol-based buses, and later by diesel-run ones. The actual story of the ‘motorization of America’ is a long and fascinating one in which, through a combination of some pretty devious methods, companies like the General Motors and Chevron gradually took over the streetcar companies and rapidly moved over to replace their services with petrol- and diesel-run buses.

One of the ways in which the electric streetcar and the trolley bus were destroyed was by the automobile giants first taking over those companies and then deliberately cancelling orders for them and/or hiking their fares so much that they became unaffordable. All these were, of course, beginning to spur people towards buying private cars, but despite all these methods people were not really doing so to the extent the corporations expected them to. The layout and structure of the cities was considered to be an obstacle in this regard. In 1939 Paul Hoffman, president of the Studebaker Corporation, said: ‘Cities must be remade. The greatest automobile market today, the greatest untapped field of potential customers, *is the large number of city people who refuse to own cars* [emphasis added].’

People in America then, even in the beginning of the 1940s, were not consumers. American life had to be transformed in keeping with the demands of the automobile industry and the demands of the

private car that now ensconced itself in the life of all middle-class Americans. This was also bound to have a long-term impact on the US economy itself as sources of oil started rapidly depleting. The average American consumes three times more oil and diesel than the average Japanese and two and a half times more than the average citizen of Germany, France or the UK.

Even today, at the height of the world’s most serious energy crisis, the US refuses to compromise on its high-energy-consumption-based lifestyles. In 1992, at the ‘Earth Summit’ held in Rio de Janeiro, the world was witness to the spectacle of the then US president, George Bush Sr, declaring that the ‘American Way of Life is not negotiable’. While the Earth Summit squarely placed the issue of global warming and climate change on the agenda of governments of different states of the world, it is precisely due to continuous sabotage by the US that the matter of reduction of greenhouse gases has not made any significant progress.

This high-oil-consumption-based lifestyle of its citizens has determined much of American foreign policy over the decades—from engineering coup d’états to fighting outright wars. But there is another solution being sought: a shift to biofuels. Let us look at the following scenario.

The year 2008 saw an unprecedented rise in the prices of foodgrains worldwide. According to the

United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), by the end of 2007 record world prices for most staple foods had led to 18 per cent food-price inflation in China, 13 per cent in Indonesia and Pakistan, and 10 per cent or more in Latin America, Russia and India.

The report went on to observe that in just about a year wheat had doubled in price, maize was nearly 50 per cent costlier and rice prices had increased by 20 per cent. Within a few months of this report, by April 2008, the world price of rice had risen by 68 per cent (between January and April 2008). News reports confirmed that the crisis was no longer confined to the poverty-stricken states of Africa or Latin America; that food was disappearing from American food stores like Wal-Mart as well.

When this situation started affecting the availability of food in the US, a whole new discourse emerged. The reason for the food shortage, it was alleged, especially by the then US President George W. Bush and his entourage, was the changing consumption and demand pattern in India and China. It was argued that their newly affluent middle classes were raising the demand of food, leading to high food prices. Even if there is some truth to this assertion—though it is not something that could have happened overnight in as dramatic a way as this—precisely what was Bush’s objection? That the Chinese and Indian middle classes do not

have the right to consume and live the lifestyles that most middle-class Americans do? Given the needs of the US and the world economy, that can hardly be the problem. How could these two huge markets, which were being eyed favourably by all corporations till the other day, suddenly become villains simply by virtue of being markets—that is to say, by consuming? The truth lies elsewhere. Bush was actually hiding a much more devastating fact by making this statement—a fact linking the car-driven life directly to the question of food security for millions of people across the world.

Here is a clue to what has been going on for some time now: an 11 May 2007 press release from the National Farmers’ Union of Canada (NFUC) linked this sudden ‘intensification in food shortage’ to ‘*an increasing push to divert food supplies into biofuels*’.

According to a report in *The Guardian*, Lester Brown, founder of the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute, confirmed this in the following words: ‘The competition for grain between the world’s 800 million motorists, who want to maintain their mobility, and its two billion poorest people, who are simply trying to survive, is emerging as an epic issue.’ Brown further said that in 2006, ‘US farmers distorted the world market for cereals by growing 14m tonnes, or 20% of the whole maize crop, for ethanol for vehicles. This took

millions of hectares of land out of food production and nearly doubled the price of maize.’

The Indian government, and many other Third World governments, had to ban the export of foodgrains so that precious food did not get diverted into running US motor cars.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we might be looking at the emergence of a new kind of armed struggle: violent struggles of the dispossessed to regain control over their oil, land and environment. So far in India, as elsewhere, environmental/ecological struggles have been seen as primarily non-violent struggles associated with Gandhians, vegetarians, faddists of various sorts and non-governmental organizations. But such an impression might soon become a thing of the past.

For instance, Nigeria has been seeing a violent movement of unprecedented ferocity in recent years. It began in early 2006 and was directed against the large foreign oil companies that have been active in the oil-rich Niger Delta. The violence started with a group known as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) kidnapping four foreign officials of Shell—the oil giant that has allegedly been directly involved in engineering coups elsewhere. Militants associated with MEND carried on their armed offensive against the oil multinational corporations through the year, blew up oil pipelines, killed Nigerian soldiers and kidnapped more than

fifty employees of oil companies. MEND was demanding ‘restitution of the environmental damage inflicted by the oil companies’, greater control over oil revenues for local government and development aid to improve the living conditions that had been destroyed by the companies themselves.

Crude oil production in Nigeria is dominated by multinational giants like Shell, ExxonMobil, Chevron Texaco, Agip and Total. The history of their devastation in the Niger Delta is an old story. This is the area where the legendary Ken Saro-Wiwa lived and was active. Saro-Wiwa was a fiction writer and journalist who later became an activist in the struggle for environmental and social justice. His primary focus was on his homeland, the Ogoni, where he launched his non-violent movement for social and environmental justice, joining the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). Saro-Wiwa inevitably came into conflict with the big oil corporations whom he accused of ‘waging an ecological war against the Ogoni people’ and of ‘precipitating a genocide’ of the Ogoni people. Eventually Saro-Wiwa and eight others were arrested and tried on trumped-up charges of killing four Ogoni leaders of MOSOP. The trial was conducted by a specially convened tribunal of the military government and was so blatantly rigged that nearly all the defendants’ lawyers resigned in protest. Key witnesses later acknowledged that they

had been offered huge bribes to depose against Saro-Wiwa. Saro-Wiwa was executed on 10 November 1995.

Any surprise, then, that eleven years later MEND steps in with exactly the same demands—but this time with arms and the capacity to kill Nigerian army and oil industry officials?

In India the story of how private corporations have looted the country's resources over the last two decades—without so much as a whimper of protest from any of the established political parties from the Left to the Right—is only a shade different from that of any African state. Precisely for that reason, it is difficult for anybody honestly willing to track the rise of armed insurgencies in India, including the most recent Maoist ones, to ignore the fact that most of these are now crucially about controlling local resources and exercising local control over them.

More recently, the *Sunday Times*, London (August 2009), reported how 'hundreds of Borneo tribesmen armed with blowpipes are blockading roads in protest against companies they accuse of destroying their rainforests to grow oil palms for "green" biofuels, cooking oil, soap and margarine'. In the Malaysian forests, members of the Penan tribe who have lived there for centuries suddenly find their forests being destroyed by big companies, which are making a beeline for the forests as 'world' demand for biofuels has seen the prices of palm

oil soar to unprecedented levels. Profit-seeking corporations obviously smell blood here.

### **Enter the Nano**

It is in this context that we must consider the highly contentious flagship project of the Left Front government of West Bengal for developing the small 'people's car'—the Nano. In May 2006, the state's chief minister announced that land would be acquired for the project in Singur, about sixty kilometres from Kolkata, for Tata Motors' Nano enterprise. The West Bengal government's argument was that the state urgently needed industrialization and development, as that alone would generate employment. For that reason the state must attract investment. The unique selling point of Tata Motors was that the Nano would cost just Rs 1 lakh, making it affordable to millions of consumers who cannot afford a car currently. They were making what we might call a 'democracy argument'—of making the car available to ever larger numbers. Market analysts predicted that the Nano could expand the Indian car market by as much as 65 per cent.

However, in Singur the news of the impending land acquisition was received with indignation from the very beginning. The discontent that had started brewing in May burst forth in December as the peasants rose in revolt. Television channels



beamed images of police violence as an area of 997 acres of fertile agricultural land belonging to the peasants was forcibly fenced off. With the peasant discontent on one side and the argument of employment generation through industry on the other, a heated debate on the desirability, indeed ‘historical necessity’, of industrialization and development ensued. It continues unabated.

In the debate, those who argued for the project made their case in terms of a larger historical process, arguing that the move from agriculture to industry is inevitable and necessary and this is how it has happened everywhere else in the world. The chief minister of West Bengal famously claimed that if this transformation did not happen it would mean ‘the end of history’. Even though his statement has been subject to a lot of ridicule, he was not the only one making this claim. Leading economists and analysts—neoliberal and Marxist in equal measure—dug out stories of industrialization from England and other European countries in order to show that this is indeed how it had been and therefore must be. That this was how it happened in England does not mean that this is how it must necessarily happen everywhere else, but we will not go into that question here.

At this stage, the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (2007b) too entered the public debate. He said:

It is not surprising that no substantial country ever has crossed the barrier of poverty without very substantial industrialization ... Those who want to prevent industrialization of Bengal ... may intend well, but they are not serving the interest of Bengal’s working class or peasantry ... for the prosperity of the peasantry ... *always* depends on the number of peasants going down. That is the standard experience in the world.

And through this ‘standard experience of the world’ we must also learn—and adapt to—the logic of a ‘market economy’. Marshalling his disciplinary resources to rebut the arguments of the critics, Sen classified them into two groups: those who do not want private capitalists on ideological grounds and those who ‘would not want to take land away from agricultural use’. The ‘ideological opponents of capitalism’ (i.e., communists other than those in government) are, of course, easily dismissed. Sen, therefore, dealt with the arguments of the latter group, about whom he says:

There are some genuine “physiocrats” among this group, with agriculture-fetishism and a strong belief in the unparalleled—almost mystical—merits of agriculture. *Their arguments were adequately rebutted about 200 years ago* [emphasis added], and if life has ceased to be quite as “nasty, brutish and short” as Thomas Hobbes found it,

the contribution of industrial development to that change would be hard to overlook.

The physiocrats, we may recall, were a group of economists in France in the second half of the eighteenth century who believed that all national and social wealth was derived solely from productive work and from land and agricultural surplus. For the physiocrats, the economy was to be in tune with the natural order and the best course was for governments to let people be and do what they wished—*laissez faire*—and the rest would take care of itself.

Strange though it may sound, this assumption that the debate was settled once and for all ‘200 years ago’ comes from a scholar of eminence who should know that, unlike 200 years ago, the planet today is suffering not from a *deficit* but an *excess* of industrial development. At the very least, Sen should know that the debate over ‘industrialization’ and ‘development’ today is not a mere reiteration of a 200-year-old position, but a burning question of our present. But in any case, Sen had erected a straw man in order to knock it down, since the battle that the peasants were fighting had very little to do with the larger questions of development and everything to do with protecting their own property and livelihoods. Indeed, very few of the supporters of the struggle were making an argument against industry per se.

