

COMMENT

Indices of a decent society



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We must be alert that just as easily as foul air, even a little bit of hate and anger

rapidly spreads

Things do change, with a whimper and not with a bang. Changes in our lives creep upon us and before we know it they become part of our daily habits. This is true of changes in society as well as in nature. Earlier, Bengaluru used to be known for its gardens and greenery. Even the Kannada spoken in Bengaluru was leisurely and didn't trip over its syllables in a hurry. We drank water off the taps and had no fans in our houses. Today, Bengaluru has become a developed city. We boast of the world's first burning lake, of increasing incidences of diseases related to the low quality of air, and a falling public health profile. The list could go on. These problems are part of every town and city in India.

An indicator of our indifference

We do not really know how we got from there to here. Like most development, changes often happen silently and outside our control. The recent report that **ranks India 177 out of 180 countries** in the Environmental Performance Index is not just an indicator of pollution but is as much an indicator of our indifference. The science fiction dystopia of biotech-created monsters or virulent viruses is not the real danger of unthinking development. It is when lakes catch fire, as the one in Bengaluru does so often, when we are ranked so low in the air quality index, or when water tastes like it is made in a chemistry lab that we realise we are already in the midst of this dystopia and don't need Hollywood films to frighten us about it.

But how did we arrive here? It is not just about **pollution** of nature but also of our society. How did we arrive at a situation where mile-long queues of silently simmering cars stand one behind the other every day at so many traffic junctions? How did we arrive at a situation where the very idea of development is only understood as a means to appease the incited desires of individuals? This is how hegemonic power changes the natural and social worlds – without our active intervention but at the same time appearing as if we are all acquiescent.

This change is so powerfully naturalised that those who question its nature and pace are often portrayed negatively. This includes being **termed as 'anti-national'** or 'anti-technology'. These are now almost synonymous, not so surprising considering that the nation is itself increasingly being viewed as a machine. In a society where it is so difficult to change certain social habits, this 'secular' notion of development has affected every town and city in ways that have been detrimental to the people living there. While there has

been far more resistance to the environmental effects of modern life, such as the attempts to ban plastic or conserve water, there has been very limited awareness of the impact of the pollution of the social sphere. For example, we don't seem to think that the cynical and systematic dismantling of education by vested interests today is as much a cause of worry.

Pollution of our society

It would be a terrible mistake to think that one can make an easy distinction between pollution of the natural world and that of the social world. The pollution of our society is much like that of the natural world: it happens silently and seemingly without our control. One could even perhaps say that it is the prior pollution of the social world that creates natural pollution.

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This argument should not be too surprising. After all, some scholars have been claiming for quite some time that nature is already social. There is no pure nature that is available to us, and our ideas of nature are most often socially constructed. Thus, pollution of nature is as much the pollution of the social and vice versa. Just like garbage on the street or foul air, there is the garbage of hateful opinions and foul actions. We might not recognise when they began or how they became part of everyday talk. The breakdown of basic social

decency or the incitement of hatred about others should not just be seen as social aberrations but as pollution of our society. Just as easily as foul air, even a little bit of hate and anger rapidly spreads.

Like the air quality index or the water quality index, there should be indices of a decent society. Something like a 'social indifference index' can gauge social pollution and we shouldn't be surprised if India ranks among the bottom in this category. Given the situation in the country today, I wonder what our 'hate index' and 'inequality index' will be.

The point is that an effective way to tackle the pollution of the natural world is to recognise that this pollution is symptomatic of social problems also. If garbage is a worry, it is as much our social practices that make it an environmental problem. If our air is so badly polluted, it is as much due to the indifference of governance as the exhaust caused by thousands of vehicles. We could even argue that it is the social pollution related to certain caste practices that influences environmental disasters ranging from toilet use to dealing

with dirt and pollution in general.

Unthinking development

One of the greatest drivers of natural pollution is unthinking development in our country. Why do we take for granted that possessing a car or vehicle by every individual is a mark of progress? What is it about the nature of development that makes us so easily accept so many unwanted consequences in our daily life as if it is only a price we pay for development? Unthinking development is also an important driver of social pollution. Silently accepting toxic behaviour in our society is very similar to accepting products and technologies without even thinking about what we do. It is the creation of an artificial chasm between the natural and the social that makes us forget that the pollution of nature is a reflection of the pollution of our society.

Our air or water quality index will improve when we attack social pollution in conjunction with natural pollution. The cleanliness of a nation is really not very different from the cleanliness of the natural environment. Being indifferent to the unequal access to wealth, education and health of millions of citizens is as bad as dumping toxic wastes into our drinking water. Just like plastic and bottled water have now become part of our lives, so have discourses of hate, anger and indifference. Unless we deal with social pollution as stringently as environmental pollution, it will be a sorry world that we leave behind for our children. Swachh Bharat needs to be as much about cleaning socially polluted ideas and practices as it is about cleaning our streets and toilets.

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