

Safeguarding Earth's Bounty: The Responsible Use of Resources

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to examine the relationship between environmental degradation due to unsustainable economic activity, colonial depredation, over exploitative mining of diamond, gold and uranium (besides other minerals), use of inappropriate technology and conflict within a country's borders and wars between countries. The paper is drawn largely from books, magazines, newspapers and internet. Water is a source of conflict between individuals, villages, states and countries as a sizable part of the world has become either water-stressed or water-scarce. Humans having 70% of water in their corporal constitution are going to face serious conflict situation in years ahead over it. Interestingly, the earth too is 70 per cent water. India has been one of the few countries where the idea of sustainable use of water resources has percolated to the masses and there is a gigantic people's initiative to conserve, store and promote cautious and frugal use of water. Water issues are outstanding between India and China (which diverts Brahmaputra waters away from India) and Pakistan, which has similar complaints against India regarding Indus water. We see relative peace and gradual development of goodwill between once warring countries in the years following resolution of such conflicts, many of them over water. This paper carries a gendered perspective as women, being preservers of life and environment, have been in the forefront of peace and sustainability movement. It should help a better grasp of the matrix of issues and promote restorative action.

Key Words : Gender, Sustainable development, Water conflict, Environment, Mining

If PPT required : No

This paper proposes to examine the relationship between environmental degradation due to unsustainable economic activity, colonial depredation, over exploitative mining of diamond, gold and uranium (besides other minerals), use of inappropriate technology and conflict within a country's borders and wars between countries.

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(A)ll bets are off in a world of frighteningly fast change that is planetary in scope and geologic in time. The weather itself has become uncanny, rendered freakish by the unceasing pollution put out by people, by us. We have created our own natural disasters, which are now more dangerous and more devastating because of our interference (Biello, 2016, p. 269).

How has it come about? Through reckless use of fossil fuels, massive deforestation destroying earth's cover in crucial places, tearing the ozone sheet with green house gases (produced by fossil fuel burning cars, other road vehicles, railway engines, industrial plants, besides chlorofluorocarbon gas used so far in fridges, air-conditioners and similar devices). These are just a few issues in a long list.

All this has been done with blind, ceaseless, economic activity, by recklessly mining earth's resources, guzzling and wasting huge water resources, leaving behind contaminated water unfit for even agriculture and further contaminating the underground aquifers which have been the most reliable source of supply of clean drinking water.

Much of it has come in the name of development.

GFN (Global Footprint Network) director and co-founder, Mathis Wackernagel, has questioned this model of development, saying human beings will need 3.9 planets like the earth if they live like Americans, 5.1 if they live like Kuwaitis and 4.8 if they use resources like Australians (McDonald, 2015).

Wackernagel's comment is reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi's observation that the world has enough resources for our needs, but not enough for our greed. The humility and protective stance of these pious souls vis-a-vis nature and the disadvantaged masses hit by "development" aggression is reflected in all the people working to protect the Mother Earth from more injury.

David Biello calls it "the unnatural world", because the natural world we inherited from our ancestors has changed in critical ways and is no longer natural. Human greed is mainly responsible for this. As beautifully depicted in the Hollywood film *Avataar*, humans are prepared to go anywhere, (including the film's moon, Pandora) try to enslave the local ancient indigenous tribes of hominoids, kill them and capture a precious mineral for the 22nd century technology available only on the Alpha Centauri star system.

This has a clear resonance in Mahasweta Devi's novel *Hajar Chaurasir Ma* about the realities of helpless and disempowered people joining together to resist dominance and being branded as Naxalites. Her short stories also sympathetically describe the struggle of the Sabar tribe of West Bengal which brought her the endearing sobriquet of "Sabar's Mother". The *Avataar* film and Mahasweta Devi's fiction highlight the same human capitalist greed for grabbing vital resources of indigenous people, uprooting or exterminating them with the help of the state and archaic laws.

