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For an alternative paradigm of development

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Abstract

Sustainable infrastructure is now an established buzzword in international policy making circles – involving governments, private corporations and think tanks. There is almost no room in this discourse for asking fundamental questions about how growth is defined and whether the nature of growth should itself be redirected.

How would the future of infrastructure look if we approach it from the perspective of 'sustainability' as degrowth – which means redirecting the economy and society towards actual well-being of all, Sarvodaya, rather than perpetual economic growth in terms of gross domestic product (GDP).

Author's profile

Rajni Bakshi is a Mumbai-based author. Her books include: Bazaars, Conversations and Freedom: For a market culture beyond greed and fear (Penguin, India, 2009 and Greenleaf, UK, 2012), which won two Vodafone-Crossword Awards; Bapu Kuti: Journeys in Rediscovery of Gandhi (Penguin, India, 1998), which inspired the Hindi film Swades starring Shah Rukh Khan; Long Haul: The Bombay Textile Workers Strike 1982-83 (BUILD, India, 1986). Rajni has also written several monographs including Trusteeship: Business and the economics of well-being (2016); Civilizational Gandhi (2012); An Economics for Well-Being (2007); Let's Make it Happen: A backgrounder on New Economics (2003); A Warning and an Opportunity: The Dispute over Swami Vivekananda's Legacy (1994).

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For an alternative paradigm of development

A charkha graces the cover of the United Nations Environment Programme's handbook on Sustainable Consumption and Production. Spinning on the charkha is an aging woman of Northeastern India. She is seated on a meticulously woven, soothingly neat, mat probably made from bamboo shavings or a reed. Displayed in the background are traditional handloom fabrics – which she presumably sells for a living. This image marks an ironic, not iconic, entry point to a handbook addressed to policy makers across the world and dedicated to these tag-lines: "Seven Billion Dreams. One Planet. Consume with Care." [1]

Sustainable infrastructure?

What is the view of life and materiality that manifests in that photo? How does it differ from the implication that the seven billion dreams are essentially and primarily about consuming more? If that is the case, then will 'care' be enough to save the 'one planet'? Such questions are a necessary preamble to any discussion on sustainable infrastructure.

One way of exploring these specific questions is to view the image of the old woman spinning a charkha through the lens of just four of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Hand spun thread and handloom cloth production are probably the oldest form of Goal 12, namely 'Sustainable Consumption and Production'. It is more than likely the woman in the photo grew up in a human settlement that was 'inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' which is SDG 11. She would also be closely familiar with diverse forms of water management systems and other facilities which would qualify as 'resilient infrastructure' – SDG 9.[2] Like most crafts persons she appears to be working in the comfort of her home, thus fulfilling a part of SDG 8 'decent work'.

It is the second part of SDG 8 that causes her, despite all of the above, to be labelled as under-developed. For SDG 8 is 'Decent work and economic growth' (emphasis added). People in the crafts sector have traditionally either been in some form of a steady-state [3] or gradual and limited growth. But SDG 8 assumes that economic growth is a must, that it can be made 'sustainable', and this is the only route by which societies can create the conditions that allow people to have quality jobs.[4]

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[1] http://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/9660/-Sustainable_Consumption_and_Production_a_Handbook_for_PolicymakersSustainable_Consumptio.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

[2] http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20150218-indias-amazing-living-root-bridges

[3] https://steadystate.org/discover/steady-state-economy-definition/

[4] http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html

In part the combining of ‘decent work and economic growth’ is an acknowledgement of the ‘jobless growth’ phenomenon. More significantly it signals how the term ‘sustainable’ is more often used to actually mean ‘sustained’ as in ever-growing rather than a balance that ensures continuity. Herein lies a possibly fatal paradox – we cannot have ever-increasing growth on a finite planet. Even though the limits of the earth’s eco systems are now widely acknowledged – from corridors of political power, to board rooms of corporations and classrooms of academia – the orthodoxy of our times still holds that sustained (as perpetual) economic growth and ecological sustainability can somehow be made compatible.

It is in this context that ‘sustainable infrastructure’ is now an established buzzword in international policy making circles – involving governments, private corporations, universities and think tanks. Within this realm, the discourse on sustainable infrastructure emphasises the need to account for, and minimise, social and environmental externalities. Much of the attention, in mainstream discourse, is on encouraging governments and corporations to create infrastructure that is less resource intensive and serves the masses rather than a relatively small segment of society.[5] There is little or no room in this discourse for asking fundamental questions about how growth is defined and whether the nature of growth should itself be redirected.