However, we must thank Sen and the economists in general who placed the real issue at stake in clear-cut terms. For neither to Sen nor to the other economists did the issue present itself as one of justice, of the ethics of taking away the land of the peasants for the conspicuous consumption of the rich. Rather, the question was presented as squarely one of Development. Agriculture should be decimated; only then can we say that we have really become modern. Industry then, is The Gateway to the Modern World.

Let us remember Sen’s words that the critics were against ‘taking away land away *from agricultural use*’ [emphasis added]. The peasants or the tribals who own that land do not even figure on his radar; merely a question of *transferring land from agricultural use to industrial use*, as if it were simply lying around for the economist and policymaker to take into his custody. The people who owned the land can be dispensed with in the larger interests of ‘removing poverty’. But the belief that industrialization can end poverty is by no means an unquestionable truth. A serious argument exists that ‘poverty’ and ‘unemployment’ themselves are products of ‘industrialization’—the latter, in fact, might be part of the problem rather than its solution.

**The Blasphemy of Being ‘Opposed to Industrialization’**

In early January 2006, police firing on the tribals of Kalinganagar in Orissa led to the immediate death of sixteen people, while four others reportedly died in hospital subsequently. The background to this story is classic.

On the morning of 2 January 2006, district administration officials (led by the collector and the superintendent of police) accompanied a team of Tata Steel officials to the area in order to fence off the land for a new Tata Steel plant. They were escorted by twelve platoons of armed policemen and bulldozers. For the preceding few months the tribals had been hearing rumours that their land was going to be acquired for setting up a steel plant. Their worst fears had now come true and for them this was a do-or-die battle. When they attempted to resist the fencing off of their land, the police opened fire, killing sixteen tribals.

In a surreal sequel to this tragic drama, a leading national television channel aired a programme in which the incredulous anchor agitatedly quizzed the people of Kalinganagar, who were on the verge of being reduced to destitution: ‘But why are you against industrialization?’ It was like they had committed blasphemy. Clearly, our anchor was skipping several steps. No, they were not opposing

industrialization, for they could not care a damn about it either way. They were merely defending their land. It is another matter, of course, that our anchor found it inconceivable that anybody could be ‘opposed to industrialization’—except maybe in the stories of the ‘machine-breakers’ in England that she might have, like many of us, read in high school.

Unlike the Luddite machine-breakers who knew exactly what they were doing and had a larger agenda, the tribal people of Kalinganagar were simply resisting their land being stolen away from them to be handed over to a private corporation; they were simply attempting to protect their lives and livelihoods and, indeed, a whole way of being.

We may note that to most indigenous people land is not simply a ‘resource’ to be bought and sold; it is a whole sacred space of culture where ancestors lie and gods and goddesses live. Thus, as Bolivian President Evo Morales recently put it, indigenous peoples speak of land as ‘Mother Earth’ because ‘the earth gives us life, and neither the Mother Earth nor life can be a commodity’.

The incredulity of the television anchor is worth pondering upon. For this incredulity, in that winter of 2006, was shared by most urban middle classes. For over a decade and a half they had become used to thinking of the world as made exclusively for their consumption. Ever since the onset of the ‘economic reforms’ in the early 1990s—which

incidentally came at the precise moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union and other east European 'socialist' states—the new urban middle classes found themselves rushing towards what we might call a 'global hypermodernity'—a future that presumably actually existed 'elsewhere', most probably in the US. This 'hypermodernity' was visualized as a kind of new urban utopia of plenty; as a land of skyscrapers and glittering neon lights, shopping malls and casinos, expressways and fast-moving vehicles. It was the Tilism-e-Hoshruha of consumption—where you could simply overcome your old Nehruvian or 'socialist' guilt about conspicuous consumption and abandon yourselves to the enchanted beings of this land. Indeed, in this Promised Land they would come of their own accord and take you away to far-off places among the stars. You simply had to keep buying. Even though in the early 1990s India was still far away from this utopia, its globalized urban middle classes were clear that they had already embarked on a journey towards it. It was party time. Any talk of poverty, hunger, destitution and exploitation was seen as a 'relic' of the past—now associated with the bygone Nehruvian state and the just-disappeared 'socialist' ones.

The new mantra of 'get rich and consume' was the direct opposite of the austerity of the Nehruvian days that had called for curtailing current

consumption and saving for the larger good. For, as any development economist of those times would have told us, poor countries can only provide for capital formation by curtailing current consumption and saving for investment.

The new dispensation rejected all that: we do not need any such nonsense like 'capital formation'; we can simply invite capital from other, capital-surplus countries. They will bring in capital, investment and the goodies—and we can simply consume. The more we consume, the more it will spur demand and therefore industry, and thus invite more investment. We will be in a land of plenty. All we would need to do in order to arrive at this utopia is provide incoming capital with cheap labour and 'natural resources', land and forests. These are unavailable to capital in the West because of high wages and strict environmental laws. All we had to do was make it easy in India for foreign and domestic corporations to acquire land and other environmental resources.

Though the dream that drove the last two decades belonged to the rich, it was also sold to those who were not yet rich but aspired to that status. Whoever wanted to could step in and join the party, such aspirants were told. It did not matter if you were not rich to begin with; by dint of 'hard work', anybody could make it. There was a little catch in this otherwise persuasive-sounding argument. Inviting capital was no substitute for our own

capital formation—this was a simple logic that the Nehruvian elite had grasped. For when you invite capital from elsewhere, it comes with its conditions and it is bad ‘market economics’ to say that we will not comply with such conditions. As Amartya Sen put it in his defence of West Bengal’s land acquisition for the Tatas’ Nano project in Singur: ‘If we want to attract business based on the market’, the government cannot possibly tell these businesses that ‘I want you to go to Siliguri and that is where you are going to be ... That is not the way the market economy works.’ Indeed. Hence the incredulity of our television anchor—the tribals of Kalinganagar did not understand this elementary point about the way a market economy works: the Tatas want their land where they want it, and they must have it!

India took the first steps towards entering this new world in the early 1990s, but really only arrived here around the end of that decade. But the determination was there. Already, by the beginning of the 1990s, certain words and ideas had become ‘blasphemous’. And in the years that followed, we had the exhilarating experience of liberation and emancipation from all social responsibility—indeed any responsibility towards the planet. What followed was two decades of cannibalizing of all the resources of the country. Its land, forests, mines, water, air as well as the public-sector capital of some of the best performing units—everything was up for

grabs. A whole new discourse of consumption came to propel this fast-track journey to hypermodernity. Indian cities began to look towards Paris, London and, more recently, Shanghai as models to emulate. Settlements of the poor would be removed to make way for huge shopping malls, theme parks, multilevel car parks, multiplexes, flyovers and freeways.

Unfortunately, there was something that came in as a party-spoiler quite early in the day. Just as we were beginning our journey to this Promised Land, in the early 1990s, in 1992 to be precise, the heads of states from different parts of the world met in Rio de Janeiro in what came to be known as the Earth Summit. For the first time the serious challenge posed to the fragile ecology of the world by mindless ‘Development’ came to be acknowledged as a serious issue. No longer was it a cause espoused only by a fringe of ‘eco-loonies’. Environmental issues became an urgent political agenda as the realization seriously dawned that our planet was living on borrowed time. Global warming and the emission of greenhouse gases as a consequence of mindless industrialization were now put squarely on the table. The US, we have already mentioned, was unrepentant and unwilling to compromise on its ‘American way of life’—which effectively meant that the US would continue with its high-energy-consumption lifestyle. But that apart, despite

efforts by the US and other assorted proponents of capitalist consumption and ‘the market economy’ in other parts of the world, public opinion since Rio has increasingly become more and more aware of the grave threat that mindless industrialization and development pose to the earth. The idea of a high-consumption-based growth could only appear jarring in this context.

However, capitalism is capitalism precisely because it can turn everything, including the desire for ‘ecological sustainability’, into a commodity for consumption. So, while capitalist industrialization and development wreak havoc on the planet, a new ecological dimension is simultaneously added now to this imagined land. Political analyst and writer Aseem Shrivastava (2007) draws a sketch of this future based on the dreams sold by ‘developers’—the new dream merchants of twenty-first-century India. Shrivastava paraphrases, if somewhat poetically, the builder–developers’ utopia thus:

There will be world-class apartments in impressive high-rises touching the sky. Prospective residents will have choices ranging from compact studios to six-bedroom duplex flats designed for traditional Indian joint families. The apartments will be equipped with handsome, marble-topped bathrooms, studded with Jacuzzis and golden bidets imported from Europe. Every room will afford a

commanding view of the golf course within whose precincts the skyscrapers will be located.

And just in case you are suffering from the consequences of your hypermodern lives, the dream merchants promise ‘stress-busting massage parlours (offering a large variety of oriental massages)’, alongside in-house gym facilities and health clubs.

This is the new Consumption Utopia. And the argument for consumption, we have seen, is immaculately crafted. The more money you make and the more you spend, the closer you are to the new utopia. And just in case the hectic pace of modern life—the relentless drive to make money—threatens to kill you, this utopia provides you with everything from recreation and entertainment to oriental massages. It even protects you from the urban-industrial dystopia by simply taking you away to the ecologically friendly climes where everything you could ever want is within walking and cycling distance. And thus, one day when the rich are richer, when corporations make super profits, when we achieve 10 per cent decennial growth, we will find that wealth will trickle down and that day the people at the bottom of the pile will also start getting the benefits of growth. The unemployed will find jobs and the hungry will have food.

But for that to happen, in the meantime, we need to take away their land and their livelihoods.

Let me state at this point that the old dispensation, based primarily on the state's (and the public sector's) overriding role in the economy, was no paradise. Indeed, it was seriously problematic. Its effects in terms of shackling the spirit of entrepreneurship among ordinary people and fostering a mentality of dependence on 'sarkari naukri' on the one hand, and fattening a corrupt state bureaucracy on the other, had actually started having a very negative impact on the economy and society at large. Stringent controls, what came to be known as the licence-permit raj, had turned into shackles and had encouraged the growth of a parasitical 'social bureaucracy'. Apart from the state elite, this social bureaucracy included a whole class of public-sector employees who lived off the state's and the taxpayers' money.

However, the dismantling of state controls in a number of arenas, necessary and important though they were, does not entail an attitude of complete abandon of the kind that we have witnessed in the last two decades. To argue that the only alternative to the Nehruvian state bureaucratic capitalism is predatory neo-liberal capitalism is, to say the least, an instance of a certain rampant intellectual laziness that frames our political and economic discourse. The argument that what is good for the corporations is good for the 'nation'—a famous General Motors slogan was: 'What is good for GM is good for USA'—and that they are serving a public purpose

since they are the engines of growth and will provide employment to the unemployed, involves, as we have seen, a sleight of hand. For no private corporation ever invests for any public purpose such as providing employment. That is indeed not a consideration at all in any investment decision. A corporation invests purely for profit—and therefore it invests only in areas and sectors where it can make profit.

