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FROM THE MOB TO THE COMMUNITY: THE ALTERNATIVE TO DEVELOPMENTALITY

By Debal Deb on Jul. 22, 2021 in [Perspectives](#)

Written specially for Vikalp Sangam

Everyone understands from one's own experience that the current model of economic development has some cracks and faults, that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer, the natural world is being destroyed, the air that we breathe is becoming toxic, the food that we eat contains poisonous chemicals, and access to materials to satisfy the basic needs of life are getting more and more expensive. Most recall the relatively cleaner environment and healthier food of the past, and accept that industrial development and the modern lifestyle have caused everything to deteriorate for good. Some do perceive that the benefits of development are inequitable. Nevertheless, everyone seems to consider all the discomfort and hazards of modern life as the necessary price to pay for GDP growth, which everyone accepts as the Greater Common Good. All the Biblical virtues – Hope, Faith and Love – are sacrificed at the altar of Development.

Yet it's no secret that all over the world as well as in our country, all the life support systems of nature have been devastated, all natural resources are being exhaustively plundered, and wealth accumulates in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals. According to Bloomberg Billionaire Index, Mukesh Ambani's net worth stood at \$83.2 billion (or Rs 6.07 lakh crore) on June 1, 2021. Adani's net worth is estimated at \$76.7 billion. These billionaires, comprising 1% of the Indian population, hold 53% of the country's resources, while the country, amid all the brouhaha of development and prosperity, ranks 97th among 117 countries in Global Hunger Index. Regardless of a positive or negative rate of GDP growth, over 14% of the country's children are stunted, although the food grain stock in government warehouses is enough to feed every citizen for about two years.

These prominent facts are not usually featured on TV channels and in newspapers of the

World's Largest Democracy; but when they are, people don't care. The poor and the middle class and the not-so-rich have formed the habit of not minding the business of the mega-rich getting giga-rich, and of not asking the reason why they cannot become wealthier likewise. The few who know all these facts, are scarcely capable of connecting the dots. People seldom perceive this social order to be unfair, or the extreme skewness of wealth distribution to be unjust. Therefore, everyone continues to believe in several interconnected myths: (a) GDP growth is necessary at the cost of the natural world; (b) more wealth is more happiness; (c) the poor are dumb and the super-rich are super intelligent; (d) industrial growth will create more wage employment and make everyone rich; and so on. All are trapped, collectively, in the worldview of Dr. Pangloss, the optimist professor in Voltaire's *Candide*, who firmly believed, 'What exists is what must be the best of all possible worlds'.

Twelve years ago, I wrote an analysis of why any serious discourse on an alternative model of economy has not built up in this part of the world:

“An argument for promoting alternatives to development is likely to be interpreted as a Luddite argument at best and as one against the general social well-being at worst. Because the dominant class ideology often translates into a collective ‘common sense,’ it inhibits appreciation of the merit of any views or arguments that seem to counter the norm...

The principal reason that people are not prepared to lend ears to alternative voices is that the standard view of development has become so commonsensical that the possibility of any other view simply cannot be envisaged. The standard view

fosters the consumer's Red Queen race for what Tim Bender (1986:307) has described as 'moreness' at the expense of 'enoughness,' for being materially better off in comparison to others. With this ideology of development deeply entrenched in the public mind, any hint of an epistemic change with regard to economic aspirations appears fearsome. ...

Developmentality propels the perpetual process of fulfilling consumerist desires in which "certain habits of consumption are intertwined with the pursuit of profit" (White 2002: 86). Alternative models of development that do not facilitate this pursuit do not deserve serious attention. Alternative economic thinking that suggests limiting growth is tantamount to stepping out of the global race for acquiring more, and therefore is unacceptable to the consumer – the individual farmers, corporate employees, state bureaucrats, shopkeepers as well as academic professionals. Consumerism as a 'materially embedded ideological reality' (White 2002: 89) is threatened by the prospect of a sustainable society, because the idea of such an alternative society is

built on the principle of social accountability and equitable distribution of benefits across generations. Accepting sustainability norms would thwart the consumer's desire to own a refrigerator, an air-conditioned home or a motor car at the expense of the environment and public health."

DEB 2009: 490-491

Thus, that prospect of a sustainable, more just society is unacceptable to the common consumer –from the taxi driver to the bank clerk to the Finance Minister. The general electorate – “the Mob” – is incapable of thinking of any alternative system, primarily because it is indoctrinated by the education system into conformity to what David Harvey (1996) calls the ‘standard view’ of development.

“This education system, characterized by an emphasis on technological development and a bias towards a Western mode of lifestyle, engenders and fosters the mainstream perspective of development. Apart from the practice of rote learning, which stifles the natural faculty of curiosity of children, the very repertoire of knowledge that is presented to students is grossly descriptive and discourages analytical thought. In the school curriculum of history, the

general description is one of a linear progressive development from barbarian stage of humanity to the most advanced civilization epitomized by the West; the cultures of the numerous hunter-gatherer-shifting cultivators do not find even a cursory mention in the stories of heroes of civilization and battles between kingdoms. The description of the national history is typically replete with a unilinear succession of a classical period of ancient wisdom, a medieval era of decline of knowledge, and then a modern period marked by advancements in technology ushered in by Europe, subsequently inherited by the nation after independence. The consequences of the series of changes in land use modes in diverse cultures and ecosystems are not mentioned. The syllabus of language and literature is suffused with texts, mostly authored by Victorian poets and novelists, dealing with the urban middle-class view of life, with either a romantic or pejorative view of wilderness, countryside and the non-West. Social science syllabi are typically bereft of descriptions of indigenous cultures, and contain a plethora of the Western

exegesis of non-Western cultures, based primarily on classical and neo-classical economic axioms. The natural science curriculum deals almost entirely with technical details of science, while the method of science remains untaught: thus, for instance, specific laws of physics carry marks rather than logical inference of the laws. Rote learning and mugging of facts assume more importance in exams than training in critical thinking. This seems to plausibly explain why pseudo-science and scientific hyperboles are ballooned in the media, while their critiques seldom get media attention.”