By contrast, the emerging discourse on ‘Degrowth’ calls for a new framework in which the emphasis shifts from gross domestic product (GDP) to that which generates actual social, material and ecological well-being. It also prioritises the values of sufficiency and subsistence rather than equating development with the fulfilment of endless wants.[6] For instance, the Hindi equivalent for degrowth has been identified as ‘Sarvodaya’ or well-being of all attained in a manner that also restores and nurtures natural eco-systems. In this case sustainable transportation infrastructure would not be equated with highway networks that can be built with more efficient use of resources and made affordable for more people. Instead, development would be equated with ease of mobility, which may be facilitated by a variety of means. This alternative approach would also aim to create circumstances in which most people are not compelled to travel long distances on a daily basis just to earn their livelihood.

This aspiration for degrowth as Sarvodaya has to contend with the reality that there is a groundswell of demands and aspirations, which equates development with highways and more consumer goods.

How then does one foster a way of seeing that neither romanticises the woman with the charkha, described above, nor dismisses her as an irrelevant relic, a museum piece?

[5] https://www.eurasiareview.com/30112015-creating-sustainable-infrastructure-analysis/
[6] https://www.gatewayhouse.in/rich-should-degrow-so-poor-can-prosper/

Degrowth: More than a 'bomb-word'

To begin with, degrowth was deliberately deployed by its advocates as a 'bomb-word' drawing attention to the absurdity of believing that indefinite growth is possible.[7] On closer examination, it is better understood as 're-growth' because it calls for a redefinition of not just growth but also of material value.

Degrowth or re-growth has broadly five dimensions:

- Development is equated with actual well-being, not just throughput of materials
- Steady-state economics are prioritised, instead of systems in which growth is a survival imperative
- The aim is to foster a solidarity economy through sharing and cooperation so that the same resources can serve far more people
- Consumption is reconfigured to make more judicious use of resources with social pressure and laws to discourage or prevent business models based on planned obsolescence. Instead products are designed to last and be reused.
- Value is redefined so that the value of anything is not just what it is worth to a potential buyer in monetary terms, but rather in terms of the actual well-being it generates immediately as well as in the long term.[8]

Over the last ten years, the Europe based Research and Degrowth network of academics has assembled an impressive array of academic papers on what degrowth would mean in several spheres of the economy.[9] In India, given the fact that hundreds of millions of people still lack the basics of life re-growth might be a better term than degrowth. This may be why the first book on the topic out of India is called 'Post-Growth Thinking in India: Towards Sustainable Egalitarian Alternatives'.

Edited by Julien-Francois Gerber and Rajeswari S. Raina, this book traverses a wide range of issues – from 'Energy and Sustainability', 'GDP and its Discontent', 'Articulating Green Growth and Degrowth', 'Degrowth as Economy of Permanence' to 'Localisation: the post-growth path to genuine prosperity'.[10] The essence of the re-growth agenda for India is

[7] https://www.gatewayhouse.in/degrowth-a-bomb-word-comes-of-age/

[8] https://www.gatewayhouse.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Rajni-Bakshi-Degrowth-Report_Final.pdf, p. 2

[9] https://degrowth.org/publications/

[10] Post-Growth Thinking in India: Towards Sustainable Egalitarian Alternatives. Editors Julien-Francois Gerber and Rajeswari S. Raina, Foreword by Stephen A. Marglin; Orient BlackSwan, Hyderbad, 2018.

conveyed by these words of the legendary expert on water systems, Ramaswamy R. Iyer, to whom the book is dedicated:

"What I want is India to be a sharing, caring, nurturing and sustainable place, with a civilisation that ensures an average standard of living for everyone." [11]

Is this a pipe-dream or can it be a vision that informs individual actions, public policies and private investments in the real world? However difficult it may be to identify tangible steps that would make this vision a reality one thing is clear – it is time to stop equating 'development' with growth of GDP and focus instead on multiple other ways to attain the end goal articulated by Iyer.

In terms of tangible steps forward, perhaps, the most notable one is to make regeneration of local economies the cornerstone of Sarvodaya.

