

Vested Interests

Shekhar Singh

PERHAPS the most pathetic manifestation of an exploitative social order is the misuse of our natural resources: land, water and air and the fauna and flora that thrive on them. Invariably, this attitude of malicious apathy towards nature first and most tellingly affects the poorest segments of society. It ensures a progressively increasing inability to procure the adequate raw materials needed for subsistence production by the impoverished and at the same time affects the ecology in a way that even nature turns against them.

Like every other resource, but even more justifiably so, these natural resources belong in equal measure to all living creatures. The only just way of allocating these resources would be to consider the total natural resources of the world as belonging to one common pool from which each living creature has a right to his or her share.

Perhaps the fragmentation of the world into nation-states makes such a universal and equitable distribution of the world's resources politically impossible. The unit is immediately reduced from the world to the nation, and justice then demands both that each nation live within its own resources and that these resources be equitably divided within the nation. This, again, does not happen.

Whichever way you look at it, whether from the global perspective or from the national, resources have not and are not being equitably distributed. It has by now become a cliché that one Swiss consumes as much natural resources as 30 Somalis. Even if we make allowances for different climatic conditions requiring, for subsistence, different levels of energy consumption, international consumption of energy in 1972 was something like this:

Energy consumption per capita (adjusted for temperature)

India 450
Guinea 200
Burma 100
USA 11,000
Canada 9,200

(Source: Environmental Fund Sheet on 1972 Energy Consumption and *United Nations Statistical Yearbook*, 1973.)

The bogey of population growth in India, especially the interest that the Western world takes in it, stands exposed through such an analysis. Considering an average American consumes about 20 times the resources that an average Indian does, USA, with a population of 250 million is consuming *seven times* the world's resources than India, with a population of 700 million. If then, the growing population of the world is a threat to the world's resources, much greater efforts should be made to control the American population!

So much for the international distribution of resources. Similar patterns, unfortunately, also emerge when one looks at the national scene, especially of India.

A 'planned economy', as we understand the term in India, seems to imply a right of the state to pool all the natural resources and then use them in a manner which is optimum in terms of both efficiency and distribution. However, under the name of such 'planning' what actually happens is that the resources, say, forests existing socially and geographically within one segment of the society, are denied to the traditional owners as, it is argued, they must be used for the collective good of the total society. Further, valuable wood, it is maintained, ought not to be burnt in *chulahs*, for such use would be inefficient; such wood should be converted into furniture, or ply or paper or rayons.

Theoretically, no one can argue against a scientific and efficient management of our natural resources, for such a management promotes greater production. But what really happens is that these natural resources, while being denied to the traditional users who are mostly poor are utilised to satisfy the luxurious demands of mainly the rich urbanite, and all this without providing the original users with any substitute to get on with the task of working, living or even surviving. The Forest Act, for example, seeks to prevent the collection of wood for the village hearth, while allowing the felling of trees and other forest products for conversion into paper, furniture and other objects of primarily urban wants. The poor deprived villager is invariably provided with no plausible alternative.

Instances of such exploitation are many, and can be listed in detail. Two brief examples might help show the strategies involved.

Paper industry

The paper industry is commonly regarded as a highly polluting and environmentally destructive industry as it not only consumes wood and bamboos as raw material but also throws out highly toxic effluents. Mainly because of its environmental undesirability and as a result of the rising consciousness of people in the developed world regarding issues of environment there is now an effort to shift production units of paper to countries of the developing world. All types of incentives and coercive pressures have and are being used by some Western countries to this end. Efforts are made to attract industrialists in developing countries into this sector and to use economic pressures to make governments cooperate in this effort. Obviously the objective is that these mills, when set up in developing countries, would procure raw materials at cheap, subsidised rates without having to pay the real cost of replacement, as has become essential in the developed countries. Also, apart from cheap labour, the costly methods for treating waste from the factories could be dispensed with, making the production of paper very cheap for the industrialist, but extremely expensive for the host country and its people.

The case of Orient Paper Mill (OPM) set up at Amlai, in Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh is illustrative of how these forces work in a micro framework (Details from *Planning the Environment*, A.K. Roy et al, 1982).

OPM was set up in 1965 with an investment of about Rs 30 crores. Almost the entire plant and equipment was imported.

