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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE INCOMPATIBILITY OF GLOBAL WARMING AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

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Abstract

Global warming signifies an undesirable geographical status of the planet and highlights the alarming trend of the extinction of the planet due to this unprecedented phenomenon. It is mostly caused by the gradual increase in world temperature, deforestation, emission of greenhouse gases, the melting of ice, glaciers and other adverse climatic conditions. This negative trend carries a portent for the future - a future that looks bleak and alarming. Extreme and harsh weather conditions have become common in India and other Asian countries. India has been the worst hit due to frequent occurrence of floods and heatwaves. This alarming trend should force us to think of better planning and optimum utilisation of resources without their ruthless violation. The miserable conditions of contemporary life can be, in retrospect traced to the beginning of industrialisation and capitalist economy. The evils that plague our lives have been mostly caused by the ruthless exploitation of natural resources.

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Introduction:-

The veteran writer Ruskin Bond was asked lately, whether Coronavirus epidemic should make people across the globe rethink and contemplate about their relationship with Nature, he replied,

“I think all this has been possibly caused by too much interference and overexploitation of Nature, fuelled by our over-consumerism, materialism and soaring population. See what has happened with Amazon forests in Brazil. Lockdown has given people enough time to be in solitude and reflect on their lives and their relation with Nature”.¹

This statement throws light upon the journey of progress that we started and how it ended up. A journey from the past to the present times, the march of greed and high ambitions that began in the 18th century, or even a little before that, which would soon endanger our survival.

Let us understand this journey and how it subsequently has led to the phenomenon called global warming. First, we shall understand the meaning of the term and how the view of the great writer proves it true. Global warming signifies an undesirable geographical status of the planet and highlights the alarming trend of the extinction of the planet due to this unprecedented phenomenon. It is mostly caused by the gradual increase in world temperature, deforestation, emission of greenhouse gases, the melting of ice, glaciers and other adverse climatic conditions. This negative trend carries a portent for the future - a future that looks bleak and alarming. A situation like this cannot whatsoever be favourable for any kind of growth, be it social or economic. There is no question of compatibility of

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global warming and economic growth because we cannot speak of destruction of the planet and economic growth of nations in the same breath.

Global warming is a situation that has arisen as a result of man's insatiable thirst for power, material growth and better economic prospects. This mad race for materialism has led us to exploit and violate nature. If we study the current situation of economic growth across the world, we find that the pace of economic growth of countries has been far behind the extent of damage that we have caused to earth and its rich resources. Poverty, socio-economic inequality, and unemployment are the common problems faced by peoples and nations. Browsing through the news, I glanced at a couple of reports in the newspaper today and I could not help but be seriously concerned about the pitiable condition of the Indian nation. One of the reports speaks about the damage to crops due to late and heavy monsoon and the other piece of news draws attention to the alarming rise of poverty, unemployment and growing economic inequality. One can easily trace a similarity between the two. Both are correlated by the simple fact that the national crisis is the result of adverse climate changes which is a major factor in intensifying the financial crisis. Former US president, Barack Obama had issued a threat due to global warming to the countries across the world,

“There's one issue that will define the contours of this century more dramatically than any other, and that is the urgent threat of a changing climate.”²

Through this paper I would like to focus on the situation prevailing across the world due to global warming and comment on the reasons for the rise of this alarming situation. I will also state in brief a few solutions, that can help curtail this trend.

Extreme and harsh weather conditions have become common in India and other Asian countries. India has been the worst hit due to frequent occurrence of floods and heatwaves. It has already seriously affected crop yield. Scientists predict that India will soon have a reduced GDP. Dr. Roxy Mathew Koll, a scientist at the Pune-based Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology who, said

“South Asia, particularly India, Pakistan and China are hotspots in a warming world. All climate projections point out that these regions will be exposed to multiple and overlapping hazards at even 1.5 degrees rise. The impacts will include intensified droughts and water stress, heatwaves, habitat degradation and reduced crop yields.”³

Daily life in most of the cities and towns and provinces across the world suffers a huge hit due to extreme weather conditions. Air and water pollution that frequently cause power shortage, bad crops, delay in travel which hits the economy badly shows adverse impact of erratic weather and climate on trade, transportation, and market. Where it was expected that economy would grow at a fast pace, instead the result was an unproportionate loss in terms of life expectancy and economy. We may get the statistics of the damages caused due to global warming but what is matter of serious concern is the distortion of natural harmony of the planet, and its impact on life.