### **Land Acquisition and the 'Passive Revolution'**

Kalinganagar's was a tragic story, but it was by no means the only one. It was followed soon after by Singur and then by what became a metaphor for anti-land-acquisition struggles: Nandigram. This flashpoint came barely two months after the violence in Singur, which blew up into a major rebellion in 2007. Here the state government had planned to set up a chemical hub by acquiring something like 14,000 acres of fertile agricultural land.

Between these two events called Singur and Nandigram, something unprecedented happened: they shook the foundations of mainstream political discourse and for the first time in decades, struggles against land acquisition became an issue that attracted the wider attention of the intelligentsia and the media. The governments at the state and the Centre had to pause and think.

There had been many violent cases of land acquisition for the sake of 'Industry' and 'Development' in different parts of the country for decades. However, till very recently land used to be acquired by the state, in exercise of its powers of 'eminent domain', for purposes of building development projects that the state itself undertook. It is estimated that over 21 million people have been displaced from their traditional habitats and livelihoods through such land acquisition over the decades. Scholars and activists who have been tracking these developments recall Jawaharlal Nehru's speech exhorting the farmers of Bhakra Nangal to 'suffer for the nation', even as their land was taken over and they were left destitute. For Nehru, these big dams constituted the new 'temples of modern India' and he had no difficulty in exhorting peasants to 'make sacrifices for the nation'. That these earlier instances of land acquisition did not spark off any major debate had to do with two circumstances. First, development projects for setting up power or steel plants that were undertaken by the state itself had a much greater legitimacy in the popular mind and seemed to be justifiable acts. Second, the overall power of the idea of nationhood and the concomitant idea that we must all suffer or sacrifice so that 'we' become a modern, powerful nation was quite overwhelming. There was a strong sense of 'identification' of the

'we' (as individuals) and the 'nation'—even if most middle- and upper-class people never really had to sacrifice anything for its sake.

On both these counts, things have changed fundamentally. In the first place, almost all the land acquisition of more recent times, invoking the colonial Land Acquisition Act 1894, was carried out by the state not for any 'national' or 'public' purpose but for handing over to private corporations. The state is now seen to be using its power of 'eminent domain' to acquire land cheaply to hand it over to private corporations who are in the business of making profit. From about the mid-2000s, the Indian government embarked upon a plan of developing what are called Special Economic Zones (SEZs) that are supposed to be special areas operated by big corporations. Inside these SEZs, corporations are immune from a number of laws that govern the rest of the country. For purposes of international trade, SEZs are to be treated as 'foreign territory' exempt from regulations that govern duties, tariffs and taxes on the one hand and labour laws on the other.

In the second place, where the Nehruvian state demanded some curbs on current consumption and placed great emphasis on savings for the sake of capital formation, the new dispensation simply calls upon people to become rich, to make money and consume. The earlier strategy was mindful of the sharp inequalities that divided our population



and therefore proceeded with care, attempting to work out a different path of industrialization and development.

This path was largely one that has been called the path of the 'passive revolution' that sought to transform agriculture gradually into capitalist enterprise through incremental improvements rather than through its violent decimation. The idea of the passive revolution, as elaborated by political theorists like Sudipta Kaviraj and Partha Chatterjee, taking their cue from Antonio Gramsci, basically emphasized the fact that unlike in most countries of the 'advanced capitalist world' where capitalism destroyed feudalism and pre-capitalist forms of property, in India and many other postcolonial countries the capitalist class was not strong enough to carry out thoroughgoing land reforms and destroy 'feudal' property relations. For those familiar with Marxist debates, this would be easy to understand: the underlying logic here is that capitalism cannot co-exist, at least in the long run, with 'pre-capitalist' and 'feudal' forms of property, as both land and labour need to be freed for capitalist development. As long as land and labour remain tied to the old forms of feudal or even small peasant property, people depending upon them for livelihood have no incentive to move beyond subsistence levels of production. Even the feudal lord produces only to engage in conspicuous consumption rather

than to invest his earnings back into expanding production.

Just as it is necessary for capital to produce the consumer, so it has had to produce 'labour'. People have always worked to earn their livelihoods and while some may work and earn more than others, they always prefer to work with a certain degree of autonomy. The work-discipline of the capitalist factory had to actually be inculcated over centuries through a range of disciplinary mechanisms and legal provisions. The conversion of erstwhile peasants into factory workers was an extremely violent process—and this violence was as much spectacular and public as it was mundane and invisible. This has continued throughout the history of capitalism.

For capitalism to come into its own, therefore, the peasant had to be dispossessed for two reasons: to seize the land and to convert him into what Marx called a proletariat—a person who owns nothing but his or her labour power. This has certainly been the logic of modern industrial capitalist development in the West, even though its classical form, as we will see below, was evident only in England. And wherever there were counter tendencies that prevented a full play to such violence, economists and ideologues of capital only saw 'retardation' and deviation from the pristine form of industrial development.

What Kaviraj and Chatterjee designated as the passive revolution was related to the inability of a weak postcolonial capitalism to carry out a robust anti-feudal programme. Rather than destroying feudalism, it entered into a compromise with feudal forces, seeking to transform them gradually and, thereby, integrate them into the capitalist economy. One of the classic instances of this can be seen, for example, in the way land reforms were carried out in post-Independence India. In no state, with the possible exception of Kashmir, did land reform take the form of radical land redistribution to the landless. Rather, it took the form of tenancy reforms, in which former tenants became owners of the land they tilled.

It can, however, be argued that in the Indian context, this was all that was possible, given the size of holdings and the actual structure of 'precapitalist' property relations where 'feudal landlordism' and 'serfdom' of the kind in evidence in western Europe hardly existed. The Kaviraj-Chatterjee thesis of the passive revolution thus makes its argument by assuming the existence of something called 'feudal' property. Now, not all 'precapitalist' property can be equated with 'feudal' property, and what we see in India, especially in the post-land-reforms scenario, is the preponderance of small and middle peasant property. Except in specific areas of some states, even the landlordism of the old kind hardly existed.

In such a situation, the passive revolution meant that the Nehruvian and post-Nehru state formulated an altogether different strategy for expanding capitalist relations in the countryside. This strategy consisted in developing capitalist agriculture with new techniques, tractors, fertilizers and new institutional mechanisms to make it profit-oriented on the one hand, alongside an emphasis on rural and village industries on the other.

This strategy of the passive revolution was undoubtedly a slow one that was able to maintain its own pace by partially 'delinking' from the 'world economy'. We must remember that in the immediate aftermath of Independence the new state elite under Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership had to struggle to order its priorities in a way that was more conducive to our domestic requirements. This meant that the Indian state had to ignore much conventional economic wisdom which suggested that international trade and the world market are the centre of the world economy and any country could best develop itself by producing and selling that for which it was best suited (in which it had the most comparative advantage). In our case, at the time of Independence textiles were supposed to be our strength and it was assumed that we would be better off by developing that industry for the world market. Needless to say, if the Nehruvian state had taken this option it would have had to integrate to the

pace and demands of the world market from the very beginning—which basically means that its priorities would then be ordered not according to the needs of the Indian population (and the home market), but according to the demands of the world market. That is to say, the Indian economy, in its effort to keep pace with the other industrial economies, would have had to go on adjusting itself in accordance with the demands of the international market. This would neither have afforded it the possibility of developing its own infrastructure and capital-goods industries nor, for that matter, the possibility of the passive revolution. It would, in all probability, have had to rapidly industrialize by directly attacking peasant agriculture.

Whether the Nehruvian strategy succeeded in all respects is not the point here; the point simply is how priorities are drawn up and whether the Indian state would be able to determine the pace of its own development.

As opposed to this, the current strategy is based more directly on the replication of the classical English and European model—that of the decimation of agriculture by industry. We can also call this the ‘primitive accumulation’ model following the well-known idea that in this model, capitalism can only develop by dispossessing the peasantry of the land and destroying pre-capitalist property. Marx called this ‘primitive’ or ‘primary’ accumulation to refer

to the process whereby ‘original’ capital comes into existence by such dispossession. Or, to put it in Marx’s own words, ‘primitive accumulation is the historical process of the separation of the immediate producer [the peasant] from the means of production [land]’. This is what the passive revolution sought to avoid.

This second model was clearly based on a call to those who can afford to live a profligate life to consume with a vengeance. If this required placing all the resources of the country in the hands of the corporations and the dispossession of the ordinary peasants and tribals of their land, then so be it. This violent dispossession in the midst of vulgar, high-consumption lifestyles of the new elites was bound to—and indeed did—exacerbate inequalities. All this made it clear to those being dispossessed that the resources of the ‘nation’ and its poor were for the rich to loot. This was bound to call forth sharp resistance, and it did.

Singur and Nandigram were neither the first nor the last of such instances. From Dadri in Uttar Pradesh to Pen Raigad in Maharashtra and innumerable cases in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, there are many, many more instances of the dispossession of peasants and tribals throughout the length and breadth of the country. And it is the same story everywhere (See Menon and Nigam, 2007).

In fact, all through the 1990s and a large part of the 2000s the issue of dispossession of the tribal population of the Narmada Valley, which was being displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Project, had kept coming up. This movement, led by the Narmada Bachao Andolan, had been entirely peaceful and had reposed full faith in the judiciary and the institutions of the Indian state. For this it was repaid with utter callousness, where even the rules laid down by the government for relief and rehabilitation were serially violated by the government itself and the violation upheld by the judiciary. Innumerable villages along with Harsud town are now submerged—lost to the inhabitants for ever. But the Narmada struggle belonged to another time.

In this context, it is worth remembering that the actual provisions of the Land Acquisition Act 1894 are in fact far less cavalier with regard to land acquisition than what is evident in the practice of the Indian state. Thus, the Act (section 4) lays down that a notification of intent has to be first published in the official gazette and in two newspapers—one of which must be in the local language. It also requires that the collector should ensure that the gist of the notifications is displayed in the area to be acquired. Anyone can file objections to the collector within thirty days and only after their ‘informed approval’ can the project proceed. Needless to say, in most cases even these minimum stipulations of the law are ignored.

That none of the economists, passionate believers of the virtues of the free market though they are, ever found any of these violations worth even a comment, speaks volumes about the neo-liberal faith. Thus, it was the late V.P. Singh, former prime minister, who first forcefully put forward the argument that the land-acquisition policy for SEZs, far from being based on the logic of the free market, was in fact a violation of its most fundamental tenets. Why should the state, he argued, acquire land from tribals and peasants at highly subsidized rates, often by arm-twisting them, and hand them over to the corporations? If one really believes in the free market, he argued, then it should be left to the corporations to buy the land from the peasants directly at market prices. And, since a market cannot force you to part with your property, we could, extending Singh’s argument, say that if the peasants do not want to sell in a given place, then that should be the end of the matter.

What Amartya Sen sees as the way ‘a market economy works’ is clearly not the way it actually works. His contention makes sense *only if one assumes* that the government is the ultimate owner of all property—in other words by doing away with the very idea of ‘private property’ and non-state common property. It is only when you have two players—the corporations looking for land and the government owning all the land—that you can say

the logic of the market economy should yield the results that Sen wants it to. After all, elementary economics will tell you that private property is the foundation of a market economy, that the latter is inconceivable without the former. The catch really lies elsewhere, and Sen's argument helps us locate the precise point at which, through an ideological displacement, capital is made synonymous with the market: the only form of property that economics and law recognize is bourgeois property—the juridical form of which is individually owned private property. Pre-capitalist family property or common property or customary ownership is simply not considered private property and in principle always belongs—through the 'right' of eminent domain—to the state.

