

## **The Conquest of Nature-A Critique on Tackling the Problems Relating To It Soon After India's Independence.**

**Dr Anuradha Jaiswal**

*Associate Professor, Dept.Of History, R.N.College, Hajipur.*

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**ABSTRACT :** *During independence three quarters of the workforce was in agriculture, a sector which also contributed close to 60% of India's gross domestic product. There was a small but growing industrial sector, which accounted for about 12% of the workforce, and 25% of G.D.P. There existed enormous variations in agricultural practices across the subcontinent. These variations notwithstanding, everywhere in India agriculture was largely empirical, based on knowledge and traditions passed down over the generations rather than on innovative or scientific ideas. To the Indian nationalist, however continuity was merely a euphemism for stagnation. Almost from the time the Congress was founded in 1885, Indian nationalism had charged the British with exploitation of the peasantry. They had resolved that when power came to them, agrarian reform would be at the top of the agenda. The socialist elements in the Indian National Congress pushed the organization to commit itself to thoroughgoing land reform, as in the abolition of large holdings, the promotion of the security of tenants and the redistribution of surplus land. Further if India had to be industrialized which model it should follow? The Indian people had to choose whether they will come into closer contact with the outer world and become responsive to its influences or remain secluded and indifferent. Action not sentiment had to be the determining factor.*

**Keywords-** *Nationalist, Industrial, Biases, Gandhian, Centralized, Planning, Irrigation, Agrarian.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The peasant was the backbone of the Indian nation, and of the Indian economy.<sup>1</sup> There existed enormous variations in agricultural practices across the subcontinent. There was a broad division between the wheat regions of the north and west, where women generally did not participate in cultivation, and the rice regions of the south and east. These variations notwithstanding, everywhere in India agriculture was largely empirical, based on knowledge and traditions passed down over the generations, rather than on scientific ideas. Rural India was pervaded by an air of timelessness. Peasants, shepherds, carpenters, weavers, all lived and worked as their forefathers had done. As a survey of the 1940s put it, 'there is the same plainness of life, the same wrestling with uncertainties of climate, and the same financial indebtedness. To the Indian nationalist, however continuity was merely a euphemism for stagnation. Agricultural productivity was low, hence also levels of nutrition and health. About the only thing that was rising was population growth. However as medical services expanded, the death rate rapidly fell.

Almost from the time the Congress was founded in 1885, Indian nationalists had charged the British with exploitation of the peasantry. Three programmes seemed critical.<sup>2</sup> The first was the abolition of land revenue. The second was the massive expansion of irrigation, both to augment productivity and reduce dependence on the monsoon. The third was the reform of the system of land tenure. In north and east India, the British had encouraged a system of absentee landlordism. The forms of exploitation were manifold and highly innovative. The socialist elements in the Indian National Congress pushed the organization to commit itself to thoroughgoing land reform, as in the abolition of large holdings, the promotion of the security of tenants and the redistribution of surplus land. They also advocated an expansion in the provision of credit to overcome the widespread problem of rural indebtedness.

Agrarian reform had to be accompanied by a spurt in industrial growth. In colonial times there had existed a sharp divide between factories owned by British firms and those owned by Indians. Jute for instance was largely in the hands of the foreigner, cotton textiles in the hands of the native. While some Indian capitalists were studiously apolitical, others had been vigorous supporters of the Congress. They naturally hoped that when freedom came, the biases would be reversed, placing foreign capitalists were studiously apolitical, others had been vigorous supporters of the Congress. They naturally hoped that when freedom came, the biases would be reversed, placing foreign capitalists at a disadvantage. The question was if India had to be industrialized, which model should it

follow? Some nationalists wrote admiringly of the Soviet Union, and of the extraordinary use they have made of modern scientific knowledge in solving their problems of poverty and want. Another much admired model was Japan . Visiting that country during the First World War, the prominent Congress politician Lala Lajpat Rai marvelled at the transformation it had undergone, moving from (agrarian) primitivism to civilization in a mere fifty years.

In 1938 Congress set up a National Planning Commission, for prescribing a policy for economic development in a soon to be free India. Chaired by Jawaharlal Nehru, the committee had some thirty members in all – those divided almost equally between the worlds of science, industry and politics.<sup>3</sup> From Japan and Russia, the National Planning Commission took the lesson that countries that industrialized late had to depend crucially on state intervention. This applied with even more force to India, whose economy had been distorted by two centuries of colonial rule. In 1944, a group of leading industrialists issued what they called A Plan of Economic Development for India (known as Bombay Plan) . However the spirit was all in favour of centralized planning of the state occupying what was called the 'commanding heights' of the economy. Thus the Constitution of India directed the government to ensure that 'the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as best to subserve the common good. In the summer of 1951 the Planning Commission issued a draft of the first five-year plan. This focused on agriculture, the sector hardest hit by Partition. Besides increasing food production, the other major emphases of the plan were on the development of transport and communications, and the provision of social services. Mahalanobis was among other things the man who brought modern statistics to India.<sup>4</sup> A government resolution of 1956 classified new industries into three categories. Class 1 would be the 'exclusive responsibility' of the state, these included atomic energy, defense related industries, aircraft, iron and steel, electricity generation and transmission, heavy electricals, telephones and coal and other key minerals. Class II would witness both public and private sector participation, which included the lesser minerals, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, fertilizers, pulp and paper, and road transport. Class III consisted of all the remaining industries, to be undertaken ordinarily through the initiative and enterprise of the private sector.

