

A TOTAL CHANGE IN THE LIVES OF ALL

Sunderlal Bahuguna

At the conclusion of the Second World War, President Truman defined the larger part of the world as “underdeveloped” and sounded the call for “greater production as the key to prosperity and peace.” Thus did humankind fall completely under the spell of development with its goal of economic growth.

Today, while admittedly development has brought economic prosperity, it has only been to a microscopic minority in the poor countries. And it has not brought peace to anyone as the blind race for accumulating atomic weapons continues unabated, even in the poor countries.

After World War II, the big powers assured peace; that peace remains a far-off dream. Immediately after President Truman had articulated his formula for development, the Third World War was waged; and this war was against Nature. Prosperity came but at the cost of the destruction of nature and continued suffering for the poor.

A large number of the world’s richest 20% live in the affluent, industrialized West while at least half of the world’s poorest 20% live in Asia. As development advances, the income gap between the richest and the poorest also increases. In 1960-61, after the first development decade, there were 30 poor people for every rich person. Thirty years after, in 1991, this ratio had doubled to 61 poor people for every rich person.

More distressing is the state of the world’s natural resources - land, water and forests - which are being depleted quickly.

Economic development converts everything into cash. Economics is the religion of modern man, the market - its temple, the experts and technocrats - its high priest, and the dollar - its supreme god. The rulers of Asia are followers of this new religion. In the quest to earn more foreign exchange, they do not hesitate to auction off the fertility and moisture of their soils by using the best land to cultivate those plants that are in demand in affluent societies.

The raising of eucalyptus trees in Thailand and India, despite people’s opposition, is a glaring example of government apathy and cruelty to the hungry millions. The same is true in India where DuPont, a multinational, is trying to establish a huge factory in Madras that will supply the nylon required by affluent societies. Unfortunately, nylon does not only require huge amounts of water; its very production also pollutes the water.

The invasion of development can be seen in the fields and farms, rivers and oceans, hillsides and mountains. The land has been spoiled by over-irrigation and the over-use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The fields have become addicts, needing more and more fertilizer.

At the same time, the rate of increase in production has decelerated. Over the last 20 years, agricultural output has gone up by only 3%, while pesticide use has increased by 340%, fertilizers by 60% and tractor use by 12%. Over the same period, some 8.5 million hectares of land have been taken out of agricultural production while an additional 20 million hectares are suffering from salinity and water-logging.

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Agriculture has become more water-intensive. Water is being pumped out of the land twice as fast as rainfall is replenishing it. In Ludhiana, Punjab, India, the water level of tubewells is going down by 0.8 meters a year. The situation in the water-scarce state of Maharashtra is worse: while sugar barons dig wells even deeper, poor people loot railway engines during the summer to get drinking water. Around Beijing, China, the water level has dropped from 15 feet in 1950 to more than 150 feet below ground level today.

While the use of water for agriculture, industry and households is increasing, especially because of urbanization, the supply of fresh water is being depleted steadily. Rivers and lakes, the surface sources of freshwater, are dying. Today, the source of the Ganga-Gangotri glacier is receding at the rate of 200 meters a year compared to a receding rate of only 7.31 meters during the last century. Many rivers, such as the legendary River Saraswati, may well disappear within 125 years.

Forests, especially the natural forests, are the mothers of rivers. Natural forests in the tropics, and even in the temperate zones, are fast disappearing as a result of the greed of governments to encash this unique gift of Nature upon which all life is sustained. The new tree plantations being raised can not substitute for the natural forests; they are timber mines and most of these are water-suckers and soil-depleters.

The third source of food is the ocean. Due to deep-sea mechanized fishing, the fish catch is diminishing. Worse, most of the catch is exported to the rich countries, thus depriving the poor of rich protein.