But let us look at this another way. What happens if we see land as another form of 'capital'—as something without which no investment is possible and which is of no less value than the money that Tata or Reliance puts into it? Obviously, we will get entirely different results. We will then have to argue that the peasant or tribal whose land is being sought should be offered life-long partnership in the project and in its profits. S/he should, in other words, be seen as a partner, a prospective industrialist, if he or she should be willing to contribute her or his land to it. This is an entirely different scenario from the one that unfolded in England and Europe. Even if

'industrialization' is what we want, there is at least another alternative path available.

Here is another possibility. This is a story of peasants becoming industrialists. It appeared in the *Indian Express* in the context of the debate on industrialization unleashed by the 'Nandigram effect'. It goes like this: in the village of Avasari Khurd, about forty kilometres from Pune, about 1500 farmers passed a unanimous resolution seeking SEZ status for their village. The resolution, approved by the gram sabha, was sent for further action to both the state and central governments. The peasants/farmers of the village have formed a company by the name of Avasari Khurd Industrial Development Pvt Ltd, using 3500 acres of land, while the remaining will be used for agribusiness and residential purposes. All the 1500 farmers will be shareholders of the company and each of them will contribute Rs 1 lakh as initial investment. The idea is that rather than let the government acquire land from them or they be forced into some highly unequal bargain with corporations like Reliance or the Tatas, the farmers themselves become shareholders of their land and take their destiny in their own hands.

However, because the initiative for this effort came from the Maharashtra Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Agriculture, the vision of this plan went in a corporate capitalist direction, with land

being earmarked for the automobile, electronic, infotech and pharmaceutical sectors. One can, however, easily imagine an initiative being taken in such a way that it could become the basis of an interesting new type of common ownership, something akin to an agro-industrial cooperative, which could focus on industries less ecologically destructive than some planned here. One could easily imagine Leftists in power in different states, if they had the vision, intervening in the flow of life that is being transformed every day, every minute, and getting the farmers themselves to turn their lives around, rather than helplessly 'invite capital' on whatever terms it sets.

For, the Avasari Khurd developments seem to be saying something else as well: they seem to be telling us in no uncertain terms that 'capital' is not something that only exists in the body of the Tatas and the Ambanis, or of transnational corporations; it is here, right here. You only need to have the vision to harness it in a non-corporate way—that is to say, in a way that does not put profit above everything else, but actually takes care of livelihoods, profitability and ecological sustainability. Avasari Khurd also teaches us something else. 'Globalization' is not an 'irreversible' process, a historical destiny that must be accepted passively; it is actually taking shape before our very eyes and we can intervene and influence the form it takes. It is the failure to act

and intervene in the situation that makes the process more irreversible in the long run.

In an interesting and ironic way, the farmers of Avasari Khurd seem to be saying that if only capitalists can claim the benefits of tax waivers, free and subsidized public resources, then let us all become capitalists and subvert this macabre game that has been going on for so long.

So while 'Nandigram' itself became a metaphor for struggle, a call to arms against the violence of neo-liberal (and 'Left-wing') progress, inspiring farmers' struggles from Panchgaon in Haryana to Raigad in Maharashtra and Nandagudi in Karnataka, Avasari Khurd presented another side of the struggle—that of simultaneous transformation (a self-transformation) rather than a mere defence of the old agricultural life.

### **Industrialization in Europe: Was There Ever a Standard Experience?**

Since the 'standard experience' has so often been invoked during the debate after Singur and Nandigram, we need to reflect on it a little. It will be clear on a moment's reflection that since most of Asia, Africa and South America remain 'backward' and unindustrialized even today, this 'standard experience' can only refer to the experience of those who have already industrialized—namely

the western capitalist societies. The experience of the former colonized world, despite over two centuries of direct colonial rule and decades of independent capitalist development, has been radically different.

The 'standard experience' is the story produced by victorious western industrialization about itself. More recently, counter narratives have started emerging that give us glimpses of possible different histories.

Now, there are at least two possible ways of looking at this 'fact' of industrialization in the West. Either we can argue that what has happened in 'the industrialized West' is the 'standard', that it is the norm, and everywhere else in the world people and governments are deviant because they do not follow it. Or else, we can say: Yes, Europe and Britain's experience is important but *it is their* experience, and our experience here suggests something else. We might in fact argue that precisely because we wish to avoid the violence that was so central to that model, we do not wish to treat it as 'standard' and therefore inevitable. We might, in our times, even go a step further and argue that today, when the world is running out of natural resources and global warming has created an unprecedented crisis, there is need to re-evaluate that whole model. In following this second line of argument, we will be going further and saying that what looks like *standard* experience

through the disciplinary lens of economics may in fact simply be a *different* experience that is better avoided than emulated. At any rate, we might wish to learn from its mistakes rather than treat it as a model.

The reason why the British and European experience has gained the status of a norm to be followed by every other society is largely due to one single factor: the economic advance registered by these societies, measured largely in terms of national aggregates such as national income and GDP, and national averages like per capita income and consumption. There is certainly no doubt that life has changed radically during the last 200 to 300 years and this change has been, in many ways, very liberating. It has opened new avenues of cultural, intellectual and aesthetic enjoyment (education, pursuit of knowledge and the arts), apart from achieving huge material advances in life. The emergence of the modern city and urban spaces has also been immensely liberating for many, since they provide secular spaces where individuals can move about with freedom and a fair degree of anonymity—away from the oppressive controls of the community. This is particularly important in the context of women and certain oppressed communities like the Dalits in our context.

With individual freedom and secularization arose the idea of democracy, which presupposes the equality of all individuals and their ability to think

and choose for themselves. The constellation of all these new and disparate things taken together is what we generally recognize as 'modernity'. It is also true that most of these historically arose together. So, for instance, it was with the secularization of modern life and what Max Weber called the 'disenchantment' of the world that individual liberty became possible. It is equally true that without this secularization, without this disenchantment of the world, neither capitalism nor industrialization would have been possible—for it was secularization that made possible the transformation of land and nature into commodities that could be bought and sold on the market. In other words, industrial development became possible because secularization had made available a new way of looking at nature and the world. And industrialization made possible a certain massive growth of cities and the sphere of modern life. Similarly, we can think of a number of connections that tie these different components of modernity together. It is because these different components seem to come together that we often tend to believe we can only have them all together in that one package deal.

However, as any serious economic historian—as opposed to an economist—can tell us, there is no standard experience of industrialization. The 'classic' case was that of England, where certain developments from the late-fifteenth century right

down to the eighteenth century created a particular set of circumstances that laid the basis for the industrial revolution which was basically an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century phenomenon. The developments were basically internal to agriculture and linked to the emergence of a certain new nobility. The initial story of peasant dispossession in the form of the 'enclosure of the commons' was initiated by this new agrarian class which rapidly cleared vast agricultural tracts for sheep rearing as the price of wool was going up in England due to the rise of the Flemish wool industry. Arable agricultural lands were rapidly transformed into pastures for sheep grazing, etc. That provided the initial impetus for the eviction and dispossession of the peasants. This process of taking over agricultural land went on from the late-fifteenth to the eighteenth century. It began with individual members of the nobility dispossessing the peasants, but by the eighteenth century the dispossession was being carried out by the law itself. The theft of peasants' land, that is, the enclosure of the commons, retrospectively became stamped with the authority of law. A century later it would start being seen as a *law of historical development*. This process of dispossession of the peasant, it is important to note, had nothing to do with capitalism as such, except that there had emerged a global market of commodities that was propelling the class of nobles to make money out



of catering to the growing world demand of wool. This process had nothing to do with capitalism because it belongs to its prehistory, when a section of the nobility turned towards sheep rearing in order to take advantage of the rising prices of wool. From all accounts, there was no capitalism—even in its embryonic form—at that time. If that is the case, it can only be an accident that this was how certain prerequisites of capitalism were created in late-fifteenth-century England. There are in fact two different histories that come together in the emergence of capitalism: the history of ‘free wage labourers’ and of ‘men with wealth’ who were ready to invest in production. These are very specific histories and it is facile to expect that these will be repeated in the same way everywhere.

However, this process in England accomplished two results at one stroke—a long, four-century-long stroke! On the one hand, it released the land from traditional agricultural use for a new kind of capitalist farming and eventually for industry. On the other hand, it destroyed the peasantry and, thus, created huge masses of free labour that came in useful as pools of cheap labour when industry started expanding rapidly. Karl Marx, probably the most acute observer, historian and analyst of this phenomenon, called this process of dispossession, borrowing from an expression used by some others, ‘primitive accumulation’. Marx sometimes referred

to it as ‘original accumulation’ and underlined that the key component of this process that provided the initial capital for capitalism to develop was the destruction of earlier forms of production that were based on small peasant and artisanal production. Primitive accumulation thus turned all these small peasants and artisans into proletarians—or people without any property or means of production.

We must remember here that by the end of the fourteenth century, serfdom had already disappeared from England and around the time of the ‘enclosures’ it was what Marx called the ‘free peasants’ who dominated agriculture. What this process destroyed, therefore, was not feudal property of the old nobility, but the small peasantry. We should remember this also because it has now become some kind of ‘mythical’ common sense to state that capitalism destroyed feudalism and the old property form, whereas it was actually the destruction of the small peasant that was accomplished by it. We can partly understand this if we look at our own Indian experience—even though it is an entirely different historical context: much of the old kind of highly oppressive landlordism that used to exist (say, around the time of Independence) against which there had been innumerable peasants movements, gradually became a thing of the past with the post-Independence land reforms that basically gave ownership rights to the tenants who cultivated the

land. Any talk of destruction of 'agriculture' today is not about the destruction of that kind of landlordism but of the small- and middle-range peasant.

But let us return to our examination of the 'standard experience' of industrialization. The fact is that this supposedly 'classic' instance of England was not repeated anywhere else in the world. Nowhere in Europe did the rise and consolidation of capitalism entail the violent decimation of the peasantry. In France, the position of the peasantry was consolidated in the wake of the French Revolution. Since economists and economic historians take the British experience to be the norm of capitalist development, this development in France is seen as 'a retardative factor' in the development of French capitalism (Kemp, 1978, 31). In fact, so significant is the position of the peasantry in France that economists and economic historians agree 'the rights of the French peasantry *were an obstacle to more rational farming* [emphasis added]' (Croot and Parker, 2005, 83). We shall return to this matter of why abstract principles such as 'rational farming' and 'capitalism' should become such an end in themselves that they are considered more important than the rights of the peasants and indeed of common people, for that is the precise point at which 'the economy' becomes more important than people's well-being.

It is true that during the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries in France, for example, the peasantry was quite squeezed due to economic pressures and found it difficult to survive on income from land alone. A small section of them even became dispossessed and were reduced to destitution. However, this was mainly around the big towns where the 'urban bourgeoisie was buying up lands of destitute peasantry and nobility alike' (ibid). Notice that unlike England, this was not a process where the government or the state was actively involved in dispossessing the peasant in order to make land available to the new nobility, but one where the nobles-turning-capitalists were buying up land from them. In such areas, peasants were reduced to something like a fifth of the population.

