

## Recognize this Face?

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It is an ancient war, and it goes on. It might have started in our pre-history, in some distant and obscure past as fights between immediate neighbours over control of surrounding territories to collect food, hunt or access water. It was a complex fight for survival both against human adversaries in hostile environment, and learning at the same time to be a part of it. It was indeed a delicate balance. Nature was still nature, not just a depository of natural resources, and humans like other species had to be both for and against nature in their struggle for survival.

That balance tipped somewhere. The march of 'civilization' came to be defined almost exclusively as a process of conquest of nature by man, and his increasing domination over all his surroundings, including other human beings. Development of powerful technology made war on both man and nature easier, and civilization came to be driven by the arrogance of growing technological power which made civilized man feel like Cesar, 'I come, I see, I conquer'. In this rush for extending control, it was indeed an even headier feeling when the special target was rival human beings. Slaves were the most valued prize of wars.

And yet, all along there have been voices of skepticism against this arrogance of power expressed in different ways. They failed to change the course, but inspired many to think differently. Spinoza added an almost new dimension to western philosophy by insisting that the ethics of man can only have meaning as part of the beautiful grand design of nature. For the poet Blake beauty was in the splendour of naturalness. The conventional system of knowledge codified in the West dismissed an intellectual tradition that considered nature animate as simply 'metaphysical'. This was incompatible in every way with the ruthless exploitation of nature in the name of progress.

In twentieth century India M.K Gandhi became its most original and vocal exponent. In opposing colonialism as an outcome of Western civilization, he articulated a philosophical position in which the principle of non-violence extended beyond human beings to nature. His distrust of machine civilization, of material progress, even of modern science went far beyond modern 'environmentalism'. It was rooted in a system of belief in which nature was animate and, in one with man (and God). He propounded his personal, political, moral and economic philosophy from this point of view, which even most of his disciples found hard to accept whole heartedly; indeed its practicability remains uncertain to date.

In some ways Gandhi was the culmination of a long Indian intellectual tradition that also had echoes in some 'little' traditions of the west. More interestingly perhaps, it was also a source of inspiration for a few great scientific insights. At the beginning of the twentieth century J.C. Bose( a close friend of Rabindranath Thakur sharing in some ways a similar outlook), one of the earliest path finders of modern bio-physics thought of laboratory experiments to show that plants and trees are 'living' and, capable of carrying messages through electrical impulses.

Nevertheless the view that nature is animate has remained at best at the margin of our consciousness. The dominant system of 'modern knowledge has on occasions been as unforgiving to this view as the Medieval Church had been to heresy to those opposed its theology. This is understandable because machine civilization is founded largely on this dominant system of knowledge with a view to conquer nature, not to live in harmony with it. Most recently misgivings have been articulated politically by various shades of the Green movement. They question the consequences of this ruthless 'conquest' of nature as the integral part of civilization, and yet, seldom pose directly the politically defining question, 'who is civilizing whom and for what purpose'?

It has always been a politically loaded question that refuses to go away in a world where the loot and plunder of nature and of people are often far too visible. It is most blatant when military force is openly applied; less obvious when it operates through the market mechanism, trade or diplomacy. However the end result is broadly the same, colonization of nature and, of those who have been living as a part of it for resources to feed mostly the already 'civilized'.

The problem came into sharper focus as 'imperialism' in the modern context. From the economic point of view, it was less important in that pre-industrial age to engage in the steady exploitation of nature for securing cheap sources of raw materials. Consequently, the predisposition of pre-capitalist imperial expansion was more towards short term loot and plunder and political subjugation for the glory of the invading imperial power. Ritualistic gifts and tributes were more symbols of subservience, not particularly useful for the imperial economy. Things began to change when long distance trade routes on sea made more or less steady supply from distant lands possible. Portugal and Spain led the way, and other European powers followed. In the process ambitions for the glorification of the empire through territorial expansion began to get inseparably intertwined with economic motive through trade. This indeed was the historical watershed, a sort of peaceful coexistence between the status of the empire enhanced by the plunder and loot on the one hand, and political domination through establishment of colonies on the other.