What Mahasweta did in her fiction is essentially being done by Nandini Sundar, a professor of social anthropology at Delhi School of Economics and a fierce warrior for the marginalised people, particularly the tribals, in non-fiction. Her latest, *The Burning Forest*, is a heavily documented, immaculately written indictment of the national war on tribes inadequately labelled as Naxalites. Intellectuals, writers and activists of their cause have been maliciously branded as "Urban Naxals" to deter them from trying to come to the rescue of these beleaguered tribals.

Sundar documents the ceaseless armed conflict between the government and Maoists which has destroyed the habitat, lives and livelihoods of some of

India's poorest and citizens in Bastar, which happens to have some of India's biggest mineral resources:

The plateaus are ancient, but the first geological phenomenon in the region, older even than gnesis, are the Dharwar rocks formed over 500 million years ago. These form three distinct ferrous hill ranges each running north to south: the Chargaon-Kondapakha- Hahladdi hills in Rajghat in the north and the Bailadilla hills in the South. It is here that iron entered the soul of the nation, from here that the origins of time return to haunt the present (Sundar, 2016, p. 9).

The colonial legacy of looking disdainfully at the ruled, bullying them and silencing them with state brutality has been adopted as an inheritance by our civil and military establishment. Bastar tribals are caught in a pincer- hold of the military and the militant. It is not a coincidence that their area has valuable minerals, including iron, as shown in the above quote from Sundar. The iron in our souls hardened our hearts to the sorrows of the local tribals and desensitised us to human distress as such.

New Political Borders:

Across the world Western colonial rulers created new political borders that divided people of a single stock in two, three or more groups living under different countries that did not bother about their livelihood, their distinct ethnicity and culture.

These devastating consequences have not fully played out today. The Indian subcontinent has not fully recovered from the Partition of India and later, partition of Pakistan. The subcontinent is not at peace with itself and barely away from a war, or civil war.

The Middle East is yet another example. The area that was largely at peace with itself before the two World Wars was deeply disturbed for decades to come with the Balfour Declaration at the end of World War I in 1917. This British declaration sought to create a Jewish state, Israel, after dividing Palestine in two parts- one for Jews, another for Arabs.

This idea looked clean and reasonable on paper, but was ominously messy, dangerous and unjust for the Palestinian Arabs, seven million of whom were uprooted from their homes, lands, olive orchards and religious places to make way for the Jewish refugees pouring in from Europe to build their own state Israel with full Western backing (Beauchamp, Z., May 14, 2018). The displaced

Arabs were not pleased at the sight of their lands, homes and orchards being taken away. The conflict still continues as the Palestinians protest continuous misappropriation of their lands for building Jewish settlements and Israeli military installations in Palestinian land. The UN has objected to it for the umpteenth time and at least five US Presidents including Jimmy Carter, Ronald Regan, George Bush Senior, Bill Clinton and Barrack Obama have expressed disapproval without effect (Washington Watch, July 6, 2009).

The early planners set aside Jerusalem as a holy place for the three Abrahamic faiths –Judaism, Christianity and Islam –with Jews and Christians concentrated in Western Jerusalem and Muslims in the East. Hence, Israelis had to be content with the Western part and leave the East for Muslim Arabs. But now Israel and America want the whole of Jerusalem as Israeli capital, which Arabs, the UN and most countries reject as illegal. This also is a mess created by colonialists leaving the area.

The newly drawn borders by Western colonial rulers have left Iraq, Syria and Palestine struggling to come to terms with their new national identities in a strange political milieu.

Maps of these countries were redrawn, scattering different, culturally unified ethnic communities into different countries destroying their national integrity. The Kurdish people are a tragic example. There are Kurds in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and neighbouring lands. Nowhere do they constitute a majority, nor do they fit into any national narrative. Everywhere they are tolerated as a minority ethnic group, but nowhere as a main constituent of national power and authority.

The wars and civil wars of the Middle East and Africa are products of colonial legacy in one way or the other. In Africa's civil wars and, particularly in the case of Islamic guerrilla movements like Boko Haram and Islamic State, the main targets have often been young women. Boko Haram has kidnapped thousands of Muslim women and made them sex slaves, even though the BH claims itself to be Islamic warriors. Much of the brunt has been borne by women in conflict situations where their bodies have been used as conquered territory.

