CENTRALASIA: DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT AND CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The article argues that sustainable development is symbiotically linked to the participatory democracy. Democracy deficit in the region leads to a development model that is not sustainable and threatens the ecology in the region and negatively impacts the living of peoples in the region. Economic development is desirable but often-mindless pursuit of development may foment inequality, increase deprivation and more dangerously it can devastate environment that particularly affects the live chances of the very marginalized. Sheer development may not need democracy but development cannot be sustainable without democracy.

Key Words : Nascent nation – state, Challenges of sustainable development, Environmental degradation, Aral sea disaster, Democracy deficit, Development Models

INTRODUCTION

The nascent nation-states of Central Asia are emerging as global trouble spots in more than one sense. These countries chose to be democracies after their independence from the Soviet Union but the experiment seems to be faltering. Tajikistan underwent a civil war and Turkemenistan turned into one party and one-person rule. In other Central Asian countries there has been serious deterioration in quality of functioning of democratic institutions and considerable decline in the protection of human rights. The problem is worst in Uzbekistan. Overall democratic deficit in the region and insensitive global power politics are turning the region into another hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism. However, the other problem is perhaps severe, is the theme of this article. This region faces serious ecological degradation and imbalances posing grave health and livelihood hazards to the people living in the region.

The Environmental Crisis

At the outset it should be borne in mind that the Central Asian region is also undergoing into severe environmental crisis. Prior to the emergence of these republics as independent nation-states in August 1991 Stalin in 1930s artificially created five republics viz. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in Central Asia. The Soviet Union treated the region as a reservoir of natural resources and manpower. In
Kazakhstan, huge mining and metallurgy complexes were built to exploit the local mineral deposits. They still exist and never modernized cause intense air pollution. In the west of Kyrgyzstan, radioactive waste from uranium plants is stocked without protection and risks polluting the rivers in neighbouring Uzbekistan. The Soviet Union installed its Polygon nuclear test site in the less populated region to the west of Semipalatinsk, which has caused serious contamination. Since the 1950s, the traditional fertile pastures of the semi-arid northern steppes have been ploughed over and over, which has undergone extensive Aeolian erosion of the soil in the region. Like the Arctic, Central Asia is a fragile region whose extreme climate makes its ecosystems highly vulnerable. The water-rich mountains of Central Asia, a treasure house of biodiversity is also quite rich in minerals and fossil energy sources. Sustainable use of these natural resources offers great potential for improving the quality of life. However the excessive use of resources, such as water and energy for cash crops meant for exports, has severe environmental effects such as water logging, infertile soil etc. Moreover huge volumes of water are wasted due to poorly maintained irrigation and water distribution systems and the use of inappropriate irrigation methods, as well as absence of water-saving technologies. The condition of soil in arable areas is critical and more than 88 % of agricultural land has been identified as degraded.

In the state of big municipalities, the changes in the volumes of land transportation and the production of construction materials have very adverse environmental fallouts. In the region air pollution due to traffic reportedly accounts for 60 – 90% of emissions and as much 90% emissions of lead. The high level of vehicular pollution in Central Asia is exponentially increasing number of passenger cars, older vehicles on road and widely flaunted and hazardous standards of inspection and enforcement.

The rapidly evaporating Aral Sea has been the lifeline of this region, faces some of the world’s biggest environmental challenges, many of them due to a legacy of Soviet-era agricultural practices and over exploitation of natural resources. Over the past 30 years, the sea has shrunk to a fraction of its former size and experts say that by 2015 it would totally disappear due to excessive use of water and diversion of rivers that flow into it. Also since 1992, irrigation for cotton has steadily increased across the region. The problem of global warming is likely to make the Aral Sea crisis worse. The increasing warming and decreasing precipitation in the region would lead to even more dramatic increase of aridity and desertification, which is already quite significant in the countries around Aral Sea. Salt, sand, and dust from exposed Aral Sea mud beds blow across the region, harming people and crops. The excessive use of Pesticides and fertilizers from farms has poisoned food and drinking water. The human cost of the crisis has been high in the Aral Sea area. For instance, infant mortality rates have consistently been the highest in the former Soviet Union. The drying off of the Aral Sea has brought about noticeable changes in climate conditions during the last 5-10 years. The Sea worked as regulator mitigating cold winds from Siberia and reducing the summer heat. The shrinking of the Sea has led to a dryer and shorter summer and longer and colder winters as well as reduced
precipitation. Drying off of the Aral Sea has resulted in a new desert “Aralkum” in the centre of the great deserts. It is solid salt marsh consisting of finely dispersed sea depositions and remnants of mineral deposits, washed away from irrigated fields. The seabed, formerly referred as a so-called “fresh water maker” contributes to aerosol transference into upper layers and fast spread in the atmosphere of the Earth. That is why traces of pesticides from the Aral region were found in the blood of penguins in the Antarctic, and typical Aral dust has been found on Greenland’s glaciers, in Norway’s forests, and Byelorussia’s fields, all situated thousands of kms away from Central Asia.