Overall, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a 'stabilization' of peasant agriculture in western Europe and governments realized that it was possible to create conditions for capitalist farming without destroying the peasantry. Till well into the twentieth century the peasantry actually remained an important segment of west Europe's population. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the crisis of industry and severe shrinkage of employment reversed the process of people moving from the villages to the cities.

Such was also the case with Germany. As historians have noted, 'peasants all over Germany had gradually acquired long term and even

hereditary rights of land usage ... These property relationships remained essentially unchanged up to the nineteenth century, even in large parts of east Elbia' (Wunder, 2005, 97).

The peasant communes that dominated agricultural life in parts of eastern Europe and Russia became a matter of a major controversy between the Marxists and the Narodniks (Populists) in Russia, and Marx himself was forced to rethink his theories about the inevitability of capitalist development as the precondition for socialism.

Noted historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie put it succinctly in his argument with Robert Brenner:

He [Brenner] thinks that for 'modernity' to emerge and to develop the peasant has to be overwhelmed, expropriated by the action of lords who then themselves become agents of capitalist triumph; that the peasant community has to disintegrate and so on. But this is surely only one of the many possible routes to 'modernization'. Brenner completely underestimates the remarkable potential of the peasant family economy, as described by Chayanov, Thorner and others. Its performance was particularly impressive in Holland and Belgium, where it contributed efficiently to provisioning a working population created by the new industrial capitalism, and has also been more creditable in several regions of northern and even southern France, in northern Italy and Japan ...

We can thus see that there is really no 'standard experience' of industrialization and capitalism—not one of the decimation of the peasantry by the state's intervention at any rate.

### **Another Industrialization**

It is not simply that there is no standard experience of capitalist development, but more importantly the idea that the history of industry, science and technological development begins with the West, sometime around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is a myth. We need to have a brief idea of the counter-history in order to rid ourselves of the illusion that we have so far only lived illegitimate lives that do not somehow measure up to the standard experience. Of course, the 'we' here refers not just to Indians, but to the Chinese and west Asians, Africans and others as well.

A lot of work now emerging details this very different history that comes to light once we put aside our Eurocentric lenses. Building on the work of earlier scholars like Janet Abu-Lughod, John Hobson (2004), for example, suggests that the very idea that Vasco da Gama 'discovered India' is a ludicrous one considering that 'Sassanid Persians had been sailing across to India and China from the early centuries of the first millennium as did the Black Ethiopians and, later on the Muslims (after

about 650 AD).’ Hobson mentions the ‘Islamic navigator Ahmad ibn-Majid who had already, decades before Vasco da Gama, circled around the Cape of Good Hope and entered the Mediterranean via the Strait of Gibraltar’. ‘No less irksome,’ says Hobson, ‘is the point that virtually all of the nautical and navigational technologies and techniques that made Da Gama’s journey possible were invented in either China or the Islamic Middle East’ and that he apparently managed to navigate across because he was guided by an ‘unnamed Gujarati Muslim pilot.’

Scholars in the last couple of decades have begun to produce alternative accounts to those produced in the last 200 years—accounts that challenge the assumption that the world before 1500 was a stagnant world, ‘mired in tradition’, a world of backward and insulated societies. They point out that right from the seventh century onwards, there has been a flourishing global economy with considerable trade and other forms of interaction. This was a global economy that was powered by the major achievements of the Arabs and the Chinese. Between 650 and 1000 AD, these scholars claim, the leading edge of global power lay in the Islamic Middle East and north Africa. Islamic/Arabic breakthroughs in astronomy, mathematics, paper manufacturing are well known—apart from a range of textile and silk manufactures. Right down to the

eighteenth century, Muslims of the Arab world led over the Europeans in iron and steel production; they also made impressive strides in sugar refinement, construction, furniture manufacture, glass, leather tanning, pottery and stone cutting. Apart from these, they created a whole range of economic institutions relating to partnerships, banking, contract law, credit and such other matters—some of these pre-dating the advent of Islam.

But the world before European hegemony was not simply based on the trade of agricultural goods. Through the work of a whole range of scholars we come to know that China’s ‘industrial revolution’, for example, spanned a period of 1500 years and ‘culminated in the Sung revolution—some 600 years before Britain entered its industrialization phase’. The beginnings of the Chinese iron and steel industry have been traced to between the fifth and second century BC but it was really between 800 and 1100 AD that it really reached its high point. By the end of the eleventh century China was already producing as much steel as all of Europe put together would as late as 1700. Already, by the twelfth century, the Chinese had a relatively advanced market economy, with paper money and a taxation system based on cash. The three most important world discoveries from the point of view of the modern world, and indeed European power, were printing, gunpowder and the compass—all of

which were invented in China. It is impossible to think of Europe's colonization of the world without these three discoveries, and yet none of these was a European product!

The point to be underlined here is that till the eighteenth century, that is, the beginnings of the 'industrial revolution', the world was not simply an unchanging and traditional world, caught in stagnation and backwardness. It was not oblivious of many of the things that we associate today with modernity and capitalism, but none of these entailed a violent destruction of earlier agricultural and peasant life. Markets and trade, even industry, could actually emerge and develop over a long period, without leading to the liquidation of earlier modes of living.

### **Kalidasas of the Modern Age**

Recently, Shekhar Gupta, editor of the *Indian Express*, wrote a lead article where he discussed the drought of 2009 in large parts of India. He advised concerned readers to 'just drive down from Delhi' to Chandigarh, Shimla or Amritsar, and promised that what they see would be an eye-opener. They would see 'totally lush, bounteous fields of paddy stretching endlessly into the horizon on both sides of the highway'. Where, then, is the drought, he asked. Where are the caked, cracked and dried

mud-flats—the photographs of which we see in the media every day?

Gupta then proceeded to enlighten us as to the reason why Punjab and Haryana, and to an extent western Uttar Pradesh, have managed to escape the drought. It is all because of 'decisive investments in irrigation in the fifties and the sixties'. The reference is, of course, to the 'green revolution', especially the capitalization of agriculture through power- and diesel-driven tube-wells, tractorization and so on. Gupta told the readers about the elaborate plans to trap large quantities of surplus water 'in so many reservoirs' that helped constantly recharge underground aquifers with water. This happy situation was made possible because, he said, in those days there were no 'retrograde jholawalas and environmentalists'.

It is true that it was the advent of the 'jholawalas' that first alerted us to the disastrous consequences of precisely the strategy that the editor lauds. But 'jholawalas' and environmentalists are regressive creatures worthy of being dismissed forthwith. So let us look at some evidence produced by the American National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). On 12 August, three days before Gupta wrote this piece, the NASA website published a press release that was widely reported in the press. Let the release speak for itself:

Using NASA satellite data, scientists have found that groundwater levels in northern India have been declining by as much as one foot per year over the past decade. Researchers concluded the loss is almost entirely due to human activity.

More than 26 cubic miles of groundwater disappeared from aquifers in areas of Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and the nation's capitol territory of Delhi, between 2002 and 2008. This is enough water to fill Lake Mead, the largest manmade reservoir in the United States, three times.

A team of hydrologists led by Matt Rodell of NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Md., found that northern India's underground water supply is being pumped and consumed by human activities, such as irrigating cropland, and *is draining aquifers faster than natural processes can replenish them* [emphasis added]. The results of this research were published today in *Nature*.

Another feature on the NASA website makes it even clearer:

They found that groundwater levels have been *declining by an average of one meter every three years (one foot per year)* [emphasis added]. More than 109 cubic km (26 cubic miles) of groundwater disappeared between 2002 and 2008.

Opinion-makers such as Shekhar Gupta are but the Kalidasas of the modern age, cutting the very branch of the tree on which they are sitting.

Evidence has been piling on everything that the NASA research, based on satellite data, now reveals. Let us take another report that appeared recently in another leading newspaper about the very same green revolution area that Shekhar Gupta celebrates. This is the sad story of the Sutlej river that has now become the dumping ground for hazardous industrial waste leading to large-scale destruction of aquatic and human life. With groundwater disappearing rapidly, the report says, villagers in Ropar district are being forced to drink this contaminated water of the Sutlej, leading to skin diseases, tooth and nail decay. According to the report, while warning signals have been coming in for some time, the alarming scale of the problem came to light in early 2009 with the discovery of ten tonnes of fish carcasses with burst gills and missing eyes.

Water shortages are a worldwide phenomenon. Everywhere on the globe water is fast drying up and some of the world's major rivers are now believed to dry up long before they reach the sea— for example, the Colorado river in the US, the Yellow river in China and in some seasons the Amu Darya in Central Asia. Typically, when rivers start drying up, marine ecosystems within them are destroyed as well. Such has been the case with the Colorado river and the Amu Darya. The latter, in fact, has started affecting the Aral Sea that now has receded far away from the coast. China's Yellow river, as Lester

Brown remarks, suddenly ran dry for fifteen days in 1972 after flowing steadily for thousands of years and being the cradle of the Chinese civilization. From 1985 onwards, it now runs dry for part of the year, every year.

And as rivers run dry, water tables too begin to fall—as they are doing on every continent. Overpumping through power- or diesel-driven pumps is now depleting underground water in most countries that have moved to particular kinds of water-intensive crops. The phenomenon of pumping water thus is just about fifty to sixty years old and has nothing to do with ‘progress’, but with certain changes in cropping patterns that have been introduced—in fact pushed through—by certain international agencies like USAID.

As many scholars have argued, cropping patterns emerged in different parts of the world that were in keeping with the climatic conditions that prevailed in those regions. So, for example, Vandana Shiva argues that rice cultures and paddy cultivation emerged predominantly in the wet regions of Asia, while in the arid and semiarid regions in different parts of the world, people took to wheat, barley, corn, sorghum and millet. As against the variety of crop that was characteristic of traditional agriculture, ‘food monoculture’ is increasingly pushed in different parts of the world. Shiva suggests that millet, for example, not only requires

less water than rice, ‘it is also drought-resistant, withstanding up to 75 per cent soil moisture depletion’. Such crops were labelled ‘inferior’ in the wake of the green revolution. Shiva suggests that crop breeding in traditional societies developed keeping in mind the possibilities of drought. She reports on a breeding experiment carried out in the desert regions of Rajasthan, carried out by the International Centre of Research in Crops for the Semiarid Tropics (ICRISAT), which discovered that the farmers preferred millet because it was drought-resistant. Shiva further suggests that the shift from organic manure to chemical fertilizers, combined with the drive towards ‘water-thirsty’ crops, has been a recipe for water famines, desertification and salinization. Thus, green revolution agriculture has all but destroyed the soils of Punjab and Haryana.

We know that innumerable civilizations have disappeared from the face of the earth because of the crisis of water. But those civilizations were not industrial civilizations and most probably faced crisis due to long-term ecological changes over which they had no control. But modern civilization will only have itself to blame for the long-term ecological changes that have already been unleashed over the years and which continue to pose ever greater threat to the world with each passing day.