DEB (2009), PP. 484

The country needs a widespread environmental literacy to emancipate from this developmentalism. The utter lack of environmental literacy of “the Mob” is reflected in the general apathy toward the environmental issues among the politicians and bureaucrats. No political party in the subcontinent ever seems to be aware that poisoning of air, water and soil and decimation of biodiversity mean destabilization of the life support system and increasing distress to the poor. While ministries of industry, finance and economic planning remain profoundly ignorant of the life support functions of environmental components, industrial activities continue to change the global climate, endanger food security, and take a severe toll on public health.

Environmental literacy involves, in addition to understanding the ecological impacts of economic growth, a direct understanding of the impacts of development on peoples’ lifestyles and local traditions. However, the environmental literacy and entrenched commitment of individuals and institutions are not enough to protect the environment. It requires a vibrant Community to protect the commons from individual appropriation. A community that has

evolved its 'land ethic,' that is, connects its roots of culture and livelihoods to the land, is likely to eschew urban and industrial development that generates more solid waste, more sewer problems negatively affecting water quality... more cars, more expressways, greater air pollution. In all civic allegiances opposing development pressures, citizens perceive development as

“a direct threat to their established ‘culture’ and quality of life – greater traffic congestion, transient populations of distant property owners importing the frenetic pace of urban/suburban lifestyles and associated amenities (e.g. strip malls, fast food restaurants, multiplex theaters), higher levels of transients associated with a tourism and recreation-based economy, more crime, and changing values translated into changing politics placing greater restrictions on the uses of, and access to, land. They want to preserve traditional lifestyles and livelihoods directly connected to the land.”

WEBER 2003: 58–59

In several parts of Europe, North America and South America, this environmental literacy has now created an upheaval of citizens' actions against the 'standard view' of development. New communities have emerged, comprising highly conscious and motivated citizens; they have created La Via Campesina in several countries of South America, several Transition Towns in Europe, and several pockets of 'direct democracy' in the hands of the people, such as the Willapa Alliance in Washington State, the Twin Rivers urban community in New Jersey, and

community trusts in Scotland. In all these instances, the people form a user Community, and frame the rules and norms of using their own resources. In all these instances, 'the Mob' that conforms to the authoritarian rules, has disappeared. Ashish Kothari gives a delectable account of the **rise of different Communities in different parts of the globe**, in the recent issue of Scientific American.

Developmentality operates by disintegrating the community. Once the community disappears, the communitarian bond among the people and the communitarian ethos of sharing (material and intellectual) resources disappear. As a result, all the commons – forests, wetlands, grasslands, crop seeds, and the knowledge systems – are replaced with industrial, commercial monocultures of exotic species and exotic knowledge systems that facilitate accumulation in fewer and fewer hands. Communities were the most important element in the polity of all indigenous societies until they were swept into the domain of industrial civilization. In all native societies – from the Cholanaiken of Kerala to the Ogoni of Nigeria to the Menominee of Wisconsin – the community shaped and governed the resource use norms, and obviated the free-rider behaviour of individuals. Wherever the community – the COLLECTIVE SELF – is strong – in the Amish society, in the Menominee Nation, on the islands of Jarwa and Sentineli, the Kibbutzim of Israel – private profit motive is subjugated by the interest of the whole community; and in each of these communities, consumerism as well as technophilia remains absent.

The old communities were disrupted two centuries back in England, and then in other parts of Europe, when the woodlands and pastures were brought under either state or private ownership. The history of this destruction is given most lucidly, in Marx's *Capital*. He described how the enclosure of the commons had become a state policy in Europe, as a result of which peasants were "first forcibly expropriated from the soil, driven from their homes, turned into vagabonds, and then whipped, branded, tortured by laws grotesquely terrible, into the discipline necessary for the wage system" (Marx 1887: 688). Derek Wall's *The Commons in History* (2014) is a wonderful depiction of this history. In India, this 'Fissured Land' (sensu Madhav Gadgil), the community was annihilated in the land use legislation and juridical parlance, has been systematically destroyed by the institutional Left, and is beyond the ambit of mainstream political thinking. [The concept of community, and the importance of the community is masterfully described in Suzanne Keller's 'Community' (2003), which could be an important text for the "commun-ists", but is ignored by the institutional Left as well as the grassroots activists.] The revival and reassertion of the Community and the commons are essential to emancipation of humanity and the earth. We are witnessing the fragmentary evidence of this revival of communities and the consequent restoration of the earth systems. I am waiting to see in my lifetime the transmogrification of 'the Mob' to the Community in all parts of this fissured land.

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