

TIME PAST, TIME PRESENT, TIME FUTURE

Of Non-renewable Resources and Conflicts **Subrata Sinha**

Despite being a part and parcel of nature, human interference in its domain has assumed the proportions of suicidal sabotage for the benefit of a miniscule percentage of the human population. Clearly, they are not aware of Poet Laureate T S Eliot's statement that "Time Past and Time Present are both present in Time Future". On an impartial scrutiny, it is strikingly clear that some categories of non-renewable and dwindling natural resources are the 'essential' wherewithal for the sustenance and dominance of J K Galbraith's 'Affluent Society'. In its inscrutable design or inbuilt defence mechanism, however, Nature has distributed such coveted resources in a uniform manner, both depth-wise and geographically. Efforts to establish a stranglehold on such resources, therefore, has been the prime motivation for most regional wars or skirmishes in those favoured 'hotspots'. Due to the stranglehold of globalisation and the market forces during the last five decades or so, these have been grossly aggravated. Paradoxically, by dint of evolving into creatures with exceptional intelligence, humans have developed into 'super-humans'—only to confront the inevitable destiny of extinction!

It is universally realised petroleum hydrocarbons (natural oil & gas) are essential for all modes of transportation. These had taken well over a few million years to be formed by the burial of micro-organisms known as *foraminifera*, specifically during the Eocene-Miocene geological periods. In a way these hydrocarbons, therefore, are really natural accidents. Coal deposits, however, are more extensively distributed and less in demand compared to petroleum hydrocarbons. The ores of iron, copper, manganese, chromium and even many of the rarer mineral deposits have taken hundreds and thousands of millions of years to evolve, long before the first traces of life were recorded on this planet. Thus these are irreplaceable—despite the mind boggling technology now available to humankind! Conservation and modification of lifestyle are the only means to lengthen their availability. Obviously, these deposits—and particularly the energy-related hydrocarbons—have become the bones of contention and competition between countries. The latest Human development Report categorically states that the current development pattern of the industrial countries is unsustainable and a different desirable norm is urgently called for : "...Replicating the pattern of the North in the South would require ten times the present amount of fossil fuels and roughly 200 times as much mineral wealth ...The lifestyle of the rich nation will clearly have to change.The North has roughly one-fifth of the world's population and four-fifths of its income, and it consumes 70% of the world's energy, 79% of its metals and 85% of its wood. If the ecosphere were fully priced, not free, such consumption pattern could not continue..." Futuristically projecting this need with the rising population factor, it is no wonder that global skirmishes are on the rise! In the global context some significant regional theatres of such conflict are discussed here including the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, the Americas to illustrate this looming crisis of affluence. The Indian situation is equally horrifying.

THE GLOBAL SCENARIO

It was the petroleum hydrocarbons of the Persian Gulf, with the small kingdom of Kuwait holding about 9% of global oil resources (held by British Petroleum & US Gulf oil company) as well as the Iranian oilfields. These rich hydrocarbons embroiled most of the nations in the region in several wars, high drama and allegations from 1990; continuing even up to the first decade of this century! Not only that, more than 35 global countries from several continents got involved. The high death toll of soldiers of the main actor—USA—led to a clamour for withdrawal in that country. The US presence, however, continues as peacekeepers—to quell the conveniently ‘fomented’ civil war between Islamic factions. The motive was to retain, by hook or crook, a diplomatic stranglehold in the Persian Gulf, and its fabulous petrochemical hydrocarbons. Persistent death of its peacekeeping forces has compelled phased withdrawal by 2011—after ensuring a brokered peace. This decision could be taken happen only due to the more rational policy of President Obama.

The continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine and other neighbouring states is based on territorial control for the limited fresh water sources of this arid region, including the coastal aquifers and some lakes from the mountainous watershed zone. With its increasing population and escalating water needs for various uses, Israel needs to control and colonise additional areas. This is primarily for controlling the aquifer zones in such desert territory. Significantly, although ‘renewable’ in the strictest sense, in such a region it is virtually ‘non renewable’ a natural endowment. The Sudanese conflict is also based over the control of the Nubian Sandstone zone—the largest global ‘fossil fresh water aquifer’—possibly meteoric, and virtually non renewable a commodity! Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya and Egypt—all are concerned. To compound the problem, there are rich petroleum hydrocarbons underlying the Nubian aquifers! The United nations are attempting to help regulate water extraction in the entire region. Whatever the overt cause may be, the covert issue is almost *non-renewable* fresh water in the Saharan desert!