One of the dangerous consequences of the drying off of the Aral Sea is the increasing degradation of mountainous glaciers of the Himalayas, Pamir, Tien-Shan, and Altay. The increase of dust on glacier surfaces and mineral deposition on them lead to intensive melting of glaciers. At present, 1081 glaciers have disappeared in the Pamir-Altay area, 71 glaciers in the Zaili Alatau area, and the volume of glaciers in Akshirak has also been sharply reduced. Many species variety of flora and fauna in the countries of Central Asia and their abundance depend upon environmental conditions. An intensive exploitation of biological objects for several decades has already led to the degradation of nature and considerable reduction of species composition. In some cases these processes became irreversible. A number of animals and plants species subject to the threat of disappearance is increasing.

The Aral disaster has deteriorated the sphere of inhabitation of the region sharply, due to polluting of the atmosphere, the drinking water and the soil. The process of degradation in the Aral region caused progressive crises in the social and economic spheres. The primary victims of the crises were the most vulnerable layers of population, namely children, women, ill-paid inhabitants of cities and rural areas. The region has the highest child mortality rate compared to the former USSR (75 children per 1000 newly born), high level of maternity death: about 120 women per 10,000 births. The disease rate has a tendency to increase. In the epicentre of ecological disaster, anaemia, dysfunction of thyroid the gland, kidney and liver diseases are wide spread. Blood, oncological diseases, asthma and heart diseases are increasing. Medical research proves that the incidence and growth of these diseases are directly related to ecological disaster. Diseases such as TB, infections and parasites, typhus, hepatitis, paratyphoid always accompany poverty.

Resources

The region is rich in natural resources. About 1.5% of the world’s resource for antimony, mercury, and uranium lies in the Kyrgyz Republic, southeastern Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. In addition, large amounts of lead, silver, and zinc are found in Achisay and in the Altai mountains. Gold is found in Murutau, the Altai Mountains, the Kyrgyz Republic, southeastern Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. In addition to these places for gold, copper mines abound in Kounrad, and Jezkagan. The latter two places as well as Akchatau have large deposits of Molybdenum. Akchatau is also known for its deposits of Tungsten. Other minerals found in the region include asbestos in the Altai, chromium in Khromtau, and phosphate in Karatau.

Central Asia has been a good source of precious stones. Coal is found in the Kazakh plateau, in the Muyunkum Desert, east of Issyk Kul, and in the Naryn basin east of Ferghana. The Hissar Mountains, the nearby Nebit Dag (Turkmenistan), and the Surkhan Darya region of Uzbekistan also have considerable coal reserves. Central Asia’s petroleum and natural gas reserves are concentrated on the east shore of the Caspian. Petroleum and natural gas reserves are also available in the north by the Emba River, south west of the Kopet Dag and
Nebit Dag mountains and in the center around Aqtua. Smaller reserves are found in the Naryn basin east of Ferghana and on the Panj in Uzbekistan. The Surkhan Darya region and the southern fringes of the Kizil Kum desert also have considerable deposits of natural gas.\cite{9}

Cotton is the primary agricultural crop of Central Asia. Mixed crops i.e., Mulberry trees, for raising silkworm, are cultivated in the Ferghana Valley. Next to cotton farming, herding sheep (karakul) in the Amu and Kara Kum Canal regions, in eastern Badakhshan, as well as in the Syr and Surkhan Darya regions is of prime importance. The Kara Kum Desert is an ideal place for raising Bacteria as well as dromedary camels.