However economic compulsions began to upset this balance with the development of industrial capitalism. As factory production conquered local artisan production and, increasingly harnessed mechanical energy to augment phenomenally the

capacity to produce, larger supply of raw materials was needed on the one hand to feed factories, and, on the other larger markets for selling industrial products became essential. Rising international economic competition among the then industrial powers of Europe led to search for cheaper raw materials in distant lands. At home wages were restrained as far as possible by a powerful capitalist class against resulting in a slow rate of expansion of domestic market which was unable to absorb the rapidly increasing industrial production of the factory system. Capitalism turned outwards in search of cheap raw materials as well as markets. At this stage imperialism became the defining face of capitalism. The 'metropolis' of capitalism was a group of industrialized capitalist nations who were constantly engaged in trade wars, but at times went to war among themselves over control of foreign territories.

However, several variations within this broad historical pattern took place over time. Direct and continuous application of open military force on a large scale over longish period to achieve these ends was cumbersome, often far too costly. While brutal and frequent military suppression of the 'natives' whenever necessary always remained a method, a more insidious option was to present a more 'human' face of imperialism. Between these two extremes of direct repression and cooption, the variations that occurred were tinged with prejudices about race, influence of the climate and the power of local resistance. They were reflected in the variety of ways the colonies were set up and administered.

It might help at this point to think in terms of an analytical metaphor from the theory of games. Use of open force of short duration is like a 'one shot game' in which the two parties expect to encounter only once. In these circumstances it is a natural economic strategy to extract in one encounter as much as possible— quick plunder and loot, leaving behind a devastated land. However, when the encounter is expected to recur over time the territory has to be cleared of native resistance by genocide for the colonizers to settle permanently on the same land. Or, a steady supply and a market outlet for the metropolis have to be assured like in strategy devised for 'repeated' games. Typically this tends to be more cooperative in character with both sides coming to terms with their strategic mutual dependence in enlightened self interest. However, this comforting outcome requires the parties to have more or less equal power e.g. access to counter strategies to inflict sufficient damage, so that the nature of strategic interdependence can be driven home. This postulate of nearly equal power is hardly the most relevant case for understanding the history of imperialism. Instead of voluntary cooperation in enlightened self interest, the crucial deviation that occurs is collaboration of the players of unequal power. The colonized collaborate with the colonizer resulting in various forms of unequal 'patron client' (or principal agent) relationships. However, such collaboration has to be partial, because it is never the case that the entire colonized people become the client. Imperialism typically creates and relies on a subset of the colonized population by privileging them in various ways. However, privilege by its very definition is exclusive, and restricted to a selected few; indeed if extended to

include all or most, it ceases to be a privilege (becomes a 'right' instead)! Therefore, as the counter point to the collaborating comprador class, imperialism also creates as under belly a vast mass of the exploited and oppressed, the real victims of imperialism.

With imperialism poised for its long haul colonial administration has to be compatible with the long term interest of the colonizers by reshaping the educational and legal structures. The hegemonic culture that gradually gets entrenched through this process becomes for the comprador class the only culture climate they ever care to know. They breathe as natural air this dominant cultural climate. Indeed, the victory of imperialism is complete when it conquers not only the land, but colonizes their minds of a large enough comprador class through whom it administers the colonies. Exploitation through various forms of exclusion of the majority is inevitable, because the comprador class as the administering agent of the imperial power is founded on privileges reserved for a minority. Indeed, exclusion from the colonial administrative, legal and educational system is an essential structural characteristic of a collaborative patron client relation. In consequence, economic exploitation of the majority continues in the 'business as usual' manner as its structurally embedded feature. Violence by the state is kept in the background except when state authority is challenged.