Hundred mile communities

When Mahatma Gandhi made the charkha an icon of the Indian struggle for freedom it was a literal manifestation of the need to revitalise the grassroots economy that had been decimated by colonial extraction and the forced imposition of mass produced goods.

Even in Gandhi's time the charkha was wrongly seen as harking back into the past and denying the importance of modern industry. This was a complete misrepresentation of Gandhi's emphasis on the need to combine dignity of labour, creativity and innovation – making these the basis of a dynamic local economy. Economic planners of post-Independence India did exactly the opposite – they equated innovation with big modern industry with almost no care for dignity of labour and individual or community level creativity. Consequently, the charkha and handlooms were regarded as a sunset industry deserving of government sops only because millions of people were still 'stuck' in that realm.[12] This was symptomatic of an overall neglect of local economies with all the attention focused on growth in terms of GDP.

In a degrowth frame, the emphasis shifts from growing the size of the economy in terms of how much money changes hands to that which actually enhances the sense of agency of people with diverse abilities by enabling them to engage in both the bazaar and social spaces from a position of strength. Take for example, the issue of local watershed management versus large dams and canal networks. While local infrastructure such as watershed management schemes has not been completely neglected, the broad policy direction in India has been to treat the informal, the so-called unorganised and local economy

[11] Ibid, dedication page.

[12] See essay by Uzramma, 'Crafts show the way for Indian industrialization' in Alternative Futures: India Unshackled, edited by Ashish Kothari and K. J. Joy, Authors Upfront: New Delhi, 2017

as the periphery. Thus the major investments have been in large systems that serve the macro economy.

Ela Bhatt, the founder of the famous Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)[13], has spent decades trying to improve the livelihoods of women through a variety of institutions. In the last few years, Bhatt has concluded it was the lack of local resources to meet the primary needs of life that has made people vulnerable to poverty. In a book titled 'Anubandh: Building Hundred Mile Communities', Bhatt has proposed that the answer lies in meeting local needs with locally generated resources in ways that benefit the local economy, the local ecology, and the local community.[14]

This is not a prescription for isolationism. On the contrary 'Anubandh', says Bhatt, is an ancient Indian word which means that everything is connected – each one of us to each other and the air and water and soil: "Over five decades of organising poor women of SEWA, I have realised how this endless web of connection exists, what potential it offers for promoting mutuality and how we neglect it more and more in our so-called development process as we strive to 'remove ' poverty and grab prosperity." Bhatt is not saying that 'Anubandh' is a magic solution. Rather it is a perspective, which encourages us to be more conscious of the choices we make. For instance, what is the effect on our economy and society when we buy vegetables from a street vendor rather than a corporate retailer? From this perspective the type and scale of infrastructure required will change accordingly.

For instance, cotton instead of being baled and carried off to distant spinning mills could be processed and turned into thread locally. Even if the spinning is not entirely done on hand-operated charkhas, the volume of electricity and transport infrastructure required would alter significantly. At the same time, the variety and volume of livelihoods generated within the local economy would increase – thus altering the dominant assumption of policy makers that concentration of large populations in cities is inevitable and unalterable.[15]

Let us now review possible scenarios in the sphere of water which, along with sanitation, is perhaps the most vital of all our infrastructure needs.

Water

"Traditional systems were often conceptualised for permanence. Inscriptions at temple water tanks would start with '…as long as Sun and moon rise in their respective places'. Population

[13] SEWA has over a million members. http://www.sewa.org/

[14] https://www.thehindu.com/features/%E2%80%98Everything-is-connected%E2%80%99/article14308333.ece

[15] http://www.thealternative.in/business/why-do-we-continue-to-beat-our-cotton-and-punish-its-growers/

pressures, leading to zero opportunities, coupled with democratic aspirations to be free of exploitative hierarchical social structures drove people to get out of such systems. The hope of modern technologies promising freedom and upward mobility has been the major drive in people accepting unsustainable technologies." -- Uma Shankari[16]

This observation captures the essential challenge of sustainable water systems in India in the 21st century. Uma Shankari is a farmer and a scholar who has watched this process unfold at close quarters on the ground in Southern India over three and a half decades. Having herself struggled with water-to-crop ratios, Shankari is painfully aware that traditional systems are now incompatible with what most people, even the poorest of the poor, believe is 'progress'.