Primarily in the Kyrgyz steppe, dairy is produced in all the places mentioned above in relation to raising cattle and sheep. Fishing is also an important source of livelihood in the region. Mere abundance of natural resources may not be a cause of people to rejoice. The political elite, transnational companies and local robber baron type capitalists, all rush to tap these resources in order to make big bucks and people are left high and dry in the absence of democracy. Moreover they have also to pay the price of devastated ecosystem.

**The Democracy Deficit**

The state of democracy is abysmal in Central Asia. Only Kyrgyzstan in the region had evolved into a near-democratic system and now even that is history. Totalitarianism is the distinctive feature of all the regimes in the region; only the degree varies. Though the lower house of the parliament is elected in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, but absolute control over the legislative branch of the government is without exception the rule in the region. Espousing ethnic nationalism, all these countries maintain what is controlled democracy or controllable democracy. In every country single party dominates and the opposition is virtually absent. The regimes seek to maintain status quo. Rulers and heirs can go to any extent to retain the state power and prevent redistribution of power.\cite{10}

Ageing leaderships, unfair elections and Soviet-style authoritarianism characterise these republics. In such regimes only those having ties with the government benefit. Corruption is used to reward political loyalty. In Kazakhstan, which is the largest economy in the region owing to its immense oil wealth, it is alleged; oligarchs pocketed the bulk of Kazakhstan’s energy income.\cite{11}

Authoritarianism thus not only restricts political participation but also inhibits redistribution of national income. This portends bigger trouble. People so alienated from political processes and economic resources are easy prey to fundamentalist organisations despite of the Central Asian Islam being less radical and more open compared to that of the Middle East. The religious attitudes of the Central Asian peoples have been fertilized in Sufi and “Turkic” approaches unlike that of the Middle Eastern peoples which are based on Arabic and Persian doctrines, including relatively more radical Wahhabi, revolutionary and Shia approaches.\cite{12} However softness of such culture is under severe strain. The region has seen a spurt of Islamic fundamentalism. Authoritarian crackdowns on such groups further alienate people and aggravate militancy. It becomes a vicious circle. Militant activities strengthen authoritarianism and authoritarianism fuels militancy. The situation has reached to a stage that the region may turn into another hub of international terrorism. Increased repression heightens already growing anti-American sentiments in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, all of which are unstable US funded client states with ostentatious post 9/11 American bases.\cite{13} Radicalism has been fed by the feeling of economic and political injustice as seen in many parts of the world. Middle East is the striking
example of this where the people are exasperated with the attitude of their governments and western governments. Central Asia may repeat that history.

Feasibility of democracy in Central Asia is somehow severely marred by the absence of democratic institutions and values. Lack of middle class entrepreneur, free society, intellectual backing and the legacy of communism inhibit flowering of democracy in the region. They need the help of global community rather badly. But the discriminatory approach of the West is too obvious. Central Asia has the similar historic background as Eastern Europe as both the regions were subject to the former Soviet Communist institutional system. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the mentioned earlier Eastern European countries received a huge hug in many areas from the Western world where the Central Asia was completely ignored. It clearly appears that the America led West is championing democracy in Central Asia only for the sake of having a foothold in the region for tapping the energy resources there. They abandoned the sole democratic regime in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan under Askar Akayev as soon as they realised that the country did not possess reserves of oil. They allied with the dictatorial regimes of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan as these countries possess enormous energy resources. The intention of Americans is confirmed by their approach. “Representatives of the American government talk like old Soviet commissars. They tell us what to do and then pull out their wallets to threaten us,” Osmonakun Ibraimov, the Kazak secretary of state and the second-highest official in the executive branch, said in an interview, referring to what he said were threats to reduce or withdraw US aid over alleged abuses. “It’s embarrassing.”

If the West talks of democracy in order to garb their design for having hold in the region with an eye on the oil reserves of the region, the two other neighbouring powers, which are also global players, are no better. Russia wants to retain some semblance of influence in its erstwhile imperial expanse whereas China seeks to assert its newfound superpower potential. Both want oil as well as hegemony in the region. They disguise their ambition in the form of regional cooperation.