Colonial Depredation:

In the distressed Afro- Asian lands all violence is associated with colonial depredation in one way or the other. They have divided countries and people in a way

that has encouraged dispossessed people to resort to extralegal measures. Warring groups have foreign sources of income, mostly traced to Western agencies. Behind most of the violence and repression of local people is the Western attempt to control underground resources that the former colonial powers covet.

Oil is the undoing of Arab countries on whom some of the most despicable, corrupt and ruthless local rulers have been placed by the US and major European powers. By creating Israel and appointing pro- West rulers these countries have ensured free flow of cheap oil. The US defence secretary at the time of the last Iraq war said Iraq was "floating on oil". Hence, a fig leaf of justification for the US attack. Earlier the US had claimed to dispossess Iraq of its imagined weapons of mass destruction, which was not there at all. It was oil. Likewise Afghanistan's undoing is its huge deposits of gas.

Seven countries of Africa have been devastated by civil war over diamond (Brilliant Earth, n.d.). The countries are: Siera Leone, Liberia, Angola, the Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Diamonds fuel civil wars by financing both national militaries and rebel militias in a violent spiral. In wars over diamond by national militaries and rebel militias, 3.7 million people had died over the years and millions of people are still struggling to cope with their consequences (Amnesty International, 2007). The number of deaths increased to around 4 million in studies done later (Statistics, 2013). About the blood diamonds, CBS News correspondent Bob Simon has written that the all this resulted in enormous bloodshed, death and monumental human rights abuses. The Revolutionary united Front (RUF) had unleashed terror in Sierra Leon.

This country's people are destitute but the mines in and around it are the richest in this world. Sierra Leon contributes 10-20% of the blood diamonds in America (Danny, 8 June, 2013).

Nurturers of Life:

A few years ago while researching for my Ph.D. programme I had a revelation: In the aftermath of India's Partition, when millions of uprooted people from both sides of the newly-created borders left their land, home and hearth to go to the other side and try to build a new life from the scratch in lands unfamiliar and among people who were often very different, it was the women who

created a semblance of home and belonging, building life from anew.

Like the foundation of a strong building they provided the emotional strength to the new communities even though they were largely invisible and insufficiently acknowledged. Casting a panoramic look on today's global struggle to protect the environment one sees dedicated women leading powerful movements, spending a lot of time and energy, often risking their life, limb and freedom in countries ruled by cruel and corrupt dictators. I would like to talk about a few of them to put their work in context and pay them respect. Those women in their hundreds of thousands who are not mentioned by name here are as worthy of our respect as the few mentioned by name.

When we look at the impressive gallery of great women environmentalists (who have often lent strength to people's rights movements like democratic and civil liberties rights, right to food, forest dwellers' and tribal rights and primarily, right to equality), we rather prefer to begin with "Saint Rachel, the nun of nature". Rachel Carson was not canonised as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church, but environment activists everywhere lovingly call her "saint". And for good reason.

Before her path breaking *Silent Spring* came out in 1962, there was little awareness of the great hazard pesticides had brought to humans, birds, animals and a wide range of fauna. Carson was dying from breast cancer, even though her breasts had been surgically removed and she had lost all hair because of chemotherapy. Within a year of the publication of her book she testified on June 4, 1963 before a senate subcommittee on pesticides.

Senator Ernest Gruening, a democrat from Alaska, told her about the book: "Every once in a while in the history of mankind, a book has appeared which has substantially altered the course of history." (Griswold, Sep 21, 2012). In the book that has sold over two million copies and influenced the environment movement like no other, she argued that synthetic pesticides, particularly DDT, deeply sabotaged nature.

They not only killed insects, but also moved up the food chain, harmed bird and fish populations and threatened children often through entering mothers' milk and other food stuff. "Our heedless and destructive acts enter into the vast cycles of the earth and in time return to bring hazard to ourselves" (Rachel Carson Council, n.d.). She told the subcommittee.

By writing what she called her "poison book", she

had taken on "some of the most powerful industrial forces in the world", which launched a huge propaganda campaign against the author and the book. "Scientists" were encouraged to attack the book as anti-progress. It was also blamed for uncontrolled malaria in Africa, to check which one of the strategies was to kill mosquitoes (responsible for spreading the disease) with DDT.