How then do we work for 'sustainable infrastructure' in the sphere of water in India today? The first step is to acknowledge that there is no ready-made model that can be applied at the macro level; it will have to be forged over a period of time by trial and error. This process can be aided by recognising some essential features of the traditional systems. Firstly, that they falsify a basic assumption of modern market economics – namely that scarcity will inevitably lead to fierce competition. Instead, as documentation of traditional systems in arid zones of India shows, scarcity led to the most intense and creative forms of cooperation.[17] Social norms and physical infrastructure were melded to ensure two things: One, human-made structures that captured and stored the scarce rainfall, and two, cooperation to ensure that the water was used in a judicious manner – thus discouraging over-use by any individual or family. But all of this was possible because sufficiency was embraced as a value. Sufficiency was not, as modern economists often wrongly assume, adopted out of compulsion.

Such cultures facilitated the accumulation of scientific knowledge over generations and consequently produced three-dimensional innovations that simultaneously sustained natural ecosystems fostered supporting social beliefs and behaviour patterns, and gave rise to technical skills for catching, storing and sharing water. All of the above was done without depending on the individual profit motive, whether in cash or kind. In a nutshell, homo economicus was conspicuously absent in these settings.[18]

Granted that over the last two decades, rejuvenation of local water systems has found some government support. But the big government project on water infrastructure is inter-

[16] https://www.gatewayhouse.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/WaterDegrowth_RBakshi-22-09-2016-PDF.pdf

[17] http://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/aaj-bhi-khare-hain-talaab, and http://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/rajasthan-ki-rajat-boondein-book-anupam-mishra

[18] https://www.gatewayhouse.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/WaterDegrowth_RBakshi-22-09-2016-PDF.pdf

linking of rivers.[19] This project aims to link rivers with surplus water with those that are water deficient – to provide water, both for drinking and industrial use. Apart from the enormous cost of such a project there is in addition the spectre of changing rainfall patterns, which could drastically alter the water levels in many rivers. In addition, there are concerns about vast forest tracts being submerged along with displacement of communities in the project affected zones. Above all, this approach is anchored not in the needs of local economies and societies but on macro data and assumptions, about projected increase in water demand, that are based on a perpetual-growth scenario.

There are broadly three dimensions on which a re-growth water discourse can be built. One, there is more and more scientific work to show that merely improving water efficiency is not enough. It is far more important, if not imperative, to map how a business or development project affects the wider environment of which water is only one part. For example, check dams for recharge on a particular plot of land can sometimes deprive those downstream of water – both humans and other living systems. Likewise, more efficient use of water to increase volume of yield is laudable but not if the total volume of water used is still rising exponentially. There is no substitute for a holistic eco-system approach.

Two, efforts are being made to 'decouple' water from GDP growth – this essentially means squeezing more GDP points out of every drop of water. For instance, technological innovations have reduced the amount of water used in industries like mining and steel. But as the UNEP has cautioned there is a simultaneous need to map 'impact decoupling' – namely the reduction of adverse environmental impacts.

Three, there is no substitute for sifting needs from wants. This takes us back to why the image on the cover of the UNEP document, mentioned at the beginning, is ironic. The distinction between needs and wants, which has been inherent to cultures of the kind depicted by that photo, is now considered backward. In India, thirty years of economic growth have been accompanied by jettisoning of an old norm which lauded 'simple living, high thinking'. It is now commonly believed that this was not actually a norm but an excuse people used to feel good in a time of scarcity. [20]

Reality check

Let us now return to the question posed at the beginning, namely how to foster new ways of seeing that neither romanticise the woman with the charkha nor dismiss her as an irrelevant relic, a museum piece?

[19] http://mowr.gov.in/schemes-projects-programmes/schemes/interlinking-rivers
[20] https://www.gatewayhouse.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/WaterDegrowth_RBakshi-22-09-2016-PDF.pdf

The first step might be to acknowledge that democracy and rising material aspirations are now inextricably inter-linked. However, it should be possible to celebrate the spaces for dignity and freedom, that democracy has enabled, while also asserting that both India and the world have no future unless happiness is decoupled from more and more consumption.