To recapitulate the democracy deficit in the region: the Central Asian Republics maintain only a facade of democracy. They forge elections, keep legislatures under tight hold, disallow opposition and gag press. It means less say and even lesser participation of people in public affairs. It means toothless or totally absent civil society organisations. In the whole exercise the role of international players is suspect. One should particularly be wary of the US game plans. If business interests in the United States of America can send their own youths to die in hordes at distant places, their ruthlessness can go to any limit with respect to other peoples. They do not love people; they love only profits and privileges. The democratic sloganeering is only a garb for their sinister hegemonic designs. On the other hand the imperialistic mentality of the Russians and the Chinese reflects almost brazenly in their foreign policies. Right now their eyes are on the Central Asian oil reserves. In fact every nation has stake in the region as credible supply of fuel is the need of every nation but these players use oil as weapons of power and sources of immense profits. Particularly problematic is that these nations are relatively comfortable with authoritarian regimes. They are easier to tackle and are more effective in ensuring the interests of translational players. It is always easier to handle centralised power centres than messy democracies.

The regimes in turn negotiate with competing international players, which ensure them greater leeway. The regimes ensure these players access to their natural resources and in return buy security. In the process the
incumbents enjoy power, privileges and immense wealth. Their family, friends and cronies all benefit at the expense of the people. On the other hand, People alienated from political processes and deprived of economic gains often seek refuge in religious fundamentalism. Such militancy only strengthens authoritarianism further. In name of curbing militancy they assume more power and bargain greater support from the global players.

The Development Model

The independence of these Central Asian states coincides with the ascendance of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation (LPG). The same forces were at work behind both these developments. The triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy and the collapse of the alternative vision of global ordering not only led to their independence but also were to determine their future course. They naturally wished to develop their economies and to be part of the global economic order. In that pursuit they followed the development model as propagated by the developed countries and their economists - a development perspective based on free trade and free flow of capital. The international financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF rather made grant of assistance conditional for adopting such model; and the same was also precondition of becoming member of the WTO. Towing the line these countries concentrated on growth and exports. For this purpose they did all considered necessary for inviting foreign investments. They expected to benefit from foreign capital and know-how. All these sound logical but there are several glitches or traps in this project.

The foreign investments are not dependent only on the policies of a state. In the 1990's almost all developing countries adopted measures for attracting foreign investments. However the fact is that 95 percent of foreign direct investments are located in the 30 most developed countries, which are also home to 99 percent of foreign investors. And most of the foreign investments among the developing countries are concentrated in countries with natural resources. The same thing is happening in Central Asia too. Kyrgyzstan though followed the policy measures religiously as prescribed by the IMF but could not hold the attention of the investors as the country lacked in natural resources and Kazakhstan attracted the highest per capita foreign investment because it has big oil and gas reserves. It is thus obvious that the foreign companies are driven very naturally by their profit motives. The availability of natural resources and cheap labour attracts them but their host countries can only benefit from enhanced and superior economic processes if they have absorbing capacities. In the absence of a skilled middle class, adequate infrastructure, proper legal and financial institutions the host countries cannot benefit from foreign investments. Mostly natives would work for pittance doing low-end jobs. Those possessing capital, technology or holding positions of higher management appropriate the major share of values generated by heightened economic activities. Whatever value is produced does not reach to the people at large. The host countries remain like mining fields for the foreign companies, while the latter benefits the former gets emptied of its contents.

Foreign money in different forms - ranging from aid to direct investments - has been found to be helping the authoritarian regimes there. The bulk of such money goes directly to the authoritarian governments, only a little is received by the private sector. Foreign aid, FDI, and commercial loans to governments have augmented the resources (patronage spending) that ruling elites deploy vis-à-vis their political opponents and thus have ensured the durability of authoritarian regimes. These investors and donors provided very little in the
way of democracy promotion. Moreover, domestic private sectors could not act as counterweights to authoritarian governments, mostly because they have not received much outside funding in the form of commercial loans or portfolio investments. The outcome has been the perpetuation of the existing authoritarian regimes and little prospect of democratization.

The Challenges of Sustainable Development

It was the all-powerful Communist state, which aimed at maximum exploitation of natural resources in order to boost the production and in that endeavor environment was of the least concern. The magnitude of the unconcern is testified by the enormity of the Aral Sea crisis. Unfortunately even today the state remains the sole player in the region. Surprisingly there are other commonalities between the communist and neo-liberal economic paradigms. In both scenarios, production gains priority over people and establishments remain disdainful to rights and dignities of the peoples. Environment is the first casualty of such an approach. As outlined above the environment crisis the region faces is largely the legacy of the Soviet communism. And the development strategy being pursued now is going to deepen the crisis.