If Mahalanobis was the chief technician of Indian planning, then Nehru was its chief missionary. Nehru believed that, in the Indian context, planning was much more than rational economics. It was good politics as well. Nehru hoped that the new projects would be a solvent to dissolve the schisms of caste and religion, community and region. On the economic side, Nehru singled out two activities as providing the 'essential bases' for planning, the production of power and the production of steel. At independence, India had only two steel plants, both privately owned, which produced just over a million tonnes a year. This was inadequate for an expanding economy, more so one that had committed itself to the building of heavy industries.<sup>5</sup> The private sector was barred from starting new enterprises in steel, which along with coal, shipbuilding, atomic energy and aircraft production was deemed too important to be subject to the profit motive. The second plan had set a target of 6 million tonnes of steel. The output was needed to provide inputs to other planned industries. But it was also a way of promoting forced savings. The Indian government signed three separate agreements for the construction of steel plants. The Germans would build one in Rourkela in Orissa, the Russians one in Bhilai in Madhya Pradesh, the British one in Durgapur in West Bengal.

In the economic modernization of India, large dams occupied a rather special place. Indian intellectuals greatly admired the Tennessee Valley Authority, the integrated project that was a cornerstone of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. <sup>6</sup> In the mid 1950s the political scientist Henry Hart wrote a lyrical account of the transformation of 'New India's River's. For Hart, these projects were 'the greatest of the monuments of free India' to them 'men and women come, in a pilgrimage growing season by season, to see for themselves the dams and canals and power stations. The most prestigious was the Bhakra Nangal project in northern India. This project would generate nearly a million kilowatts of electricity, while the water from the reservoir would irrigate 7.4 million acres of land, this carried in canals for whose excavation 30 million cubic yards of mud and stone had to be removed. This project was a form of compensation for the refugee farmers from west Punjab, a substitute for the canal colonies they had left behind on the other side of the border.

In the push to industrialize India, a key role had to be played by technology and technologists. In an underdeveloped country like India, science had to be made the handmaiden of economic progress, which scientists devoting their work, for augmenting productivity and ending poverty. At the time of Indian independence, a mere 0.1 percent of GNP was spent on scientific research. Within a decade the figure had jumped to 0.5 percent, later it was to exceed 1 percent. Homi Bhabha founded and directed two major scientific institutions. The first was the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Bombay whose work, as its name implies was aimed mostly at basic research. The second was the Atomic

Energy Commission, mandated to build and run India's nuclear power plants. Many new engineering colleges were also started. Five IITS were inaugurated between 1954 and 1964. The industrial bias of Indian planning was tempered by a range of programmes promoting agrarian uplift. Assured irrigation and chemical fertilizers increased agricultural productivity. But they could not solve what was a fundamental problem of rural India, inequality in access to land. Therefore, landless peasants were encouraged to settle in areas not previously under the plough. In the first decade of independence, close to half a million hectares of land were colonized, principally from material forests in the northern terai, the central Indian hills and the western Ghats.<sup>7</sup> A second way of tackling landlessness was to persuade large landholders to voluntarily give up land under their possession. This was a method pioneered by Vinoba Bhave. A third way of ending landlessness was to use the arm of the state. After Independence, the different states passed legislation abolishing the zamindari system, which under the British, had bestowed effective rights of ownership to absentee landlords. The abolition of zamindari freed up large areas of land for redistribution, while also freeing tenants from cesses and rents previously exacted from them.<sup>8</sup> After the end of zamindari, the state vested rights of ownership in their tenants. However their well being would have required a second stage of land reforms, where ceilings would be placed on holdings, and excess land handed over to the landless. This was a task that the government was unable or unwilling to undertake. Even after a decade of planning, access to land remained very unequal.<sup>9</sup> Further the Gandhians had deep reservations about large dams. They thought them costly and destructive of nature. But as Indians were soon finding out, dams were destructive of human community too. By the early 1950s reports began appearing of the sufferings of those displaced by dams.

### Conclusion

There was lot of critique relating to free-market, human capital as well as ecology. But at the time these notes of dissent were scattered, and they were politically weak. There was then an overwhelming consensus in favour of a heavy industry- oriented, star-supported model of development. This was a consensus's among intellectuals, no fewer than twenty –three of the twenty four economists asked to comment on the Mahalanobis plan agreed with it in principle. This consensus was shared by large sections of the ruling class as well. In their Bombay plan the leading industrialists had asked for an 'enlargement of the positive functions of the state'. They approvingly quoted the Cambridge economist A.C.Pigou's view that freedom and planning were entirely compatible. Indeed, these big businessmen went so far as to state that the 'the distinction between capitalism and socialism has lost much of its significance from a practical standpoint'.<sup>10</sup> No economic organization can function effectively or possess lasting qualities unless it accepts as its basis a judicious combination of the principles associated with each school of thought. The economic integration of India is a consequence of its political integration. Greater the movement of goods and capitals and people across India, the greater the sense of one's own country. In the first decade of independence, it was the public sector which dominated and furthered sense of unity. Andhras laboured in steel plant in Bhilai and

lived alongside Punjabis and Gujrati's.<sup>11</sup> More recently it has been the private sector, ensuing profits as well as furthering the process of national integration. Migration is not only in professional classes, but also like barbers working in the city of Bangalore, come from UP, same way carpenters from Rajasthan. However economically laggard states have been sinking deeper into provincialism and facing monetary hardships. Still since independence efforts are going on to bridge economic disparity between states.

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