It is true that the person who is walking wants a cycle, the cyclist wants a motor-bike, the person on a two-wheeler wants a car, the motorist wants a bigger or more expensive car, and so on. At the same time, it is also true that this reality is not a fact of nature, like photosynethsis. To a large extent these aspirations have been fostered and expanded by a broad range of economic and cultural factors – above all by the positing of Western style urbanisation, with its associated notions of what is adequate infrastructure, at the pinnacle of progress. This is why the woman with the charkha is equated with backwardness – as the relic of a sunset industry, a burden to the welfare state or at best manufacturer of a niche-consumer product patronised by elites.

However, seen from a different vantage point the spinner and handloom weaver represents a radically different knowledge system and therefore also market culture. What the spinner and weaver participated in was bazaar, an ancient mechanism of human societies across the world. These pre-modern forms of exchange in the bazaar were embedded in diverse forms of social, cultural and moral norms, which by and large discouraged greed and almost never gave rise to a model of endless growth in either production or profits. It is with the rise of 'the market' in Western Europe from the 18th century onwards that greed came to be treated as a positive human tendency, which fosters dynamism and the idea of linear 'progress' of societies and economies becomes all powerful.[21] In a paper about innovations in Indian handlooms, published in the journal Technology and Culture, two scholars have argued that it is the dominant accounts of technology and innovation, which assume linear development and a movement of societies towards modernity:

"Alternative views offer ways to grasp innovations that circulate in time, in contrast to innovations as ever progressing way from the past in linear time.
… Building on a broadened conception of innovation and a symmetrical engagement of scholars and practitioners, we thus have an opportunity to recast the technologically backward and vulnerable weaver from the past into a convivial companion for the journey to a sustainable future."[22]

[21] *Bazaars Conversations and Freedom: For a market culture beyond greed and fear* by Rajni Bakshi, Penguin: Delhi, 2009.

[22] Innovation in Indian Handloom Weaving by Annapurna Mamidipudi, Wiebe E. Bijker Technology and Culture, Volume 59, Number 3, July 2018, pp. 509-545

Such perspectives are difficult for policy makers to engage with because they threaten entrenched notions of what is progress and who is backward. The task of cultivating new forms of 'seeing' is made still more difficult by the fact that many activist interventions tend to be based on knowledge of only some pieces of the puzzle or are focussed on specific, sometimes narrow, demands – thus not being able to present a coherent over-arching framework. In addition, both public and private sector investments are still predominantly driven by the quest for monetary profits – regardless of avowed commitments to the triple bottom line of "people, planet and profit."

At the same time, the staggering scale of the agrarian crisis is drawing attention to difficult questions about the kind of infrastructure that has been promoted over the last half century. The unbreathable air of most Indian cities is another powerful incentive for rethinking the model of development rather than seeing the pollution as a problem that can be fixed by better management of the situation. Above all, water is a life or death issue with unavoidable immediacy. At the time of writing, in November 2018, there are reports of some villages in Maharashtra emptying out due to lack of water. Over more than half a century some of the most intense investment in dams, canals and borewells has happened in Maharashtra – and it is now annually afflicted with a severe water crisis.

For the last four decades the advocates of alternative paradigms of development visions have tended to assume that such crises would eventually widen the space for alternative perspectives on growth, development and progress. Now, the realities of accelerating climate change give rise to the very real possibility that the required transition to a re-growth or post-growth Sarvodaya economy may not happen at a speed and on a scale that can prevent catastrophic suffering.

Since pessimism is for better times, a luxury we cannot afford, where do we go from here?

First and foremost – refuse to play along when the term 'sustainable' is attached to what today constitutes 'development', with its promotion of endless wants in an economy of perpetual growth.

Secondly, use all possible forums for dialogue between diverse perspectives aimed at co-creating the tangible details of a post-growth Sarvodaya model of society and bazaar – for this will necessarily and indefinitely be a work-in-progress.

The first condition is already being fulfilled by activist groups who tend to remain on the margins of both the political discourse and economic activity. An overview of such groups

can be found on the platform of Vikalp Sangam.[23] However, there is little or no work on the second condition – of dialogue between policy makers and investors on the one side and votaries of alternative paradigms on the other.

As long as this situation persists the term ‘sustainable infrastructure’ will mean little more than resource efficiency, ie. building more roads with less cement, steel and water consumption. And living examples of self-sustained and creative livelihoods, like the spinner on the UNEP handbook’s cover, will be reduced to serving as token poster figures while the global economy hurtles down the opposite direction.

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[23] http://www.vikalpsangam.org/