The Communist regime in order to showcase its strength, both economic and military, exploited the natural resources ruthlessly. Enhanced production was also needed to support the superpower paraphernalia and global engagements. In particular nuclear tests and dumping of nuclear wastes in this region shows their recklessness. The independence of the republics of the Central Asian is hardly promising in this wake. The state agencies in order to placate their political masters and foreign companies in order to increase their profits would concentrate more and more on the exploitation of natural resources, as these countries have nothing else to offer. As mentioned earlier foreign countries and companies abandoned Kyrgyzstan as soon as they realised that the country has nothing to offer except stones. The overexploitation of natural resources and the associated processing may cause great damage to the environment.

The big problem, as has been seen, is that the degraded ecology harms the general populace, in particular those who are marginalised. The loss of arable soil, shortage of water both for drinking and irrigation, loss of livestock, depletion of marine sources while create growing economic hardships, the contaminated air, water and soil have increased prevalence of diseases manifold. Such problems are going to increase as the authoritarian regimes in alliance with foreign players and local mafia would increasingly exploit natural resources. People though at the receiving end would not be able to countervail the ruthless military might of the regimes in the helm. Turning to Islamic fundamentalism they would have to face even severer repression unleashed by the regimes well aided by the Western powers for this purpose. Free public opinion; activist citizenry and civil society organisations are essential conditions to guard people’s interests. Development processes shorn of sustainability is against people’s interests and democracy alone can save from such a predicament.

In this respect important lessons can be learnt from India. Despite India is democracy; despite of its free press, a very activist judiciary and a vibrant civil society, here too, the big projects, whether governmental or private entails lot of displacements of people and such peoples are often short changed. Even big reputed players including multinationals tend to flout environmental norms and rules of public safety. However organised people and civil society organisations mostly take care of such highhandedness of the government and the capital. They often fight back government’s tendency to short-circuit rehabilitation or
negligence of environmental or livelihood issues. There are also plethora of other voluntary organisations that generate awareness about flora and fauna and threats to them. Though such efforts dwarf before the gigantic problems of environment and livelihood crisis. Indians faces, yet they provide much needed succor to hapless people and help protect their habitat. A great awareness of the Indian way of life, which among others values a harmonious living which the nature, may be very helpful. In this context it would not be irrelevant to look at Gandhi, who has inspired many a non-violent popular movement for environmental protection. According to Gandhi

1. Real home-rule is self-rule or self-control.
2. The way to it is passive resistance; that soul-force or love-force.
3. In order to exert this force, Swadeshi in energy sense is necessary.
4. What we want to do should be done not because we object to the English or because we want to retaliate but it is our duty to do so.

CONCLUSION

In the case of Central Asia, the enormity of crisis which is unfolding can be realised where the big companies have almost free hand and there is nobody to check them. What is needed is sustainable use of water, soil, forest, mineral and other natural resources in the region. Considerable expertise exists in the area of water conservation and judicious uses of land. In addition, the growth strategy should be anthropogenic, i.e., growth must focus on peoples than on GDP. A gradualism would be of much help in the case of exploitation of oil resources. Mega projects should be avoided and micro projects involving people should be prioritised. The Aral Sea crisis is not a localised problem; it affects the ecosystems of far-flung areas. Even the shrinking glaciers of the Himalayas are linked to the crisis.

Democracy produces many desirable consequences. It helps avoid tyranny, guarantees essential rights, ensures general freedom, the right to self-determination, moral autonomy, human development, political equality, peace, prosperity and protects essential personal interest (Dahl, 2001). Democracy society means an empowered people, who are capable of guarding their interests. Environmental degradation has the ordinary folks as its first victim. The empowered masses are bulwark against unsustainable development.

It is high time that Indian civil society assumes its global responsibilities. It must align with its globalising corporate world and compel its government to partner its programme of global democratic interventions. The interlinked crises of democratic deficit and environmental degradation of Central Asia must be the concern of India’s civil society. This is too an important task to be left in the hands of the governments.

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submitted to the “Journal of Environmental Research And Development”, have not been published and have not been submitted for publishing elsewhere, besides manuscript is my/our original work. Moreover, I/we assure to put my/our best efforts for the upliftment of environment.

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