Afghanistan had served as a base to access the middle eastern petrochemical hydrocarbons—sought by erstwhile USSR and USA. Even in its new ‘Avatar’, the USA’s Obama administration is stalling withdrawal from that strife-torn country—avowedly to destroy the Taliban and hand over national security to a democratic government. According to Press Trust of India (New York bureau)—reported recently in *The Statesman*, the most recent revelation from the latest satellite imagery, with geological ground truth analysis, that this small country has a treasure trove of untapped mineral deposits including iron, copper, cobalt, gold and lithium, worth US\$ one trillion, beyond all expectations. It cites US officials that this may change the Afghan economy and the direction of the raging guerrilla-warfare; and shall fundamentally transform the country into one of the biggest global mining centres. According to the *New York Times* (after the recent declassification of Pentagon documents) an internal memo states that “with the realisation of the potential of the minerals, Afghanistan could become the Saudi Arabia of lithium”, one of the rarest and most sought after non-renewable key natural raw material for the manufacture of batteries for laptops and blackberries. According to Gen. David Petraeus of the US Central Command “...there is stunning potential here.” Afghan President Hamid Karzai has been briefed on these findings; in fact, Jalil Jumriani, adviser to the Mines Ministry agreed that “...this will become the backbone of the Afghan economy”. Probably, the Taliban shall also now fight harder to retain territorial control—with opium-poppies replaced by mineral wealth! With the planet already imperilled by man-made environmental disasters, one shudders to ponder on the incalculable havoc

that such mining may wrought on this eco-seismically fragile Himalayan region! In fact, Paul A Brinkley, the leader of the Pentagon team had already expressed reservations about Afghan know-how on environmental issues by asking “The big question is, can this be developed in a responsible way, in a way that is environmentally and socially responsible?”

The series of ‘wars’ or skirmishes in southeast Asia culminating in the Vietnam war—from which US retreated battered with a humiliating defeat—totally altered the ethos of US public opinion against foreign wars.. After being compelled to discard the military paradigm, therefore, it has now opted for a diplomatic approach even with a unified and hitherto ‘untouchable’ communist Vietnam. If the non-renewable natural resources potential of this region is pondered over, the highly valuable petroleum hydrocarbons of Myanmar and surrounding areas gets highlighted. In fact, suppression of democracy by the Myanmar military Junta and imprisonment of Madame Aung San Suu Kyi—in total disregard of global public opinion after she won the elections, is also continuing to enable the Junta to retain control over these deposits. After all, even an impoverished, but democratic Myanmar may opt for a more sustainable development strategy! It is a matter of shame, however, that even the largest democracy of the world—India—is virtually pampering the Junta so that it continues to get access to these hydrocarbons that continues into the Assam oilfields! Even massive China and other neighbouring Southeast Asian (ASEAN) countries are also not exerting any force on Myanmar for exactly the same reason. Where self-interest of the affluent society is concerned, there are no limits to skulduggery by States!

Then there are the Americas—both the northern & southern halves. It is well known that the South American countries like Venezuela and Brazil are rearing themselves up economically with the formation of a Consortium of South American nations; simultaneously with the economic decline of the USA. Apart from political upsurge against dictatorial regimes, these nascent democracies are now using their huge petroleum hydrocarbons as bargaining points against the hitherto US overlord State. In fact, they are even brokering deals with the middle eastern Arab countries where the reserves are shrinking due to over-extraction. The Obama administration may be able to negotiate a middle path—at whatever cost! However, the inordinate energy consumption by the USA & Canada has to be halted. The infamous BP offshore drilling oil spill— with its horrendous environmental impact—has reemphasised on the US dependence on hydrocarbons; with its Supreme Court refusing to grant a moratorium on offshore drilling.