What the affluent societies refer to as "environmental" problems are actually "survival"

problems of the poor. In Asia, the attack on land, water and forest is taking away food from the mouths of the poor. In industrial society, Nature has become a commodity. The harmonious relationship between Man and Nature, which existed in indigenous societies where the communities managed the resources, has disappeared. Man has become the butcher of Nature.

Poor countries have been subjugated by a new imperialism, the economic imperialism of the G-7 countries. This new imperialism will remain until the poor of the world revolt against the current mode of development that has given birth to three persistent global problems: threat of war and internal insecurity, pollution and depletion of natural resources, and poverty and hunger.

Industrialization is the main program of development and the Asian countries are aping the West. While Japan, South Korea and Singapore have become the three leaders of Asia in this regard, other Asian countries are following suit, inviting foreign capital by giving them several concessions that, in turn, uproot poor peasants, fisherfolk and forest dwellers. Foreign capital is putting up huge factories, building high dams, encouraging deep-sea fishing and large-scale mining. These are taking away the resources of subsistence farmers and driving them away from the land and into city slums and even to the flesh trade.

The target of popular opposition should be the following six activities that are responsible for the economic, physical, moral, social and cultural impoverishment of the common people of Asia.

1. Big industries, which displace people from the land and convert the green earth into brown earth.
2. Big dams, which kill the rivers - the mothers of our culture - and introduce centralized management and control of water.
3. Mining, which fleeces the land and creates ugly scars on the body of Mother Earth.
4. Deforestation, which destroys biological diversity (ultimately, the food-base of the poor) and dries up the rivers and accelerates soil erosion.

5. Deep Sea and Mechanized Fishing, including prawn farming on agricultural land.
6. Luxury Tourism, which is responsible for the commoditization of the body and the destruction of culture.

It is heartening that, in spite of powerful forces of authority and wealth, people are challenging such projects and fighting against these. In India, the Chipko movement in Himalaya has forced the government to switch from the commercial forestry of the 1970s to conservation. There are people's movements against big dams - such as Sardar Sarovar in Central India and Tehri in Central Himalaya (the highest dam in Asia), Koel-Karo in Bihar, and Poyam Kutti in Kerala. In South India, ongoing struggles include: the fisherfolks' movement in the coastal region, the tribal movement for village self-rule in Bastar, the peasants' movement in Karnataka against two multinationals, Cargill and Kentucky.

These movements are challenging the centralized resource exploitation policies of the government and are demanding:

1. Control by village communities over the natural resources of water, forest and land;
2. Decentralization of political power; and
3. Equitable distribution and share of village communities in the profits.

These movements are inspired by *Gram-Swarajya* (Village Self-Government), a philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, the 20th century representative of Asian culture. Gandhi gave practical shape to the ideas of Gautama Buddha (Siddhartha), who still reigns over the hearts of the majority of Asian people.

Prince Siddhartha was faced with the same problem that our rulers face today. Like them, he saw misery all around but, contrary to these modern rulers, he emphatically denied that misery could be alleviated from inside the palace. He left the palace, became a common man, subjected himself to all miseries and hardships and undertook a 40-day fast. Light dawned upon him and he preached that *trishna* (desire) was the root of all miseries. He also differentiated between "need" and "desire." Our

needs should be fulfilled but we should not run after our desires.

Some 2,500 years later, Gandhi reached the same conclusion. He challenged the definition of progress given by materialistic civilization. Gandhi said: *"Human instincts are wavering. He runs after futile things. As you give more to his body, the body demands more. The body is still not happy even after taking more. The demand for sensual desires increases after fulfilling these. So our ancestors advised us to give up the pursuit of desires. They thought it was a useless affair to establish big cities. The people would not be happy in these. There will be gangs of dacoits and streets of prostitutes. The poor will be plundered by the rich. So, they were satisfied*

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with small villages. They saw that ethical power was stronger than the rulers and their swords. So they regarded the rulers as inferior to the wise seers and sages."