The book begins with a myth, "A Fable for Tomorrow" about "a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings.... Then a mysterious blight falls this place. No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves," she wrote (Carson, 1962, pp. 1-2). This spring was not alive with the chirping of birds in the woods. The birds died when they ate insects killed with DDT. Their death signalled a silent spring.

The book was a wake-up call to humanity and an enduring inspiration for two generations of environment activists.

Several names of such heroines of environment protection movement (which often involves peace, justice, women's and human rights and fair politics) from all over the world come to mind in such moments. Let us talk about the Nobel Peace Laureate, Wangari Maathai for a while. This stalwart from Kenya was beaten up and jailed for staging a protest against practices that degraded the environment with the connivance of corrupt government officials and politicians in power.

A small excerpt from her acceptance speech shows how wide and neatly interconnected the environment protection movement's agenda is:

Although this prize comes to me, it acknowledges the work of countless individuals and groups across the globe. They work quietly and often without recognition to protect the environment, promote democracy, defend human rights and ensure equality between women and men. By doing so, they plant seeds of peace (Maathai, 2004)

Mother of Sustainable Development:

Gro Harlem Brundtland, rightly called "mother of sustainable development", is the person who articulates so clearly:

(P)overty in the developing world was less cause than effect of contemporary environmental degradation, the outcome of insensitive technology transfer that pauperised people and natural systems.

If all the world's people were to live like North Americans, a planet four times as large would be needed. Only sustainable development could blend the fulfilment of human needs with the protection of air, soil, water and all forms of life—from which ultimately, planetary stability was inseparable. (Brundtland, 1987)

Brundtland, the first female prime minister of Norway, was elected thrice to the position. She was Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) from 1998 to 2003.

In 1983 the UN Secretary General asked her to chair a World Commission on Environment and Development, which soon came to be known as Brundtland Commission. She had a deep and enduring influence on the commission's work.

Over the long course of extensive public hearings “distinguished by their inclusiveness”, she got confirmed that health was a human right and issues of development also involved peace, human rights, equality, fair play and responsible governance. The commission's report (also called the Brundtland Report), titled our Common Future, was presented in London in April 1987 (within a year of her becoming prime minister again). It led to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development on June 3, 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

She put her philosophy on health and development in her acceptance speech after she was elected as Director General of WHO in 1998:

What is our key mission? I see WHO's role as being the moral voice and technical leader in improving health of the people of the world. Ready and able to give advice on the key issues that can unleash development and alleviate suffering. I see our purpose to be combating disease and ill health, promoting sustainable and equitable health systems in all countries. (Norway in the UN, 14 June 2017)

Women in India's People's Movements:

Nearer home, women have been trying to improve people's lives through organisations and movements focused on rights to food, right to information, women's right, health and education as well as environmental protection resisting dams that flood hundreds of villages, uproot tribals and other weaker people and destroy livelihoods.

The leadership of such movements by women is horizontal, non-hierarchical and collective. Every

participant is a leader in her own right and, the most familiar face in the movement (the informal head) takes decision in consultation with her colleagues.

One of the leading activists of right to information, right to life and livelihood, community development and civil rights, Aruna Roy, told an interviewer after getting the Magsaysay Award in 2000 for community leadership that she could not have succeeded without the support of dedicated, talented but so called ordinary people because alone one cannot bring about a socio-economic change (Bora, 2000). This is how women leaders bring vital change in society without hubris, with humility and by becoming part of the people and local landscape. After seven years of work in the coveted Indian Administrative Service she quit her job in 1975 to do full-time social work.

Roy told the Rediffinter viewer that when the Magsaysay Foundation intimated her about the award she asked them that instead of awarding her for the grassroots-level work, her organisation and its entire workforce should be honoured. But the Foundation told her that there was no provision for that. “Then I asked the village people and women activists with whom I work and all asked me to accept the award. I am accepting the honour on their behalf,” (Bora, 2000)

Roy was a member of India's National Advisory Council (NAC) from 2004-2006 and from 2010 to 2013. She played a crucial role in the passage of national legislations from the Right to Information (RTI) and the Right to Employment law (MGNREGA) in 2005. The RTI is the first national legislation in which common people played an important role right from drafting it to getting it passed through parliament. Around 8 million applicants seek information every year under the act (Watson Institute, 2020).