The Mill, over the last 15 years has chopped up all the nearby verdant bamboo forest and converted them into paper, earning the mill a declared gross profit of Rs. 8.95 crores last year [1982]. Now bamboos, which constitute 80% of its feedstock, have to be got from as far as

Balaghat, Hoshangabad and Betul, some 500 km. away. Hardwoods are obtained from Himachal Pradesh.

Apart from the destruction of forests, OPM has at least two other grim repercussions. First, it requires 32 cusec of water, while the Son river, which flows nearby, has a flow of between 7 and 14 cusecs. The mill owners, as such, dam the river every December to satisfy their requirement. This earthen dam is washed away by floods every July. This illegal building of a private dam to impound a public river has been condoned by the authorities for 17 years (reference year 1982), no matter that it deprives the hundreds of villages downstream of water for drinking and cultivation.

The helpless villages are further affected by the serious water pollution caused by the mill. The effluents which are released into the river and flow downstream, contain the highly toxic sulphite waste liquors like sulphur chlorides and gas; black liquor; hydrogen sulphide; methyl mercaptan; sodium sulphide; sodium hydroxide; sodium carbonate; turpentine (resins); methyl alcohol, etc. All these chemicals are harmful to human, animal and aquatic life. A large number of villagers who have to cross the polluted river frequently, suffer from various forms of rash and other painful skin ailments directly traceable to the effluents. Similar results are seen in surveys regarding cattle deaths, gastric disorder from consumption of the water, reduction in the birth of calves, and milk yield per cow per lactation period: in some regions downstream milk yield had fallen by more than 80 per cent (in 1973) as compared to the levels prevailing before the mill was set up in 1965. These ill effects could have been contained to a large extent by bringing in proper methods for treatment of toxic effluents, but the mill owners could not be bothered with the costs involved.

Minor forest products: The bhabhar grass

Another manifestation of the politics of environment can be seen in the Saharanpur district of UP. Here, an estimated 40,000 families are engaged in producing *ban*, which is a type of rope most commonly used in making beds (*charpoys*). *Ban* is made from a grass locally known as *bhabhar* which grows wild in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Traditionally, *ban* makers, many of whom are Harijans or economically backward Muslims, used to cut the grass from the foothills and pay a minimal royalty to the owners of the forest. In 1951 the Forest Act was implemented in UP and the ownership and control of the forests was taken over by the government.

The government then started auctioning the grass to big contractors, who would have it cut and then sell it to smaller contractors. It reached the actual producers of *ban* after passing through the hands of a series of middlemen. While the cost of the raw material shot up, the cost of the finished product, as usually happens, did not show a

corresponding increase; the income of the poor *ban* workers thus suffered. Under this system, whereas the *ban* worker was, in the late seventies and early eighties, getting the grass for between Rs 80 and Rs 100 per quintal, the government was selling it to paper mills, on a quota basis, at Rs 30 to Rs 35 per quintal!

In 1982, the *bhabhar* trade was taken over by the newly formed UP state forest development corporation. The corporation, instead of selling the *bhabhar* directly, started giving out contracts to the same big contractors for the cutting of grass. The grass was then stored in hastily constructed depots and auctioned out in lots of 100 quintals or more. By the time this raw material came down to the actual users it now cost 25 to 35 per cent more than the year before. The *ban* trade has virtually been washed out and nearly 40,000 families face the prospect of starvation. As a curious footnote one might add that through all this, paper mills are still being provided *bhabhar* at Rs 40 per quintal. (The author recently did a study on this problem in Saharanpur district. The details are published in an IIPA working paper.)

‘Environmentalists’ who argue for preservation of our natural resources even at the cost of slowing down, or stopping, all developmental processes, are not to my mind being realistic. There are today a large number of ‘superpowers’ waiting to walk into any country whose weakened economy provides them with the slightest excuse. If, then, one slows down beyond a point the process of development in order to preserve the environment one would be inevitably opening the gates to foreign exploiters who would, with great glee, ravage the very environment that was in the first place sought to be preserved.

This does not mean that we should not seriously ask ourselves: to whom do these natural resources belong, who uses them, for what, to whose benefit, and why?

When we start denying to the people the very basis of their production, the raw material for the houses, the fuel for their fires, the water for their fields and when we start polluting the air they breathe, the water they drink and the environment within which they live, then ‘ideology’ and ‘strategy’ stop having relevance and a struggle for existence starts anew.