Initially imperialism was a class project for the imperial power at home. From its early phase of procuring foreign luxury goods by trade or loot for the aristocracy at home to the later phase when cheap sources of raw materials and foreign market became a compulsion for factory production, imperialist expansion had predominantly been driven by the interest of the upper classes. It changed character substantially from being a class project and appeared as a more inclusive nationalist project when the economic advantages of imperial exploitation of the colonial periphery began to percolate down to the working class at home. The 'labour aristocracy' at home became the counterpart of the comprador class in the colonies. Yet another escape route to greater economic opportunity was opened for the poor at home through settlements as colonizers in other foreign lands cleared through genocide and large scale extermination or dispossession of the original inhabitants (North and several countries of South America, Australia).

This transformation of imperialism from a predominantly class to a nationalist project dealt a double blow to international working class movements. The interest of the labour aristocracy became increasingly distinct from that of the vast mass of working people especially in the colonies, and the labour movements became divided along nationalistic lines. As a result, eruption of imperialist wars among rival capitalist powers got support as 'nationalist' cause from the respective working class of the warring country. In relatively peaceful times of milder trade wars, it continues to express itself through xenophobia.

And yet, despite all the turns and twists of history, the fundamental aspect and the

very reason for the existence of imperialism hardly changed. The ancient war goes on driven today by that same hunt for natural resources and conquest of 'other' people, gathering further momentum by increasingly powerful technology. Decolonization only changed the direction but not the goal of this march. As countries that were once formal or informal colonies gain political independence, the more successful among them join the march of civilization in the name of 'development' only to become colonizers themselves. The irony of history does not end there. The formerly colonized countries are relatively new in the race, and handicapped by an inherited past of economic and military weakness in a world of stronger competitors. And so, the direction and the target of the hunt change. If strength does not allow conquering other lands and people, regions are identified for the hunt of natural resources inside the country. Imperialism turns inwards, and the latecomers in the race wage war against their own citizen, but this time in the name of developing them.

Nevertheless, with the hunt for resources turning inwards history begins to repeat itself, but this time as a farce. Development again becomes a class project despite attempts at giving it the face of a nationalist project. Attempts converge on projecting 'national prestige' on the international scene as the main goal, and market driven rapid growth for which the hunt for natural resource becomes the essential means. This class project is made to appear inclusive and nationalistic by privileging a selected minority who gain disproportionately from this pattern of rapid growth. A new post-colonial comprador class soon emerges from the old privileged comprador class. However this time the task is easier because their mind has already been suitably colonized. It supports this process through the control of the bureaucracy and the media, while domestic and foreign big business, multilateral agencies like the World Bank, IMF and WTO make collaboration exceptionally attractive financially in poor countries. In the process, the show of democracy becomes a form increasingly devoid popular content, a shadow without substance.

By its own logic, the violent hunt follows the international pecking order of power. Among the new entrants to this race, a relatively more powerful country like China has greater ability to externalize its hunt for resources compared to a less powerful country like India. In this perverted 'nationalist' project, achieving a higher the rate of economic growth becomes synonymous with the speed with which the country climbs up the ladder of power. However, higher growth driven by this logic also means greater pressure for procuring natural resources by dispossessing those fellow citizens who are unfortunate enough to live in areas of abundant natural resources. With effortless ease the old colonial logic of "a white man's burden" returns to haunt the one time colonies. A 'civilized' class consisting of corporate leaders, sleek media persons and the wheeler dealer politicians with a pliant class of bureaucrats, join hands to 'civilize' and 'develop' the uncivilized. Even ethnic details of the old colonial ideology are not left out. The centuries old ancient homeland of the Adivasis (about 8% of the population) in resource rich regions and the

Dalits(16%) who are treated as rejects of the Hindu society together are among the poorest in rural India. Together they constitute just about a quarter of the total population, but account for more than half of those who fell prey to the violently predatory growth process. Dispossessed of their land, home, livelihood, family, close-knit communities and common properties, this ethnic war of the 'master race' continues to civilise relentlessly the 'primitives'.