Ismail Serageldin, a former World Bank vice-president, once said, ‘If the wars of this century

were fought over oil, the wars of the next century will be fought over water.' And we must make no mistake that if there is going to be one big war that humankind will have to fight in the twenty-first century, it will be the war over water. Indeed, it is wrong to say that it will be one big war—we are likely to see, literally, hundreds and thousands of wars spread all over world, in comparison with which the oil wars of the last century will probably pale into insignificance.

But the one big war that is now becoming inevitable in the coming decades is that between the northern industrial world—especially the US—and the global South. While the ecological domain is likely to be the main arena of these conflicts, in a perverse way it is in the name of addressing the ill effects of the green revolution and of hunger in the South that many new corporate interventions are seeking to colonize ordinary life.

We know that the impact of the so-called green revolution, enumerated by Vandana Shiva above, was not restricted to India and that the results over time reveal the same problems everywhere in the South—in what was once known as the 'Third World', which had become the ground for its experimentation. Classically, the myopic vision of the sponsors of the green revolution was on increasing yields and productivity and it was thought that this could be accomplished by simply

introducing artificially produced hybrids—known as high-yielding varieties or high-response varieties. With the power of international agencies behind them, giant transnational corporations and pliant Third-World governments pushed this revolution—as the imagined counter to the rising tide of the 'red revolution' of that time. Within a short time, crop diversity was replaced by monoculture. Apart from all the water-related consequences that Shiva recounts, it had the additional impact of making agriculture highly expensive and unaffordable for the small farmer. It meant high input costs, increased dependence on chemical pesticides, not surprisingly produced by interested corporations, greater demand for credit and the destruction of biodiversity. Biodiversity, in this context, does not refer only to crop varieties but also to, literally, millions of micro-organisms found in the soil that make it capable of resisting pathogens and toxins, of increasing its water-retention capacity, and of providing the plants with numerous micro-nutrients that soil destroyed by chemical fertilizers just cannot provide. Biodiversity, thus, also provides protection against various kinds of diseases and its destruction by the green revolution led to increasing outbreaks of diseases.

Rather than take the lessons that seem obvious to most people, the powerful transnational corporations, with the backing of the US government, have found



a novel way out of this fiasco of the green revolution. They seek to overcome these problems through genetic engineering and biotechnology—by more and more intervention into life forms, in the name of making them ‘pest-resistant’ or ‘herbicide resistant’. That is to say, such genetically engineered crops are designed to resist the effects of certain herbicides or to kill certain insects. Genetically engineered pest-resistant crops are toxic to insects that eat them. So, for example, varieties of corn can be produced that kill insects that feed on corn by adding genetic material derived from certain kinds of soil bacteria. Some of these bacteria naturally produce proteins or other materials toxic to some insects and can be used externally as natural pesticides. Genetically engineered crops are designed to produce the toxin in every cell of the plant.

But the problem is that such interventions can have far more serious consequences than the problems that they set out to eliminate. Often, the introduction of such new genetic characteristics may create toxicity. One of the better-known examples is that of the *Bacillus thuringiensis* (also known as Bt) toxin, which appears in soil bacteria and acts as a pesticide for certain kinds of pests that feed on corn. Now, Bt produces it naturally and is supposed to be relatively safe for humans. In these bacteria, the toxin exists in what is known as a ‘protoxin’ form, which becomes dangerous to insects only

after it has been ‘activated’ in the insect’s digestive system. On the other hand, genetically engineered Bt crops produce the toxin in its already activated form. As researchers have pointed out, in the past human beings have had no opportunity or reason to take in Bt toxin in large quantities, in any form. Once it becomes genetically incorporated into our common foods, we are exposed each time we eat those foods. Researchers also point out that unlike externally sprayed pesticides, a pesticide engineered into every cell of a food source cannot simply be washed off before a meal.

The same biotech corporate interests, once again backed by the US, are also pushing for genetic engineering and biotechnology as the solution to the worldwide problem of hunger. In the first place, it should be apparent to anybody with even the faintest idea of how our world functions, the problem is not that there is not enough being produced, but of inequalities and problems of access. So, it is quite common to have food rotting in godowns or being used to run cars, while people starve. In other words, hunger is a political problem that calls for changes at that level; it cannot be addressed through technofixes. Biotechnology, therefore, is not about what is claimed on its behalf; rather, it is about private corporations taking control of life itself.

If events and developments of the last twenty years show one thing with great clarity, it is that

ecological conflict is the new arena of class struggles in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the class war is already on—in the form of corporate capitalism’s war against the poor; in the form of rich industrial countries’ unwillingness to concede ‘environmental space’ to the poorer countries of the global South; in the form of their insistence that they will continue to shift the burden of reducing carbon dioxide emissions on the poorer countries.

It is clear that so far the northern governments, rather than give a commitment to reduce carbon dioxide emissions in their respective countries, are bent upon pressurizing countries like India and China to reduce theirs. How blatantly inequitable this is will be evident from the fact that it is primarily a result of the industrial and the skewed post-industrial-revolution notions of progress and development that things have come to such a pass. In effect, countries that have not contributed in the least to the current ecological crisis are being asked to control their emissions. Even the World Bank, not particularly known for its sympathy for the world’s poor, in its latest *World Development Report 2009*, has found it difficult to back the position of the rich countries. It has argued that the mere replacement of the 40 million oil-guzzling sports utility vehicles (SUVs) plying in the US by more fuel-efficient vehicles, like in Europe, could make possible the provision of electricity to over 1.6 million people

across the world, without increasing greenhouse gases in any significant way.

This struggle at the global level has brought a few critical concepts to the fore in recent times. The idea of *ecological footprint* is based on the calculation that the world is now consuming 25 per cent more natural resources than the planet’s capacity to regenerate them, which is often referred to as its *biocapacity* or *environmental space*. This means that a strategy that merely focuses on abstract growth rates can only realize itself by continuously depleting the planet’s resources. The notion of an ‘environmental space’ for such development refers to the *carrying capacity* and *sink capacity* of the global ecological systems to take the effects of human activity on them. The idea of *carbon space*, on the other hand, refers to the amount of carbon or carbon dioxide that can be released into the atmosphere without this leading to dangerous levels of warming. Clearly, these are spaces of intense conflict and they are likely to become more sharply contested if the attitude of the northern industrial countries remains as indicated above.

A glimpse of the unfolding scenario can be had from the following extract from a submission made by Bolivian President Evo Morales before the United Nations’ Ad-Hoc Working Group on Climate Change in early 2009:

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A glimpse of the unfolding scenario can be had from the following extract from a submission made by Bolivian President Evo Morales before the United Nations’ Ad-Hoc Working Group on Climate Change in early 2009:

Responsibility for the majority of the historical emissions contributing to current atmospheric concentrations and to current and committed future warming lies with developed countries. Developed countries with less than 20 per cent of the world's population are responsible for around three-quarters of historical emissions. Their current per person emissions continue to exceed those of developing countries by a factor of four. Their accumulated historic emissions on a per person basis exceed those of developing countries by a factor of eleven.

Developed countries—which have contributed disproportionately to the causes of climate change—now seek to appropriate a disproportionate share of the Earth's remaining environmental space. By basing their future emission allowances on their past excessive level of emissions, they seek an entitlement to continue emitting at 70 per cent or more of their 1990 levels through until 2020 (i.e., consistent with reductions of 30 per cent or less). At the same time, they propose limiting developing countries—which most need environmental space in the course of their development—to much lower levels of per person emissions.

The excessive past, current and proposed future emissions of developed countries are depriving and will further deprive developing countries of an equitable share of the much diminished environmental space they require for their

development and to which they have a right. By overconsuming the Earth's limited capacity to absorb greenhouse gases, developed countries have run up an 'emissions debt' which must be repaid to developing countries by compensating them for lost environmental space, stabilizing temperature and by freeing up space for the growth required by developing countries in the future.

This coming war is, therefore, likely to be more painful and violent if the 20 per cent of the world's population that consumes 80 per cent of the world's resources is unwilling to make changes in its lifestyle—if the 'American way of life' continues to be non-negotiable. The likely scenario, in the event of the continued stubbornness of the northern governments, is that things might spin out of control of the elite and governments of the South, and may delegitimize all attempts by them to reach a negotiated settlement of issues in global forums. Let us not forget that much of what we see in the form of the rise of radical Islam and 'terrorism' directed against the US in particular and the West in general has a lot to do with the history of wars around oil in the last century. This is no 'clash of civilizations', even if it is articulated in religious terms.

The northern industrial countries need to rapidly change their approach, but this does not mean that in the name of fighting inequities of the world power

structure, we in the South must continue to stake our claim and 'right to development' in the manner of a modern-day Kalidasa.

### **Another World is Possible**

Invoking the metaphor of the 'Copernican revolution' in physics, Lester Brown calls for one in the human sciences. The revolution that Copernicus inaugurated in science, we know, upturned in entirety the beliefs of Ptolemaic astronomy that the earth was the centre of the universe and that it was the sun that revolved around the earth. It established its exact opposite—that it was the earth that revolved around the sun. We can easily imagine the immense magnitude and impact of this understanding: everything had to be thought afresh. Nothing could remain as it was before the Copernican revolution. Brown suggests that something of this order is on the agenda in our understanding of the social world today. If, until now, we have been used to thinking of the ecology as a subset of the economy—that is to say, simply as a source of 'natural resources' to be mined for human consumption—then the reverse recognition is in order today: that it is, in fact, the economy that is the subset of ecology and must adjust itself to this fact.

Indeed, we might say that such a Copernican revolution is already under way. The discipline

of economics faces one of its most serious crises today as it attempts to grapple with questions it once considered 'externalities'. Questions that never entered calculations of the enterprise or macroeconomic calculations, for that matter, are now central for society at large. The myriad ways in which an enterprise or firm causes more and more losses for society as a whole—through different kinds of pollution, creation of new diseases and so on—are never really factored into the models that determine prices and profit. But pollution, as we have seen, is only one level at which the economic/productive activities of the firm negatively impacts society. There are other levels, especially in terms of the rapid depletion of 'natural resources', which need to be considered. So when economics claims that the market gives us the 'true picture' of the economy, it is still working within the old paradigm where the whole series of costs that a firm (or the 'economy') imposes on the society is not integrated into the cost of production. It is only just that local communities whose resources are being cannibalized, whose air and water are polluted and whose life is exposed to more and more dangers (including through genetically modified food) should be charged back to the corporations; that they should be liable for all that they do to society. Once the costs that a corporation or enterprise imposes on society are charged back to the firm,

we might be able to get a better picture of the actual costs of production. Corporations and firms generally function by passing on increased costs to the consumer by enhancing prices, so that their profit remains intact. However, with ever-increasing production expenditures due to the inclusion of more and more hitherto unpaid costs to society at large, it is likely that they will increasingly run up against an accumulation barrier. For there has to be a point beyond which prices become unaffordable for sections of the market, large enough to impact the logic of accumulation. What all this means for a capitalist economy remains to be seen, but one thing is certain: the discipline of economics is set to go through a major reconfiguration in the coming decades.

