

Modernisation, Injustice and Social Resistance in India

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Many mainstream media commentators perceive current upheavals in India are merely part of a necessary transition towards an urban based society. Those who resist are accused of being Luddites, Maoist terrorists or as lacking perspective. It is said that the transition takes time and there will be unfortunate casualties along the way. There appears to be an implicit belief that 'urban is good', underpinned by a blind faith in the 'free' market and a western model of development.

Mainstream thinking implies that in India shifting to an urban environment to toil in factories, become a domestic servant, work as a security guard or clean the floors of a shopping mall dirtied by the boots of the privileged improves the human condition. However, according to many surveys carried out in recent years into life satisfaction, happiness has been declining in developed nations since the late 1950s, despite people having moved to cities and gaining access to a greater range of material goods.

People in wealthy western nations are not much happier, or are indeed less happy, than those who belong to poorer more rural countries that use far fewer resources. This is a damning indictment of a development model that is not only ecologically destructive, but promotes conflict due to grabs for finite resources to fuel the craving for ever more products that have an inbuilt planned obsolescence.

It is easy to fall prey to the belief that the shift to wholesale urbanisation is inevitable and therefore should be forced through. Urbanisation in Britain, for instance, was the result of deliberate policies, the unforeseen outcomes of various struggles and the stealing of land and uprooting of people from it in order to get them into factories and help line the pockets of the industrialists who were getting rich on the back of their colonies. It wasn't a 'natural' occurrence. So why blindly ape it?

Perhaps because it's colonialism merely in a different guise.

In India, clearing farmers from their lands and handing agriculture over to western monopoly agribusiness is part of a conscious ploy to drive people to the cities to eventually lead what is ultimately an environmentally unsustainable consumerist lifestyle. Stealing their land and handing it over to mining concerns is also part of the plan is to shape the economy according to the image of powerful corporations.

It is interesting to note that a 2009 report blamed the government and companies such as Tata and Essar for a corporate takeover in the hinterland of Chhattisgarh state, warning of "the biggest grab of tribal lands after Columbus."

“This open declared war will go down as the biggest land grab ever, if it plays out as per the script,” the report stated.

Commissioned by the rural development ministry and chaired by the then-minister Raghuvansh Prasad Singh, the report also stated, “The drama (is) being scripted by Tata Steel And Essar Steel who wanted seven villages or thereabouts, each to mine the richest lode of iron ore available in India.”

And now the stage is being set, the profiteers are moving in. The state has been gradually abdicating its responsibilities by submitting to the neo-liberal tenets of Wall Street’s ‘structural adjustment’ programme, whereby government reins in spending and adopts a pro-privatisation strategy. The whole notion of governance is changing – exploitation and huge profits are justified on the basis of ‘private investment risk’, and the notion of democracy is usurped by unaccountable cartels that rule the market and beat down labour costs.

The result leads to the type of protests we now witness. From the naxalite movement and the tribal peoples (adivasis) to country-wide protests over land grabs by state-corporate concerns for nuclear power projects or special economic zones, some of India’s poorest people are fighting a rearguard action against attempts to destroy their ways of life and steal their land and resources. And very often it involves land that is highly fertile, which requires nurturing if India is to attain some semblance of food self-sufficiency and food sovereignty for its massive population.

One solution of course has been for displaced people to flock to already overcrowded cities with dilapidated infrastructures and water scarcities. Despite the turmoil, however, many regard this as a transitional phase on the way to urbanisation that will eventually work out for the best. The best for whom though?

It’s easy to downgrade ‘the rural’ or ‘the tribal’ by claiming they are barriers to ‘progress’ when priority is given to building flyovers, luxury townships and muscle flexing weapons programmes at the expense of proper investment in rural industry and productive biodiverse agriculture. And it is easy to portray them as basket cases and thus advocate change and displacement when they have experienced decades of neglect.

Bhutan may be a far from perfect place, but maybe something valuable could be learned from its government, which stresses the importance of economic growth in conjunction with Buddhist values in its pursuit of modernisation. There, the government through its policies actively promotes psychological well-being, health, community vitality, ecology and culture, heritage and the preservation and sustainable use of the environment.

According to much research into happiness, when decisions are taken to invest heavily in health, education, self sustaining communities and local economies and work within limits set by the environment, contentedness is boosted. However, elites in India and the West currently work against nature and ‘the local’, not with them. They work against the interests of many, not in favour of them.

The western model of development should not be viewed as a cure-all remedy. Engels documented the horror that urban industrialisation brought to England during the 19th century. For many people, hardship has never gone away. It has been a permanent feature. Poverty, drug use, imprisonment, poor health and a range of other issues blight large

sections of the population in 'developed' societies. For such people, their struggle continues.

Ordinary people, whether in the US, Europe, India or elsewhere, have and continue to struggle for rights and better living conditions, and, while the types of land acquisition and displacement now occurring in India have occurred throughout history in various countries, so has protest, injustice and resistance against it. Unfortunately, as far as India is concerned, those with bulging pockets privilege a certain notion of development at the expense of alternatives then quite literally bulldoze it through over the heads of the downtrodden. For the victims, it's planned obsolescence, albeit in a different guise.

*Originally from the northwest of England, **Colin Todhunter** has spent many years in India. He has written extensively for the Deccan Herald (the Bangalore-based broadsheet), New Indian Express and Morning Star (Britain). His articles have also appeared in various other newspapers, journals and books and his East by Northwest website is at: <http://colintodhunter.blogspot.com>*

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