Roy is an important member of many democratic struggles and campaigns, and currently is the President of the National Foundation of Indian Women (NFIW). A winner of many awards, and laurels, she was listed as one of the most influential people in the world by Time magazine in 2011.

Quite a few movements for environment protection and people's rights are led by some of the most highly qualified and experienced women in India.

There is a large number of women working on the above issues, some well-known, others “so-called ordinary people”, in the words of Aruna Roy. Nobody in this huge work of restoring damaged environment and

livelihoods is unimportant. However, it is worthwhile to note some names, recognised all over the world: Arundhati Roy, Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi, Nandini Sundar, Vandana Shiva and Mira Shiva. By no means is it an exhaustive list of illustrious women working in their own idiosyncratic way to protect mother earth, her vital resources and creating a more equitable world for her children. Motherhood being common to both, caring, protecting and nurturing is part of women's nature, and eco- feminism is hinged on this eternal truth.

Water: A Shrinking Asset:

Water is an asset on which all life forms depend for survival and growth. Human body is constituted of 70 percent of it. This is true of all humans: saints and sinners, mahatmas and maulanas, bishops and rabbies, without exception. The Archbishop of Canterbury (UK) is the head of the Anglican Church, which makes him an equivalent of the Pope of Catholics, the only difference being that the British sovereign is figurehead of the Anglican Church, who stays aloof from affairs of church, which is run by the Archbishop of Canterbury .To make a parallel, the British sovereign is like the Indian President in church affairs while the Archbishop runs church affairs unhindered, like the Indian Prime Minister.

I needed this rather prolonged detour to put a mischievous remark of Bernard Shaw in context: "Even the Archbishop of Canterbury is 70 percent water." Shaw, the agnostic, tried to suggest the crucial importance of water and demonstrate a certain essential equality between the holiest of holy and commoners, including imperfect Christians, agnostics and atheists.

Sandra Postel, director of Global Water policy Project wrote in her *Pillars of Sand*:

Water, unlike other scarce, consumable resources, is used to fuel all facets of society, from biology and economy to aesthetics and spiritual practice. Water is an integral part of ecosystems, interwoven with the soil, air, flora and fauna. Since water flows, use of a river or aquifer in one place will affect and (be affected by) its use in another, possibly distant, place (quoted in State of the World, 2005, p.80)

Almost all issues of water are concerned under three heads: quality, quantity and timing. Today a large number of countries face all the three problems: quality of river water and aquifers compromised by excessive use of pesticides, fertilisers, untreated sewage and industrial effluents pumped into rivers without sufficient treatment.

In the above cases more stringent laws and municipal regulation are required to encourage greater use of organic, non-toxic (to people and animals) pesticides, improving agricultural practices (two-thirds of available water is used for agriculture) to improve pest-resistance through selected use of pest-resistant plant varieties as well as through the use of genetically engineered plants that carry some of the genes of hardy plants growing in arid and desert climates needing very little moisture. Use of sprinkler technology and drip irrigation can dramatically reduce the need for heavy irrigation, thus mitigating a lot of water shortage.

In terms of quantity, India is among many countries described as water-stressed (The World Bank, March 22,2019). There is a nexus between quality and quantity: decreasing water quantity concentrates pollution while excessive water quantity, such as flooding, can lead to contamination from overflowing sewage.

Use of contaminated water is hazardous for health. Sometimes the water is so severely contaminated with pesticides, fertilisers and nutrients that it is unfit for even agriculture.

Water shortage is also addressed by building check dams at slopes and foothills that checks water from running off and be used for recharging aquifers and nearby dry wells, besides being stored in big ponds and tanks for year-long use. A decade ago, excessive mining of groundwater for domestic use emptied the aquifers below parts of Chennai. As nature abhors vacuum, saline water from the sea ingressed into the empty aquifers and made then further unusable, causing crisis of drinking water and often insufficient, or useless, water for bathing, washing clothes and cooking. Once the municipal corporation began demanding rain water harvesting in public buildings, schools, housing societies and co-operatives, the problem began to ease.