One of the indications of such an impending change in the discipline is that more and more economists have begun to recognize the need for something like the imposition of a carbon tax. Thus, Brown reports that some 2500 economists—including eight Nobel laureates—have endorsed the proposal for a carbon tax. This is just the beginning but certainly a sign that the Copernican revolution is already, in a manner of speaking, under way—though there will of course always be some Kalidasas who insist to the contrary.

It is true that there are still powerful vested interests who resist this idea because behind it lie

trillions of dollars worth of investments—in specific kinds of industries and in particular built forms of cities that necessitate a particularly unsustainable energy and resource use. Making the shift to a new paradigm calls for the dismantling of not merely some of our most dearly held beliefs, but equally importantly, of investments made in structuring the economy and of cities in particular ways. In many cases the built form of cities will need to be dismantled.

In fact, we in India and other countries of the global South have a great historical advantage in that we can actually make the shift to a more ecologically sustainable and sensitive, carbon-poor ‘development’ strategy without any major damage. Imagine, if American cities like Los Angeles have to actually shift to more sustainable lifestyles that are centred on pedestrians and cycles, the entire city will have to be rebuilt. We in India, on the other hand, are fortunate that, having arrived late on the scene, we have not destroyed all older forms and can still build afresh. For, despite close to two decades of frenetic restructuring of Indian cities, most of our cities and smaller towns—and to some extent, even metropolises—have not been irrevocably transformed in terms of the built form. The idea of rebuilding cities is no longer a mad concept advocated by ‘eco-loonies’, but the outcome of a new realization that faces us today. The point

really is that today economic growth cannot be our only reference point; the question of its ecological footprint must constantly frame it.

The time has come, therefore, to call the bluff of the neoliberals—professional economists, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank votaries, and their followers—and so-called ‘market fundamentalists’. As would have been evident by now, the ‘market’ is merely the shield from behind which neoliberal orthodoxy fires its salvoes against public institutions and pressurizes governments all over the world to hand them over to private corporate players. None of its own methods, however, depends on the logic of market transactions. Whether it is the question of land acquisition, disciplining of workforces to work for capital, making people consumers (as we saw in the case of the automobile industry in the US), or indeed the wars and coups that have been executed for the sake of grabbing oil—nowhere is the story of ‘Development’ simply one of a free play of the ‘invisible hand’ of the market. In fact, if the recent history of so-called ‘economic reforms’ in India is any guide, we can see how much the anxieties of the government and the corporate world are fixated on regulation of the economic activities of the poor. ‘Free market’ at the top is inevitably accompanied by vigorous efforts to regulate cycle-rickshaws, hawkers and various kinds of small enterprises,

and this has actually become a point of contention between the government and many activists who take the market logic seriously. All the anxieties that governments and corporations have displayed over the past few years on the issue of ‘piracy’ too reflects, quite often, the same attempt to control and regulate smaller entrepreneurs. If there ever was an ‘invisible hand’, then Adam Smith got it wrong, it was not the hand of the market but of Capital—and as we can see from the foregoing, there is a world of a difference between the two.

The perverse logic of neoliberalism is exposed when we consider the familiar argument that governments must privatize state or public enterprises because they are by definition inefficient. While it is true that many such enterprises do not run as efficiently as some corporate ones, the neoliberal economist will tell you (as a strictly ‘disinterested professional’) not to get rid of the loss-making concerns but *the profit-making ones*. In India there has been a chorus of voices from world-renowned economists and IMF-World Bank officials and their acolytes in the media: all insisting the government sell the most profitable ‘navaratna’ public enterprises. And why? Their answer is devastatingly simple: because the private sector is only interested in those; why should they buy loss-making enterprises? That they make such an argument is not surprising but it is certainly

interesting that governments and policymakers buy into this argument without pausing to ask the reverse question: but why should a government sell profit-making enterprises? The logic at work here is purely ideological because it is based on an a priori belief that private enterprise is always, under all circumstances, the best option. 'Efficiency' is always the reason cited for this (let us call this the 'efficiency argument'). The interesting thing is that when governments want to make a case for 'industrialization', the case is almost inevitably based not on the efficiency argument, but on its ability to provide employment (let us call this the 'employment argument'). Yet, once an industry comes into being, the efficiency argument invariably trumps the employment argument. That is why no government official or policymaker schooled in economics will ever ask that equally devastatingly simple question: Why sell profit-making and employment-providing concerns? And the same holds true of the cheerleaders of capital in the media, who argue vehemently in favour of industrialization, using the employment argument.

The other bluff that has become virtually unchallenged common sense in the last two decades is the idea that we are now globally integrated and therefore, in order to survive, must open ourselves out completely to the demands of the global economy and international trade. The

whole series of policy changes that were initiated in India from the beginning of the 1990s, together described as 'economic reforms', are actually policy prescriptions that can be summed up in one phrase: free play to private capital. And the argument goes like this: it is 'we' who need private capital and investments, for these alone will create more employment and usher in development; we must, therefore, do everything to make private capital happy. We have just seen how disingenuous this argument actually is. Secondly, even the limited truth that the 'employment argument' might have exists only as long as we wish to pursue the 'standard' set before us by the northern industrial countries. Once we have overturned that paradigm, things begin to look very different. Once we realize that there is no privileged way of being in the world, there are different ways of life that privilege different elements as their ideals, and all of them are equally valid, we have already accomplished half the task of dismantling the hegemony of the western model posing as universal.

It is pertinent at this point to recall that Gandhi saw this a century ago, when he penned his tract *Hind Swaraj*. For, it was there that he not only made a scathing attack against what he called modern civilization, but also asserted the right of other forms of life to live in their own preferred ways. It was there, in that scandalous text, that



Gandhi enunciated an aesthetic of slowness as against the paeans to speed that characterized the new aesthetic of modernity. It was in that text that Gandhi underlined the fact that the introduction of factory production was leading to the enslavement of workers; it was there that he proclaimed his preference for the autonomy of the artisan over the slavery of the proletarian. And if his claims seemed utterly outlandish and impractical in his day, they certainly appear as an imperative today. And they definitely seem far more possible today than when they were written.

Thus, we can say, following the slogan raised at the World Social Forum in the early years of this century, another world *is* possible. It is worth mentioning at this stage, despite our invocation of Gandhi, that we are not arguing for enthroning the ascetic ideal. The other world that many movements participating in the World Social Forum visualize is not a world based on negation of desire and pleasure. The other world that they seek will simply have to be a world where key decisions about our lives are not taken by private corporations behind our back, but by us ourselves or by those whom we may depute to take those decisions. Such a world does not imply that people must stop consuming and making their lives more comfortable, even luxurious; nor does it mean that people should stop the pursuit of aesthetic pleasures—eating good food and going to the

cinema or the theatre. It does not imply that people in that other world should stop using computers or flying to distant places. Gandhi's scandalously pious asceticism certainly had no place for all these but these are not the ideals of the twenty-first century radical imagination. What it does mean is that we must cease to be consumers in the sense that we have discussed earlier. It does mean that the present-day consumer must yield way to what we might call the *rasik* who partakes of *rasa*, but whose pleasure in 'consuming' is always mediated by aesthetic deliberation.

It is necessary to state this because consumption is often celebrated in quite unthought ways as a domain of the battle of equality. Thus, it is not uncommon to see historically disadvantaged, subaltern communities celebrating consumption and making claims precisely in the languages of corporate capitalism. While it is important not to dismiss such notions of 'celebrating freedom' through consumption, it is equally important to underline that freedom and pleasure are not to be always found in mimicking dominant notions of what constitutes desire. A case in point is what we called the 'democracy argument' in relation to the Nano. The argument made by the Tatas and by many Leftist supporters of the project was that it would make the automobile available to millions of people who could not afford it so far—and it

would therefore be unfair to target the small car. At one level, the logic is impeccable: everybody should have a car. But as we saw in our discussion of the motorization of American cities, cars were not the automatic preference of even the most affluent urban buyers when comfortable public transport existed. Cars *were made indispensable* through the *motivated* restructuring of the cities and mass-transit systems. To say that buying cars is a natural proclivity of human beings and must therefore be satisfied is to overlook the complex ways in which 'desire' itself is produced through a whole range of networks, relationships and techniques of power.

On the other hand, we must also be clear here that this 'other world' cannot simply be a throwback to the grey and humourless world of Soviet-style state socialism.

It needs to be understood that Soviet-style state socialism produced no alternative to the basic premise of capitalism or of 'political economy' against which Marx was so exercised. State socialism simply claimed to better capitalism on its own ground—of growth in all the terms set by capitalism and its academic apologists. That is why, everywhere, communists who swear by that model can only claim to build capitalism better—from China and Vietnam to West Bengal in India. Twentieth-century state socialism and capitalism shared the same techno-developmental fetishism

that believed in the secular virtues of technology and 'Development'.

The question is often thrown at the critics of such development: So what is your alternative? It should be underlined that we need to think, not of *an alternative* but of *alternatives* to a whole series of distinct and discrete problems that come together in this thing called 'Development' or 'Progress'. Let us hazard the outlines of possible alternatives.

Take the land question first. It must have become clear from our discussion of land acquisitions and the responses that have emerged in the last few years that at least three alternative models are already emerging.

First, the alternative approach proposed by V.P. Singh—that it is not the business of the state to acquire land for corporations. This should simply be left to the much-beloved market forces, and corporations should have to buy land from the peasants at prevailing rates. If peasants in some places do not want to part with their land at any cost—as was the case when Reliance Industries tried to buy land for an SEZ in Maharashtra—that too makes perfect sense under the logic of the market, though not within a capitalist logic. Let us pause for a moment and state once again that the market per se is indifferent to property forms and has co-existed with them since antiquity, and we need to distinguish it from the logic of capital that respects

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only one form of property—bourgeois property—as sacrosanct. Within a market logic it should be entirely acceptable that if peasants do not want to sell their land, the capitalists should look for it where people are willing to sell it.

Second is a suggestion that was put forward by some economists in Kolkata but was not taken up seriously. This was a proposal to give farmers a stake in the industry coming up on their land, so that they are not transformed overnight from property owners into wage slaves, but get lifelong returns from the investment on their land. We could rephrase this suggestion in a more radical fashion. What if 'land' itself were to be considered a form of capital for our purposes? What if it is considered as the investment made by a partner in a joint-stock company? This could be a way of providing an incentive to peasants who are otherwise unwilling to sell their land.

The third model emerges from the possibilities opened up by the example of the farmers of Avasari Khurd who constituted themselves into a company that will undertake to build an SEZ on their land. Under this model, farmers basically argue that if the government will only give certain privileges and major tax and other concessions to corporations, then the farmers too can constitute themselves into a corporation.

It is clear that none of these three possible routes are part of the 'standard experience', but are being

articulated as alternative ways of dealing with the land question in India. It will also be evident on a little reflection that an 'industrialization' strategy based on any of these routes (or all of these together) can lead to the emergence of a capitalism and a regime of property that may be very different from the one we associate with the dominant experience of the West. Even in the West, of course, the experience of capitalism has differed. For instance, in Scandinavian countries there exists a strong regime of public access that allows, through law, the free movement of the public even on private property. This is based on a general understanding that nature cannot be privatized. This is in sharp contrast to the absolute privatization that we see in England and which we have derived from our colonial association with it, where 'trespass' on private property is a criminal offence. More recently, less than ten years ago, even Britain had to change its law after a sustained movement over the years—the Ramblers—made it a point to assert the right of way through huge tracts of land that were once common property but were transformed into private property.

