

Who is Afraid of Global Warming?

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[Frightening as it is, there is no need to be pessimistic about global warming. The cause of global warming is capitalism. It can end, only with the end of capitalism. The days of capitalism are numbered. How and what will bring about the end of capitalism? First the anti-imperialist struggle all over the world, particularly in Latin America, West Asia, Parts of Africa and Asia. Then there is inter-imperialist contradiction and the competition for energy sources- oil and gas. Oil will peak within a couple of years and gas within a decade. This will lead to the mother of all recessions- a recession from which capitalism can never recover. Are people ready for a post-capitalist society? Cuba provides the closest fit to a saner alternative : a small state; an enviable record in anti-imperialist struggle and internationalism; socialist in principle and practice; investing heavily in human resources in terms of health and education; providing its urban and rural citizens food security and quality (organic) food; and engendering a pride in being a Cuban and socialist! What is the vision for India? A Federal Republic of India with about 100 odd small states, and a political economy on the lines of Cuba.]

The present rate of energy consumption is causing global warming. It is so big that it is exceeding the bio-capacity of the earth. One and a half earths are required for current human consumption levels. This is inevitably leading the earth to the tipping point. In other words global warming cannot be reversed. That is people have entered a vicious cycle where global warming itself leads to further global warming and that no one can do anything about it.

It is not yet clear when the tipping point will occur. Some even claim that it has already occurred and that people will see the results in coming years. However the assumption here is that it has not yet occurred.

An average American puts out 20 tons of CO₂ emission per year compared to an average Indian who puts out a mere one ton. And of course these averages hide the fact that the most of the carbon output is contributed by the 20% rich people of these countries and the poor consume far less energy. And yet the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says 'Most of the observed increase in globally averaged temperatures since the mid-20th century is very likely due to the observed increase in anthropogenic (human) greenhouse gas (GHG) concentration'. This is a classic example of deliberate obfuscation of the real source of global warming! Such a statement very conveniently obscures the extreme inequalities in GHG output within and across countries.

For tens of thousands of years, humanity has existed, slowly changing the natural environment and ecology to meet human needs. However it is only within the ascendancy of industrial-based capitalism in the period of one hundred and fifty years that global warming has occurred in a dramatic manner and increased to a point that threatens to alter the earth's climate and ecology irreversibly.

It is not 'people' or 'human' to blame for this, it is not simply a 'man made' crisis, as if people as a society had consciously created this problem. It is the political economy of capitalism that has produced the climactic, environmental and ecological crisis that all face today.

The 'human' activities that lead to increase in greenhouse gases are very specific. They do not pertain to the tribal or communal village life that humanity

led in the past and which, even today billions of poor people are leading. Such activities are the direct results of coal-based steam technology that saw the creation of the Industrial Revolution and mass manufacturing. In the 20th century oil replaced as well as supplemented to coal and is causing further pollution and global warming. The newer capitalist economies of Asia have in the last 25 years taken the crisis further.

Many people believed that capitalism can reform. That the government will do something, that the newer energy source will solve the problem. That everyone individually can do something. However, in order to solve this problem the essential need is to roll back energy consumption to at least pre-1975 level and preferable even earlier, say 1930. There is no plan that can do it within the capitalist system. The problem can only be solved by the demise of capitalism. If this does not happen, people will reach the tipping point in near future. So it is imperative that capitalism should collapse within 10 years or so, so that life on earth has a chance to survive. Therefore people should look at the tendencies that will lead to such an event.

THE BELL IS TOLLING

Leftists all over the world have predicted the demise of capitalism many times and have been proved wrong. Now that the demise is imminent, the wolf is actually at the door, leftists are the last people to believe it.

What makes the end of capitalism so imminent? Is it the last and final crisis of capitalism? Is it the onward march of socialist and other anti-imperialist forces? Is it the anti-WTO, anti-globalisation movements all over the world? Is it the inter-imperialist (which today includes Russia and China) contradiction that has reached a breaking point? Is it the war in Iraq and anti-US struggle in the Islamic countries all over the world?

It is all of this, but not quite. The trigger is peak oil. What is Peak Oil? Essentially it means the end of the cheap petroleum-era. Also there is no alternative cheap and plentiful and concentrated source of energy like coal or petroleum. Capitalism or the industrial era began with coal in 19th century, particularly for capitalism in the western/northern world. For India and China, coal continues to remain an important source of energy. But for road transport nothing can replace petroleum effectively. For Iran and Russia, gas may last a little longer. But eventually, the level of energy available and needed may come down to the 1930 level say by the year 2030. This is not as drastic as it sounds. Today a significant amount of energy is spent in irrational needs of capitalism.