The president of France, Francois Hollande says in this regard,

“We have a single mission; to protect and hand on the planet to the next generation.”³

The universe works on the principle of natural harmony but the unethical violation of nature has distorted this balance which risks the nourishment and survival of its flora and fauna. To build cities and industries we have constructed dams and cut down forests, for transportation we have constructed railroads and bridges and, in the process, we have disturbed the equation between sustenance of life and nature. By destroying it we have invited nature's fury. To curtail one evil, we have invited several other evils. We are responsible for the division of the world. Modernisation has polarised the world into the rich and the poor, into stronger and weaker nations and into classes that are privileged and unprivileged. Cases of violence and terrorism are on the rise. Farming is seriously affected and there is no security to life. Economy everywhere is in doldrums. Large chunks of population are displaced and people are forced to leave homes and migrate, to escape from the wrath of natural calamities and other insecurities.

A society based on the principles of the progress of a few is bound to create vast divisions among people and countries. This has reinforced poverty and violence and has led to a sharp decline in morals, ethics and human values. Societies based on commercialism and consumerism of production are solely based on the profit motive like the ones we have in the present times.

The creation of special economic zones, construction of huge reservoirs, the destruction of forests, the transformation of green spaces into urban spaces, expansion of industries and dislocation of a vast number of people has marginalized certain sections of the society, which mostly includes women and children, who are at the receiving ends where suffering and exploitation are concerned. Discrimination and marginalisation of women and child labour are the twin evils that we are struggling to eliminate. Both are born out of the imbalance that occurs due to the selfishness and greedy nature of capitalist societies. So, we can easily trace a link between progress, destruction of nature and the vast divisions it creates in order to achieve this goal of development. This is enough proof of the evils it perpetrates.

In India, the construction of giant industrial units and the other changes that have gone hand in hand in achieving this goal have tilted the balance in favour of progress at the cost of human health and its security. The case of the construction of dam on the Narmada River is worth mentioning here. The reservoir caused a large-scale displacement of several villages in the surrounding areas. It has not only caused irreversible ecological damage but it has also led to huge economic losses. Lakhs of people lost their livelihoods. How do we repair the damage done to the flora and fauna, and to the people of the region. This is a big question because we ourselves are the creators of this tragic reality.

This alarming trend should force us to think of better planning and optimum utilisation of resources without their ruthless violation. Let us look at how global warming has affected different places across the world. In India, a huge devastation in terms of human and material loss occurred in Bhopal in 1984 that killed over 16000 people. The chemical leak of tons of toxic gas emitted from an insecticide plant in the city, killed thousands of people and left the survivors prone to respiratory problems and other maladies. Even today after 30 years of the tragedy, women there continue to bear children with physical and mental deformities. This is our gain at the cost of industrial progress.

Recently, the pollution levels in Delhi, the capital city touched a great height, forcing the government to shut down schools and colleges. In Delhi, the air quality is at its worst and pollution touches the highest peak in winter. The entire city is enveloped in a thick layer of smog that causes accidents and people have to wear gas masks due to difficulty in breathing. There is an alarming rise in Delhi's population and the high levels of toxicity throws life out of gear for its population especially in October and November. The population of the city which is around 170 lakhs is vulnerable to several respiratory diseases. One can wonder at the huge losses all this leads to in terms of disruption in daily business and that too in India's central, capital city. Doctors predict that 9 out of every 10 children in Delhi may suffer from Asthma, Bronchitis and other lung disease in near future. Scientists forecast that in a few years Delhi would not be a place worth living due to health and climate risks. How can growth of Indian economy remain steady in these circumstances considering the sad plight of living conditions in the country.

Scarce rainfall, bizarre weather conditions and low crop yield have forced farmers to commit suicide in several parts of Maharashtra. The drought compelled the helpless farmers to borrow huge amounts of money. The farmer suicides in Maharashtra can be traced to dismal yield and drought conditions in Marathwada. A large number of farmers committed suicide. Mounting debt and huge financial losses due to scarce rainfall triggered this tragedy.

