

A Sympathetic Critique of the Bhaduri-Patkar Model

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In suggesting an alternative to the current pattern of industrialisation we cannot ignore the environmental limits of industrial growth. Sustainable alternatives need to incorporate an understanding that non-industrial lifestyles and non-human life forms too deserve respect and space to flourish. This short piece offers a sympathetic critique of the Amit Bhaduri-Medha Patkar economic formula (3 January 2009).

Amit Bhaduri and Medha Patkar make a formidable pair, combining incisive economic analyses with deep humanitarian ethics (“Industrialisation for the People, by the People, of the People”, *EPW*, 3 January 2009). Their critique of the current economic model of globalised growth in India and advocacy of an alternative, deserves full attention. But while I am in full agreement with their critique and with the general line of their prescriptions, I think these fall short of the fundamental restructuring that is needed for the Indian (or global) economy to come close to being sustainable and equitable. Knowing Medha and having been part of some of the same struggles, I suspect she and Bhaduri may not be averse to what I am saying, and that perhaps the omissions I point to may be more because they did not have the time or space to make their article more comprehensive and well-rounded. Or perhaps, they held back because they were anxious to project themselves as not being “impractical romantics”, but deeply and concretely concerned about ordinary people struggling to make a living.

I have two main points of criticism. One, that the issue of ecological frameworks and limits is missing. There is a tiny hint of this in the last paragraph when they talk about “saving and improving, through popular initiative, common resources of forests, rivers and the sea coast”, but the implications of such an objective do not underlie the rest of the article. Second, that in advocating an equitable path of “industrialisation”, there is a curious sidelining of other modes of production, consumption and living. Again, there is only a hint of this at the end of the article, when the authors mention “those who now make a livelihood from related agricultural activities”.

It is clear now, more than ever before, that the earth simply cannot sustain

continuous human growth, regardless of how efficient we make our technologies to reduce demand on resources per unit of production. Equitable growth, through rural and people-centred industrialisation, must also have its limits. Indeed, the equation of “development” with “growth” has been seriously and increasingly questioned, and even the idea of ever-lasting “development” has been challenged. The ideologies of development and growth are, after all, less than a century old and it is astonishing how much of a sacred status they have attained. Anyone challenging these is looked at with horror by not only those within the departments and offices responsible for development, but also by most “educated” citizens, for we have all grown up to believe that humanity can only prosper by an ever-increasing harnessing of natural resources for a constantly growing base of energy and material goods.

The multiple ecological crises we are now surrounded by, however, have forced us to accept that the earth indeed has limits. I am not necessarily arguing for the Malthusian version of “limits to growth”, such as was made famous in the *Club of Rome* book by this name (Meadows et al 1972). My concern is rooted in a more fundamentally ethical perspective that respects all life forms and thereby requires that humanity restrain its activities so as not to impinge on their right to survive. It is also rooted on the perspective that limitless growth of *any* kind will simply not be sustained by the earth. “Industrialisation for the People, by the People, of the People”, as Bhaduri and Patkar title their article, could well lead to equitable development for all humans, but it may not be so benevolent to other species that co-inhabit the earth since it may ultimately not be sustained by the earth.

It could conceivably be argued by the authors that equitable industrialisation, in which all people have a say, would lead to ecological sustainability too. Possibly. But I do not think there is anything inevitable about this, for conceivably too we may continue to displace the space and capacity of other species to thrive, even while expanding our own share of goods and services *equitably* within our

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species. It would be a mistake to think that equity will automatically lead to sustainability, especially if the latter is meant to include the capacity of all species to continue thriving.

Going Beyond the Limits

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment sounded a clear alarm in 2005 when it stated that humanity was already overusing or degrading the carrying capacity of the earth. One consequence of our actions was that 10 to 30% of mammal, amphibian and bird species were threatened with extinction. In such a situation, any more *overall* growth for human purposes could exacerbate our negative impact on ecosystems and species. In October 2008 the Ecological Footprint Network and Chamber of Indian Industries reported that India was already using twice its biological capacity (GFN and CII 2008). This means it was either using someone else's bio-capacity by importing timber or mineral or other natural resources and energy sources (and indeed we do import timber from south-east Asia), or overusing its own resources (of which there is plenty of evidence in the form of continuing degradation of forest, grassland and wetland resources). Therefore, a strategy of ever-increasing growth, whether for India or for the world, is not likely to be compatible with an ecologically healthy future.

The consequences of the lack of a more ecologically-centred vision shows up in seemingly innocuous but potentially dangerous ways in the article. For instance, in arguing that industry must not displace existing land-based livelihoods (an absolutely vital point), they advocate that it must "come up on vacant/uncultivable land". This harks back to attempts by the government of India to afforest "wastelands" (in more recent times), or to distribute such lands to the landless (in early post-independence times). Many studies have shown that in fact such lands are either, (a) the only common resource for the poorest people (especially pastoralists), or (b) the habitat of a rich diversity of wildlife. Or often both. In a country like India, it is not clear what vacant or uncultivable land would be available, which is not already in use by the most

underprivileged sections of India's (human or non-human) denizens.

Alternatives to Industry

Focusing only on "industrialisation" in their alternative has led the authors to neglect telling us what should happen with agriculture or other non-industrial livelihoods and lifestyles. They talk of the dire straits agriculture is in (and the dropping share of agriculture in the country's GDP), but do not provide a vision of how farmers are to get out of this. This is much more than simply saying they should not be displaced by industry, it is about a fundamental revolution in the way agriculture has been treated by governmental policy. It is about moving away from bureaucracy or corporate-led, chemical-intensive, irrigation-priority, homogenised farming towards a focus on farmer-led innovation, reviving the respectful role of farming in the economy, clarifying property rights, supporting organic and biologically diverse cropping, encouraging direct and local producer-consumer links, putting the knowledge of farmers into school and college curriculum to provide it the same status that formal lab-generated knowledge has, and other such actions. Strategies such as these, and many similar ones for forest-dwellers, fishers, pastoralists, and other non-industrial ways of life, are as crucial in any "alternative" vision of human welfare as is equitable/rural industrial development. Concomitant to such a restructuring would also be a more direct challenge to the unfettered consumerism of material goods that feeds the currently unsustainable paths of economic globalisation. Such a challenge may today seem hopelessly unrealistic but may not in the near future, specially if public awareness of its consequences and incorporation of different perspectives are put squarely into education and public outreach.

To conclude, I urge that any fundamental challenge to today's destructive economic globalisation process, has to embrace a diversity of ways of producing and consuming, and related lifestyles; as also respect for a diversity of life forms. One may then envisage not even one alternative path, but perhaps a variety of paths, to suit the enormous diversity of local ecological, cultural, economic, and political situations humans find themselves in. Such alternative paths would have to ensure that none is constraining the other, and that they all collectively respect the global limits of the earth and our responsibility placed on us towards our fellow species.

Such a vision may be called "impractical" and "romantic". I could argue that we now have the knowledge and practical strategies to make this possible, and that this is no more impractical than trying to achieve universal human welfare through industrialisation of any kind. Or I could argue that India's constitution, which enjoins upon us the responsibility of achieving equity and environmental protection, is equally "impractical" and "romantic", but is nevertheless something we have embraced as a guiding light to illuminate the paths we must take. Either way, the fact that we have put our planet and ourselves on a path with very visible arrows pointing to "self-destruct" suggests we need a very basic rethink. Arguing for equitable, democratic and decentralised growth is crucial, but on its own, it will simply not get us off this path.

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