Developmental terrorism on this massive scale is camouflaged by a liberalized and globalised market economy. Irrespective of the ideological colour of the political party in power in the states and in the federal centre join this hunt with great patriotism to dispossess the poor for making India (or their respective states) an emerging global power. National and multinational corporations are viewed as the muscle powers needed to win the race in countries like India. They are enabled with a special economic steroid by granting them almost free land, water bodies and rivers, mineral resources, forests, mountains, coast lines and anything else they might fancy with the democratic government in India at their service to acquire them for mining, industrialization and special economic zones (SEZ). This becomes the public purpose for private wealth, and corporate wealth grows at a dizzying rate with poverty stricken India producing billionaires at an alarmingly high rate. They are presented as the face of emergent India which the world is expected to admire.

Irrevocably however the balance of power must shift in this process. Increasingly powerful corporations manipulate with their money power to cripple further an already limping democracy through this gangrenous growth process. Under the empty shell of a multi-party democracy, a new script is written to reverse the balance, and make the principal the agent and the agent the principal. Corporations do not merely stop at bribing politicians, judges and bureaucrats; they begin to dictate terms and their larger compulsion is to transform India into a corporate state. Laws proposed for the special economic zones (SEZ) where corporations would rule supreme read almost like the chronicle of the death of Indian democracy foretold.

Unprecedented growth in a hollow democracy is dangled before the people, while both government and corporations deform systematically every aspect of democracy. The broad outlines of the new script that is being played out to present India's miraculous achievements are clear.

Act I: Despite overwhelming number of poor, India today has over sixty percent multi-millionaires parliamentarians who are there to represent the poor. A good part of these millions is made in land and other natural resource related deals (MOUs) including legal and illegal mining, destruction of forests, rivers, coast lines, and fertile multi-crop land because the public purpose of the government, is to create private wealth in the name of development.

Act II. As a result, representation through elections in the parliament becomes

prohibitively expensive ruling out participation of ordinary citizens. (Some estimates put the price of entry to the electoral process at an average of rupees 8 crores per contestant, which goes up to nearly 30 crores for contestants from). Consequently all major parliamentary political parties upholding our democracy are in the game of raising enormous funds mostly through land and natural resource related deals. Regional governments cheered by the federal state race to the bottom with increasingly favourable terms in natural resource deals, while corporations return the favour with big money to restrict entry of unwanted ordinary citizens to the charmed circle of the political class. Parliamentary parties, irrespective of colour and rhetoric help corporations to build a hollow democracy devoid of popular participation for emergent corporate India.

Final Act III. This theatre of democracy is set in the final act against the background of globalization, with the media and academia helping to project a well crafted image of India as an emerging global power. Occasionally reality intrudes and the script is temporarily lost. The play looks unconvincing when thousands die in a gas tragedy and democratic government has to crawl in front of large international corporations in full view of the audience. However the audience must realize that not sending wrong signals that might vitiate the international investment climate is so essential for high growth. So the play of the emergent global power goes on. The script reiterates that widening disparities among classes by privatizing basic needs like schooling and health is not a matter of shame, but a matter of pride. Children from privileged classes go to schools with world class facilities, the rich have access to world class health care, and the corporate controlled media focuses on these achievement keeping as far as possible the poor and poverty invisible. This emergent global power would lead the world with the maximum number of undernourished, crippled and illiterate children by the middle of the twenty first century. But that is at best a footnote to this script, better overlooked. Our middle class is a creature of this media, and is dazzled by its own image of glamour. It is an insidious process because our middle as well as our political class becomes ultimately a victim of the delusion it helped to create. They prepare willingly to secede from the poor majority in the country. And yet, it is no more than a delusion no matter how well crafted and sleekly presented. Will we be forced to recognize the true face in the mirror? Or, the well crafted mirror will continue to delude us until we are overcome by a violent turn of history?