Gandhi expressed these views in 1909. His ideas on new society progressed on this basis. Communities should be self-sufficient in their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter from their surroundings. He believed in the ethos of productive labor.

The answer to the major problems of our times, especially of pollution, is hidden in decentralized production. Big factories are the main cause of air and water pollution. The foul air and polluted water as effluents are the main pollutants. When production is centralized, slums are born. Our big cities are industrial centers and, as such, have all of these evils.

Centralized production systems have exploited the earth and given birth to unemployment and helplessness. It has put the producers and consumers in two distant and opposite corners and, in between these two, has created a whole army of unproductive people - managers, traders, brokers, advertisers and transporters. Finally, individual liberty is also at stake because the centralization of economic power leads to the centralization of political power.

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Gandhi, while giving his views on the reconstruction of India, said: "The earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs but not for anybody's greed."

He presented a practical solution: the village communities should be self-sufficient in their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Today, however, we need oxygen even more than food because we live in a technosphere where our oxygen requirements are fifteen times more than our ancestors, who lived in a biosphere.

Similarly, we are facing water-scarcity, erosion and deterioration of the soil.

Insofar as food scarcity is concerned, we are already facing it because of the increase in population and decrease in the availability and fertility of the land. Famine has taken the form of malnutrition. The blind race for more industries and consequent urbanization will ultimately make most of the Asian countries importers of food grain, like China. In 1994, China was a net exporter of 8 million tons of food grain, mostly corn; by 1995, it had become a net importer of 16 million tons, mostly wheat (World Watch, News Release, Nov. 1, 1995).

Our problem is to produce more from less land, without losing the fertility of the land. Gandhi foresaw this. When asked about the future of agriculture in 1926, his reply was "Tree Farming." Trees require less labor and less water. They attract clouds and those who take tree products are nearer to non-violence. Now, scientists have found that trees can produce more. When we use one acre of land to produce animal protein (i.e. beef), we get 100 kilos a year; cereals, 1-1.5 tons; fruits, 7 tons; nuts, 10-15 tons; edible seeds, 15-20 tons. Leguminous trees will also improve the quality of the soil through nitrogen-fixation processes in their root systems.

A program of cultivating all land, especially the slopes, for tree farming is the urgent need of countries with more people and less land. This will also solve the problem of water scarcity. We need 1,000 kilos of water to produce 1 kilo of wheat, and much more to produce rice and sugarcane. Suitable tree-species for different ecological zones - to give food, fodder, fuel, fertilizer and fibre - should be identified.

Tree-farming has become essential for the dying Himalaya, which extends to eight Asian countries and decides the destinies of many more people living in the plains. Tree-farming will turn the Himalaya slopes into permanent dams and save the people from the disastrous effects of these dams and floods. The same is true for all the hilly regions of Asia.

Tree-farming will also end the conflict between national interests and local aspirations, which has made these regions as the bases of terrorist activities. Nations need water from the hill but local people need permanent employment. The standing tree will give soil and water to the nation and produce nuts, fruits, leaf fodder and fibre for the local people.

Tree-farming is the basis of a permanent and non-violent economy. As E.F. Schumacher puts it in his celebrated book, *Small is Beautiful*:

"The teaching of the Buddha enjoins a reverent and non-violent attitude, not only to all sentient beings but also, with great emphasis, to trees. Every follower of the Buddha ought to plant a

tree every few years and look after it until it is safely established and the Buddhist economist can demonstrate without difficulty that the universal observation of this rule would result in a high rate of genuine economic development, independent of any foreign aid. Much of the economic decay of Southeast Asia (and of many other parts of the world) is undoubtedly due to a heedless and shameful neglect of trees." (Small is Beautiful, pages 49-50)

Tree farming is the alternative to the industry-created brown world that, in turn, gives birth to crime, drug abuse and city slums. It will re-green the earth, provide jobs to many more and re-establish the long-lost harmonious relationship between Man and Nature. It will also protect flora and fauna that are now becoming extinct.