THE INDIAN CONTEXT

After this global scan, the Indian scenario with the skirmishes in the so-called “Red Corridor”—extending over 35 districts spreading over portions of nine States—Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal—calls for careful scrutiny. Implausible though it may seem, this steadily expanding conflict zone is largely due to the large-scale exploitation of its non-renewable natural resources. For a change, however, ores and minerals and not petroleum hydrocarbons, that happens to be the focal point in the internal fighting between the ‘Maoist’ provoked indigenous tribal dwellers and the forces of both the Central and State governments. The problem may be viewed from a non-political viewpoint, and examined through any good school atlas, for instance the Oxford School Atlas, for the picture to emerge. India is a country (along with the other sub-continental nations) with a natural endowment of unique land, water and climatic diversity. Virtually, it is a global scenario. On a small scale. It has excellent farmlands for irrigated

agriculture as well as dry land farming, pasturing and forestry. The massive Ganga-Jamuna-Hugli-Brahmaputra and Indus alluvial basins—with the farming pattern predicated to the regional rainfall variations—constitute the prime farmlands. There are considerable deposits of Iron, Bauxite (for Aluminium), Copper, Chromium, Manganese, Zinc & Gold. Among non metallic economic deposits are Limestone, Phosphorite, Dolomite, Kaolin, Magnesite, Gypsum, Diamond and Barytes. The alluvial farmlands are fringed by the Chotanagpur, Vindhyan and Deccan plateaus. These undulating hills and plateaus are the main repositories of an enviable treasury of economic ores and most high-value minerals. These are largely located in the 'Red Corridor' states, as mentioned earlier.

The demographic pattern is also startling—whereas the farming communities dwell in the alluvial tracts and have major clusters of urbanisation and industrialisation, the plateau region is basically inhabited by indigenous tribal communities, who have traditionally depended on the forests for their sustenance and livelihood. Therefore, these communities love their lands and forests. With their animistic nature-worship rituals, they are indeed their protectors. This is why the conflict has matured into a bitter brew. The major Transnational & Indian corporate giants are hell bent to have rights to develop the economic ores and deposits for the pursuit of their goals. Among such organisations are Posco, Vedanta and quite a few others. Both the Central and State Governments are equally interested to use these deposits to attain loftier National heights of growth—through a process of development devoid of equity or sustainability! Tragically, therefore, India has also become another major zone of a tragic skirmish within dwellers of the nation—not other countries. Taking advantage of the reluctance of the tribal-folk to be displaced, ultra left groups (like 'Maoists') are fighting for the tribal cause. Unavoidably this has led to pitched jungle warfare with loss of lives on both sides—the State forces and local dwellers ! This confirms the basic emphasis of this essay that it is the treasure trove of non-renewable natural resources that have led to such belt of conflict. The Statesman's first editorial on 12th. June notes that : "...However belatedly, the Planning Commission has advanced a template for the Centre and the state governments that have been out of their depth in containing the Maoist phenomenon....." It goes on to say that the template recommends "...the forest land on which the tribals grow rice and other crops, must legally be handed over to them.. No less crucial is the suggestion on a 'state mineral fund' to be utilised for tribal welfare. Considering that the country's annual mineral production is reportedly worth Rs 99,000 crores, a 10 percent levy on royalty should yield a tidy sum..." Since bulk of this mineral production comes from the designated 'Red Corridor', the premises of this essay are proven.

Even several senior-level political functionaries of the Central Government and the principal ruling party; including the Expert Committee Report entitled 'Development Challenges in Extremist affected areas' submitted to the Planning Commission in 2008, have conceded that poverty and lack of development in these belts has spawned extremism in these zones. Even as it is there is a widening gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' in both urban and rural India. Among the rural population too, tribal communities are at the lowest rung. They have not only been denied any share of the 'growth pie', but have also paid a heavy price for development by being displaced from their homes and livelihoods; without proper rehabilitation or compensation.. Even if the 'human factor' is brushed aside, it must be realised that development of the economic deposits in these the "Red Corridors' zones for the sole benefit of the Indian 'affluent society', shall devastate the biodiversity hotspots, forests and contribute to

environmental devastation and global climate change in a major way. With its avowed emphasis on rural development, the present Central Government has to emphatically adapt the path indicated by Mahatma Gandhi that Nature provides enough for Man's need, but not for his Greed. The entire global community is attempting to change to a pattern of sustainable growth. Why should the Mahatma's homeland fail him! □□□