At this point, we must also take a brief look at 'private property' and 'private entrepreneurship'. It must be clear that our argument against corporate capital here is not a generalized argument against either 'private property' or the market. As a matter

of fact, we have been arguing here for making a distinction between *capital and its logic of accumulation* on the one hand and *the market and other forms of property* on the other. These other forms of property include common, private and cooperative—that may or may not have a clear-cut juridical expression. As mentioned above, there have been concerted attempts by the Government of India in recent years, reinforced by the judiciary, to control and regulate the economic activities of the poor. One of the reasons is to bring this huge sector into the fold of the formal economy so that the entire economy becomes legible to the state. This ‘legibility’ is crucial for the modern state because huge sectors of the economy, often referred to as the ‘informal sector’, remain outside its control, simply because the state has no way of accounting for all the transactions that go on in these domains. And this often has to do with the fact that the languages of transactions in these domains defy the language of the state and law. For, to be able to bring it within its control, it must be able to ‘read’ what goes on there, which basically means that it must translate those transactions and property forms into the language of law—the language of bourgeois private property.

This also has to do with the demands of resource mobilization through taxation by governments unwilling to ruffle corporate feathers—the volume of tax evasion by the corporate sector in India being

recently estimated to be to the tune of Rs 1.4 lakh crore (thrice the amount allocated for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme by the Government of India). Such attempts to regulate also have something to do with the ideological beliefs of economists and the professional discipline of economics, as it considers most such activities to be backward and residual pre-modern forms that must be brought within the fold of the formal economy. What this ideological belief aids—wittingly or unwittingly—is the colonization of the entire economy by corporate capital. Interestingly, however, partly as a consequence of the ongoing crisis of capitalism, even officials associated with the international financial institutions entrusted with the task of instituting the bourgeois property form everywhere have begun showing signs of reappraising the significance of some of these forms. Thus, an article in the *Wall Street Journal* reported from Ahmedabad and Bangkok, at the height of the recession in March 2009, on what it termed the ‘rise of the underground’. From its findings in the two cities that ordinary poor people were hardly affected by the recession, the report extrapolated on the how this ‘underground’ informal economy that provided livelihoods to the poor actually escaped the impact of the recession under which the capitalist world was reeling. It is best to let the report speak for itself:

Economists have long thought the underground economy—the vast, unregulated market encompassing everything from street vendors to unlicensed cab drivers—was bad news for the world economy. Now it's taking on a new role as one of the last safe havens in a darkening financial climate, forcing analysts to rethink their views.

At the Manek Chowk market, in this Indian city's congested centre, vendors peddle everything from beans to brass pots from a row of derelict stalls as monkeys scramble overhead. One man sharpens nails using a spinning blade attached to a moving bicycle wheel.

Their wages are pitiful by Western standards. But there are no layoffs at the Manek market. All anyone has to do to work there is show up and start hawking—something more and more people are doing these days.

Economists have stressed the negative aspects of informal trade for decades. Informal businesses often don't pay taxes, and they routinely lack the capital and expertise to be as productive as big enterprises, leading to less innovation and lower standards of living. Since informal workers lack health benefits and other safeguards, they have to save more for emergencies, resulting in less casual spending that further drags down growth. The frightening scale of the current recession is forcing some analysts to reconsider. As many as 52 million people could lose their jobs from the economic crisis worldwide, says the International

Labour Organization, an agency of the United Nations. Without the informal sector, many of them will have nowhere to go.

Informal jobs 'will absorb a lot of people and offer them a source of income' over the next year, says W.F. Maloney, an economist at the World Bank in Washington. Indeed, the jobs are 'one reason that the situation in desperately poor countries isn't as bad as you'd think,' says Simon Johnson, a former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund.

It is true that the majority of people depending on this sector for their livelihood barely manage to survive, even by Indian standards, and the lesson to be taken from here is not that we should simply celebrate the informal sector, but that there are virtues in not being fully incorporated into the globally integrated capitalist market and that a certain insulation from it is both possible and desirable. Two things that really prevent people in the underground economy from perishing are worth keeping in mind:

- (i) These enterprises function by catering to local market demands. The 'local' may vary according to contexts, from those in the city of Ahmedabad itself to even some relatively far-off places with which connections have developed over a longer period in a somewhat

organic manner. These economies do not produce for unseen abstract market located in some global city. These are economies embedded in a network of social relations and know how these work.

- (ii) Consumers and producers in these sectors alike do not as a rule live beyond their means. This is not to say that credit is not important in the lives of these economies; it is to underline that credit here does not determine what people consume.

The lesson to be taken from here is that a majority of people in the world survive even today ‘outside’ the dreamworld of capital. In fact, it is possible to imagine a quasi-autonomous enterprise (or a network of enterprises) that could find its own ways of raising resources, upgrading its skills and techniques and accessing lower ends of the market—from which this majority of people are always excluded—in ways that are more profitable.

As against this, it is instructive to read another report—this time on the state of malls. The *Times of India* (*Delhi Times*) recently reported on the shopping malls that have become the insignia of the new magic land of consumption under the title ‘*Maal shaal nahi chalega*’ (Malls and all won’t do). The mall bubble had burst, said the report. ‘Dropping sales, steep showroom leases and maintenance

rates, not to mention the economic meltdown, are all leading to commercial or rather mall stress!’ it said. Reports of shopping malls not doing well in different parts of the National Capital Region, especially the elite Gurgaon region, had been coming in over the past year before the ‘downturn’. They are affordable neither for the showroom and shop owners nor for the consumers. On top of it, in places like Gurgaon, the conflict between the malls and the residents—their prospective consumers—is also gradually coming to the fore as all available water and electricity are sucked up by the malls, leaving the residential areas in perpetual crisis. In a word, the consumption dream is turning out to be unsustainable in more than just the ecological sense.

Neither a reinvention of the informal-local economy nor alternative strategies of dealing with the land question, however, provide any automatic solution to the question of ecological sustainability. Some recent attempts at working out alternatives to capitalization of agriculture and SEZs are, however, worthy of consideration. A case in point is the attempt involving adivasi communities in the southern and south-eastern parts of Gujarat that centres on the idea of a Green Economic Zone (GEZ). Initiated by Ganesh Devy and his legendary Adivasi Academy in Tejgarh, the plan is to form an economic zone that will avail of the legal provisions

marked out for SEZs, in order to start a venture that is otherwise completely different. It started almost a decade ago when adivasis in 1200 villages in this belt of Gujarat started creating a network of micro-credit institutions. They also set up their own foodgrain banks, water-harvesting cooperatives, organic agriculture practices, and run informal centres of learning. The beginnings of the movement were laid in 2000 when a group of young adivasis met at Tejgarh and resolved to make their villages free of hunger, indebtedness and exploitation. The GEZs are to be based entirely on investments from locally raised resources. The idea behind the GEZ is to pool resources and energies in order to increase agricultural production to the fullest, based entirely on the use of organic fertilizers and to promote local industries and form links between them, as well as with new markets. The emphasis is on drawing out values of adivasi life, not in order to celebrate poverty and exploitation, but to change life. The idea is to enhance literacy and learning, to increase productivity, to preserve biodiversity and to lay the basis of transforming life in more fundamental ways in the future.

In order to deal with the problem of ecological sustainability at a larger level, however, we need to look at specific industries and specific technological choices available. More importantly, we need to look at where our potential strengths might lie and

to make investments in research and development in those fields.

Scholars and researchers working on possible alternatives have already indicated the broad directions in which our economies and lifestyles need to be reorganized in order that they become more ecologically sensitive. It is clear that an automobile-centred, fossil-fuel-based economy has to give way to one that is based on solar and wind energy and a radically different design of cities that is based on an efficient city-rail network and that is more conducive to cycling and walking. Then there is the issue of the huge amounts of waste generated by the modern bourgeois economy that thrives on a 'use-and-throw' approach. (Imagine what would happen to profits if you were to buy a commodity that would last for a lifetime.) This is clearly no longer a workable proposition and the alternative forms need to seriously base themselves on recycling waste—apart from moving away from the use-and-throw approach.

The shift from thermal and hydroelectricity to solar- and wind-energy-based systems is also conducive to a different kind of economy that is more decentralized and small scale. While the older forms of electricity generation require highly centralized systems, we already have in evidence the rudiments of a solar-power-based system (quite advanced in some parts of the world) where solar



power can be simply be tapped with panels placed on the roofs of individual buildings. In Delhi itself a beginning has been made with distribution companies selling solar-power technology and consumers with rooftop panels having the option of saving and selling their excess energy back to the companies. Similarly, wind-power production has been expanding at a very rapid rate over the past few years and even in India many states have started tapping its potential.

The point, however, is that such changes cannot simply take place without the government actively intervening. And this intervention has to be necessarily located at multiple levels. These range from actively planning the restructuring of cities and their energy-consumption patterns to encouraging individual consumers and private entrepreneurs to move towards more ecologically friendly and sustainable patterns of consumption. A high tax on those with high levels of carbon-rich consumption accompanied by a reduced general tax on middle-class salaried incomes can have a far-reaching impact, not only on consumption patterns—and, therefore, investments and production in the longer run—but also in redistributive terms.

In many Western cities, the informed consumer has already begun to refigure her consumption in terms of the carbon footprint that each individual leaves behind, moving more rapidly towards organically

and locally produced foodstuff. Such awareness is only beginning to take shape in poorer countries and one reason for this is that there is a serious lack of information beyond a minuscule section of people. Largely, this has to do with the fact that the media, which could have played the role of dissemination of information, generally chooses to play along with the corporate Development game. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that individuals and movements take this up as a major concern. The ultimate irony here, of course, is that large numbers of people in the poorer countries still consume—even though this is rapidly becoming history—precisely the kind of ‘organic’ and coarse, unprocessed food that is now becoming hugely popular among the more ecologically aware consumers in the West/North. Under pressure from the corporations, however, these forms of consumption are often portrayed as ‘backward’ and representative of ‘unrefined taste’, best replaced by nicely packaged oils, yoghurt and breads, for example.

More importantly, a shift from the existing paradigm to the new requires time and application. It is important for that reason alone for the Indian (and other Southern) economies to delink from the pace and demands of the global economy. Then alone can a planned move to the new economy become possible. Thus, for instance, if state governments have to compete with one another to bend over

backwards and show that they are attracting the maximum investment, then clearly there is no way of getting out of the bind of 'Development' and that too in its worst, neoliberal form. Then the only option that remains before the state governments is to roll out the red carpet to investors—irrespective of what they are investing in, what technological choices they will make, what energy they are going to use and so on. Characteristically, this approach leads to a situation where governments are left with no other role than playing the appendage of capital.

Another world is possible, then—not through the enunciation of one Big Alternative, but through a range of molecular practices that work towards a radical transformation of our aesthetic that institutes very different notions of taste and pleasure. Governments and policies need to change as much as our own practices of consumption—and as the Nandigram effect illustrates, the moment of political struggle is as important as the moment of molecular changes in effecting a larger paradigmatic shift.

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