PEAK OIL

So what exactly is Peak Oil, which is likely to lead to the end of industrial era? At the present rate of consumption, all available oil will be used up in 40 years. However peak oil is not about when this economics run out of oil but, rather, when the production of oil starts to decline. And this is much closer. It may be as close as 2010. Some even say it has already arrived and one will see the effects in a matter of months!

How can one predict when Peak Oil will occur? In 1956 a US scientist, Hubbert, correctly predicted that US oil production would peak in 1970. Since then his methods have been refined further. Essentially it is based on the fact that all major sources of oil are known, because it is easier to locate big deposits. No

new big discovery of oil will now occur. Secondly, the consumption pattern is also known. This enables one to predict. The dates may be advanced due to several factors. For example, consumption has increased dramatically in China and India. The oil-producing countries in West Asia are using more oil to spend their income from rising oil prices. Finally, the wars to gain control over oil resources, like the Iraq war are not only consuming more oil but are also proving counterproductive.

Peak Oil crisis starts with rise in petroleum prices. For some time the figure of US\$ 100 per barrel of crude has been considered to be the turning point. On November 21, 2007 oil price hit US\$ 99. So it was likely that by the beginning of 2008 it would definitely cross this point.

The immediate effect of Peak Oil will be a recession in North America and Europe. Many believe that in USA it started in August 2007 with the housing crisis. This will lead to a world-wide collapse of the system.

Rise in transport costs increases all commodity prices. Chemical fertilisers and pesticides are petroleum based products. A rise in their prices may reduce food production leading to increase in food prices (In fact some people are talking that world food production has peaked this year and that there will not be any further rise in world food production!) These processes lead to decrease in relative purchasing power, fall in demand and recession. The Government of India is trying hard to keep the subsidy on petrol. Otherwise, the price of petrol can be as high as Rs 80 per litre. One of the methods is to issue petrol bonds. But this only distributes the risk to a wider range of gullible people and buys time for a short period. There is no solution to this crisis.

While there is only one past, there are many possible futures. What will happen in next 20 years depends on response to this crisis. Different countries will evolve in different ways. But they all will go through a period of transition, which will involve lot of hardships to millions of poor people. The only viable future is a society based on a much lower level of energy consumption, which will come from renewable sources. This will also mean self-sufficient smaller states. As of today, Cuba appears to be best prepared for such a future and may have a most ordered transition.

CUBA

The Cuban revolution occurred in 1959. It had to defend itself from the mighty USA next door, which continuously tried and is still trying to overthrow the regime. The Soviet Union helped it in many ways. It gave it cheap oil and bought sugar from it. Cuba achieved very high levels of literacy, food security for its people and a high health standard. Cubans have a pride in their country and Cuba performed extremely well in sports.

In 1990, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Cuban economy received a big set back. However, within 5 years they recovered. Today Cuban agriculture is almost fully organic and not dependent on oil-based fertilisers and pesticides. They have city farms to produce vegetables to reduce transport costs and create jobs. They are very advanced in agriculture science and medical science. A major source of foreign exchange earning is medical tourism because Cuba offers high-class medicare at reasonable costs. Cuba also meets all the standards of carbon emission and energy consumption.

INDIAN SCENE

Since 1984, all the parliamentary parties have abandoned the poor. In 1984, in Bhopal, during the biggest industrial accident in the world, except SUCI, none of the parties came on the side of the people. From the 1990's, with the advent of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation the parliamentary political parties have been brazenly opposed to the poor, displacing them in millions from their homes and resources in the name of development.

On the side of the poor there are three major forces and a host of small ones. They are the Naxalites, NAPM and the Dalit movement. Among the smaller ones, but nevertheless very important are the women's movement, anti-communal groups, Christian and Islamic dalits, atheists, rationalists and science populisers. Many individuals, professionals like social scientists, engineers, architects, urban planners are also on the side of the poor. In the struggle for poor, there are three aspects: assurance, relief and solution. All these groups are a source of assurance to the poor, because they have stood by them under very difficult situations of exploitation and oppression of the poor. In giving relief, the Naxalites have been more successful than others. As to the solution, none have a credible and realisable vision. The Naxalites have only a theoretical solution, which fails to address adequately important contemporary issues like gender and caste discrimination, communalism and ecology.

A large number of practical and useful suggestions have been around about reducing energy level in personal lives. However, these have meaning only when it is a part of an alternative of building a non-capitalist society. It is only in a non-capitalist society that inequities in energy levels within societies/countries and across countries will be minimal. Only a non-capitalist society that is not driven by the profit motive (for a few), will accept and adjust to lower levels of energy use by all. So in specific terms the primary agenda for humanity for the next twenty years or so is to work towards equity among human beings and to restore land, water (including forests) and air back to health. □□□