With large in-house storage the scarcity of water for washing, flushing toilets and watering lawns eased considerably. Controlling water run- off recharges the ground water aquifers gradually and allows vegetation to grow abundantly. In many cases, it is not the scarcity of water itself, but mismanagement of this vital resource. Another way of regulating water use in an environmentally sustainable way is to metre water supply in all municipal areas, big or small. Another way of ensuring just use of this vital resource is by putting differential prices for high income, middle-income, low income and economically distressed groups, largely

identified by whether they live in jhuggis, low-income or middle-income flats or pent houses and palatial homes. At present rate the advantaged groups have a greater access to water than shanty dwellers, both paying for water at the same rate.

No discussion on the steep struggle to protect people from the destructive impact of dam politics and economics would be complete without a description, however brief, of the vision and restless toil of Medha Patkar, the Narmada Bachao Andolan's, (Save the Narmada Movement) most recognisable face. She founded and continues to provide it with a non-hierarchical leaderships.

Because dams are generally situated near the ancient homes of the indigenous nations, it is ultimately rural and ethnic minorities far from the central corridors of power who are typically forced to pay the price. Ill considered development plans, forced evictions, and resettlement with inadequate compensation generate conditions and conflicts that threaten the security of individual and group rights to culture, self determination, livelihood, and life itself.

Patkar launched the Narmada Bachao Andolan with local tribals, farmers, fish workers, labourers in 1985. Human rights activists, environmentalists, scientists, academics and intellectuals came along to join the non-violent people struggle for just and sustainable development. The Sardar sarovar dam, one of the biggest on Narmda, has been a particular focus of the movement that questions social and environmental costs, undemocratic planning and unequal distribution of benefits.

Among the laudable results of the movement regarding the huge Sardar Sarovar and other dams along the Narmada river, thousands of families got land-based rehabilitations. The movement continues the fight the displacement without rehabilitation of more than 40,000 families residing in the submergence areas of the Sardar Sarovar (Iavataar, Aug 8, 2017).

Patkar has been active on many fronts: environmental protection, right to health and food, education for the economically distressed locals etc. With her "Ghar Bachao, Ghar Banao Andolan" launched in 2005 after the Maharashtra government demolished 75,000 houses of the poor (Yasmin, 1 Dec., 2016). A powerful people's movement was launched with a huge rally at Azad Maidan in Mumbai by Medha Patkar and her colleagues. Because of the mass action the communities were rebuilt on the same sites. It continues

to struggle for the right to shelter, water, electricity, sanitation and livelihood.

Through National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), she is able to work on a wide range of issues related to socio-economic justice, political justice and equality. She is the national convenor of NAPM, which facilitates unity and provides strength to people's movements in India, fighting against oppression and questioning the current development model so as to work towards a just alternative.

As great environmental catastrophe and extreme weather catastrophes there is no time left for the luxury of complacency. As Amitav Ghosh writes: "The events set in motion by global warming have a more intimate connection with humans than did the climatic phenomenon of the past—this is because we have all contributed in some measure, great or small, to their making" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 43).

As mentioned in the earlier parts of this paper, climate change this time round, is almost exclusively due to reckless economic activity and extraction of earth's resources. The "climatic phenomenon of the past" were geological and comic, rather than human-induced. Now that the accountability of we, the humans, has been fixed, we owe it to ourselves and the suffering mother earth to set about making whatever amends are possible.

Through the above short sketches and the coherent narrative around them I have tried to make the points that earth's resources are finite and must be used judiciously and equitably; that reckless extraction of resources by colonial powers had depleted them and impoverished some developing countries, which implies that the developed nations (often former colonial powers) have to think of compensating for the loot; that women have been in the lead to restore earth to health and promote judicious utilisation of resources. Their work needs to be recognised and supported for a better future for all of us. This by no means amounts to denial of men's equally important work.

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