Centralized industry should be replaced with a decentralized system of production in which every cottage becomes a small factory. The centralized system of production has given birth to an army of unproductive people - managers, bankers, brokers, advertisers and transporters. They take the major share of the fruits of production while the burden falls ultimately upon Nature and the consumers.

To avoid this, the direct relationship between the consumer and the producer should be revived. In rural communities, the peasants and craftspeople were knit together, they were interdependent and their relationship was humane. It should be the criteria of an ideal society that the essential needs of the individual are fulfilled from his surroundings.

No society can be free from pollution and exploitation until it has a decentralized energy system. The existing energy system was born in the West where population was less and more production was needed for the expansion of their trade in the colonies. However, when this energy system is adopted in densely-populated countries, it has thrown many people out of jobs and created environmental hazards.

Our energy priorities should be human, animal, biological, solar, wind, tidal, geothermal and hydro from the run of the rivers. Devices based on the principle of the bicycle should be created to make

the utmost use of human energy. The objective should be to end drudgery and maximize efficiency.

Being the heirs of two great revolutionaries - Buddha and Gandhi - we Asians have a responsibility towards our dying planet. These two servants of humankind have given a practical program to bring the individual and society from Nature (*Prakriti*) to Culture (*Sanskriti*). They defined development as a state in the life of the individual and society in which both enjoy permanent peace, happiness and fulfillment. This is the alternative to modern development, which has taken us from Nature (*Prakriti*) to degeneration (*Vikriti*).

Voluntary workers have an important role in this process. Voluntary workers are not NGOs; an NGO is something supplementary to the government. Buddha and Gandhi never associated themselves with governments. They were not merely Red Cross workers; they took up the work of ending the root cause of the miseries for which the establishment was responsible.

A social activist stands for a total change in the lives of all (*Sarvodaya*). This change is possible with the progress in science and technology. Social activists should share a platform with humanitarian scientists and compassionate literati, artists and journalists to bring about this change. They have to form a creative minority that will provide practical answers to the problems facing humankind and make the silent majority raise their voices for change.

This is the message of our culture which believes that all great objectives are achieved when knowledge, action and devotion are concerned.

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That We May Live

As voluntary social workers, we have to bring the message down to earth but to do this, we need to start the process of change from within ourselves. We need to pray like Gandhi, "Oh god! Give me the strength to be one with the masses." His God was the emperor of the Humble. Humility and self-imposed poverty should be our identity. Like Buddha, we should live on alms, the small contributions from the common people.

The agent of change should bring upon a change within himself. Then, it will certainly bring about change in society. Take us from death to life.

Let us all cry at the top of our voices: Yes to Life!
No to Death!

Let this light of Asia spread, from the East to all over the World, and show the way for suffering humankind. ■

Sunderlal Bahuguna was born on 9 January 1927 in the village of Terhri Garliwal (Himalaya), India. A journalist of leading Hindi and English dailies in India, he has focused his writings on the problems of development and environment in the Himalaya area. For the last five years, he has been campaigning against the construction of a 260.5 meter high Tehri Dam in Himalaya, which will be built within a seismic zone where scientists have predicted an earthquake of 8.5 points on the Richter scale could wipe out the densely-populated Indo-Gangetic plain. His campaign has included two fasts - 45 days in 1992 and 49 days in 1995. For the last three years, he has been living in a shanty near the dam site where he is visited by people from all over India and the rest of the world who seek his advice on environmental issues.

Mr. Bahuguna practices Gandhian techniques of non-violence. He has challenged the traditional concept of development that has made Man the butcher of Nature. He advocates an alternative paradigm of development that aims for permanent peace, happiness and fulfilment. His slogan is "Ecology is Permanent Economy" and "Yes to Life, No to Death."

Mr. Bahuguna has received many awards for his writings on sustainable development, including the World Food Day Award.