The case of neighbouring countries like Pakistan, China and other countries of South Asia is no better. Recently in Pakistan, more than 33 million people were hit by floods. Heavy losses were incurred in infrastructure and livelihood. In fact, Pakistan was the hottest city of the planet for three years. Europe is not far behind when it comes to devastation due to natural hazards. Cyclones, wildfires, and melting of Arctic ice often throw life out of gear in America, and other parts of Europe. The big fire in Amazon recently shows that the entire world is simmering and may result in a serious disaster if things are not controlled. There is a serious health risk involved.

The miserable conditions of contemporary life can be, in retrospect traced to the beginning of industrialisation and capitalist economy. The evils that plague our lives have been mostly caused by the ruthless exploitation of natural resources.

Francois Hollande says,

“The time is past when humankind thought it could selfishly draw on exhaustible resources. We know now the world is not a commodity.”⁴

The onslaught of colonialism restructured the economic and social relations that prevailed in the past. The rise of market economy gave a parallel rise to commercialism and capitalism. It thereby created a new culture, that thrives on consumerism and fulfilment of material desires. This liberal economy created a society that was given to greed and profit motive. No doubt, several development projects were undertaken everywhere, however most of them were undertaken to protect vested interests.

The goal of these mammoth projects might be progress of the majority but unfortunately, they have caused an enormous loss to human life and property. The SEZ which have been established in countries like India, China Poland, Russia etc. is a move taken by the government that further widens the gap between the 'haves' and 'have not'. The government is authorised to grant environmental clearance for setting up SEZ. Lands are grabbed from the middle class to develop the region and raise its economy and mostly it is agricultural so it causes a big loss of livelihood for the farmers.

This is consistently leading to the depletion of biodiversity. We may get the statistics of the environmental damage caused by us. The damage which is done by to our brutal acts of transgression- of nature and biodiversity. But the need of the hour is to address the serious issues of environmental degradation and find solutions to create ecological balance. We have to stop the perilous violation of nature and try with all our might to protect the natural landscape and preserve its rich resources. Environmentalists are trying to raise awareness regarding this alarming situation. Even celebrities are hooked in and many of them have voiced their concern over the destructive portents. The famous Hollywood actor, Leonardo Di Caprio, in his Oscar winning speech had said,

“Climate change is real. It is happening right now; it is the most urgent threat facing our entire species and we need to work collectively together and stop procrastinating.”⁵

This is the time to think of ways to revive a dying economy, create better conditions of living and hygiene and find ways of ending terror and violence.

We have little choice but to reconcile with the bare truth that global warming accompanied with climatic changes across the world cannot lead to any substantial growth in world economy be it Europe, Asia, Africa, India or any other country. The changes everywhere in the world, are a portent for destruction that risk life on the planet and pose a serious threat to health of humans, and its flora and Fauna.

What we need today are societies that are based on ideas of equality and human values and this is possible if harmony is restored, whether it is harmony between races and classes, between man and environment or men and women. This can only become possible if we acknowledge our limits, our human limits and beware of surpassing them.

According to the great environmentalist, Vandana Shiva, the development project has changed people's perception regarding the desirable living standards. Important means of livelihood are on the wane because they are considered substandard. For e.g. products of small-scale industries, cottage industries and other local units are considered below the norms of standard living. 'Subsistence' economies, the term that Shiva uses for natural and healthy products like the dairy, cultivation, home-made products like natural fibers etc. are perceived as low-quality products. Real development is possible only when we establish gender equality and harmony with nature. We need to revive small scale and cottage industry.

In the words of Shiva,

“Dominant economic theories assign no value to tasks carried out at subsistence and domestic levels. These theories are unable to encompass the majority in the world- women and children- who are statistically invisible.”⁶

The development project must address the issue of environmental degradation. If this imbalance is resolved, then the natural balance and harmony will be restored. It is just a question of respecting the limits and boundaries of nature. There is a need to have a healthier and more humane attitude towards people, society and nature to maintain peace and harmony. If the limits of nature's violation are not surpassed then it will surely guarantee a better life and harmony on this planet.

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