

Title: Environmental Racism, Coding of bodies and Resource Extraction : Some issues of Internal Colonization

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The status of the nation states and professed democracy can be interrogated on the lines of the internal fracturing and marginalization of some people as against others. Predictably within each complex entity called a nation with its rhetoric of justice and equality, for example the Constitution of India; there is much non-equality. The so-called nation is embodied in some bodies that are deemed protectable and important, while others remain dispensable and unvalued. The marking of these bodies mostly proceed along lines of race, gender, class, ethnicity etc; but importantly there seems an almost inverse ratio between the value put on people and their location in resource rich environmental zones.

The underlying rationale of the racism justifying colonization, while overtly framed in cultural and biological terms hid one important fact. The exploiters had to get to the resources held by those whose elimination needed to be justified on moral grounds of a 'primitive' rhetoric. The Post colonial slogans of development are aimed to achieve these very ends. From within itself the nation identifies areas which it must access to fulfil its agenda of primitive accumulation both to justify its own existence and to cater to the needs of the now global capitalism and modern forms of accumulation. These usually become targets of the so-called development agenda; where indigenous lives and economies are uprooted to pave way for the extraction of valuable resources to feed capitalist accumulation. The extraction usually takes a form that destroys local self-sufficiency and compels local people to enter the global consumer markets feeding into the abstract accumulation represented by the cash economy.

I shall here take up the cases of two disparate regions of the world, differently situated and culturally diverse, yet exhibiting unmistakable similarity in terms of what may be called 'internal colonization'; the Indian Himalayas and the American Appalachian ranges. Both these areas have some things in common although one exists as part of a Third world and the other is situated within the world's most powerful capitalist economy. Both are resource rich areas. The Appalachia are mined extensively for coal and formed a major backbone of the developing American industrial economy. The Himalayas provided a rich

source of wood and forest produce during early Colonial period. At present the region is the site for numerous actual and proposed hydroelectric projects and dams that stand to ruin both the natural environment and the lives and economies of the local people but which are seen as absolutely necessary for the urban centers of the plains of India where the 'real Indian nation' is located. The planned devastation is far more in the North-eastern part of the Himalayas where the people are regarded as hardly Indian; racially, culturally and historically. Yet this region has the potential to make possible immense capital accumulation to give a boost not only to Indian but to global capitalism. Prime minister Manmohan Singh for example has been pushing for the almost unbelievably devastating Tipaimukh dam in the name of 'national interest'. This dam is all set to destroy enormous tracts of natural environment, local economy and cause immense and irreversible damage to local flora, fauna and climate. It will create hordes of 'ecological refugees' who will then land up as wage labourers or otherwise enter the market economy, providing their bodies as fodder to feed the furnaces of capital accumulation.

In the Appalachian mountains similar cultural mechanisms are used to denigrate the local people who are regarded by the sophisticated elites of the North, as 'hill-billys' laughed at and ridiculed, even as their resources are being sucked up by large mining companies whose owners are almost never local residents. The form of mining most prevalent in this area is Mountain Top Removal (MTR), where the companies save on cost of production by not doing underground mining that requires far more labour input and time but to simply remove the entire mountain tops and then sift out the coal; leaving the area totally destroyed as a consequence. The companies systematically work on the local human settlements; first causing the schools to close down, then the medical facilities to disappear and so on, till the people residing have no other option but to leave, making it legally easier for the companies to move into what they then report as 'uninhabited' areas and engage in MTR. The American public has little sympathy for the so-called 'backward' people of mountains, as long as their gas prices remain cheap and their factories run.

The political mechanism of the slogan of development, thus first creates an academic hierarchy of 'backwardness' that usually creates a barbaric other whose spatial location is strategically on top of valued resources. Thus the 'pahari' rustic peasant, the unsophisticated 'hill-billys', the savage and naked

forest dwellers, become devalued in comparison to the commercial value of the resources that can be potentially available on their removal.

It is not physical genocide only that we are talking about. It is also breaking down of their ways of life and the subsistence economies that insulate these people from the market. In the remotest parts of the Himalayas one finds aggressively marketed goods for which the local people actually have no use; these are inessentials like bottled soda, potato wafers, shampoos and toilet articles that may not be acceptable to the more informed city gentry. The gullible people buy them in the hope of becoming urban and civilized, just as the television ads tell them. The state, at the same time is trying to break the self sufficient subsistence economy of the local people, pushing them into cash cropping so that they have cash in hand, just to buy these.

Even a few years back, as an anthropologist doing fieldwork, I found that the villagers in the remote mountain regions had little reason to use cash. Most of their needs were met by their own produce or by barter exchange. Today, many of them are engaged in producing for cash, like growing apples, and use this money to buy consumer goods, not because they need them, but because it fills in their perceived need for becoming 'modern'. Thus there is a multi-pronged strategy at work here. The cultural mechanism creates the rhetoric of 'underdevelopment' and also that of the 'dispensable' people; those who do not fulfil the criteria of being developed and 'civilized' therefore and importantly not to be regarded as full members of the 'nation'. Since all development is directed towards 'national interest'; such inclusions and exclusions have far reaching ramifications. They may decide simply which lives are of value and which are not. It also serves the interests of accumulation that people so stigmatized become willing participants in their own destruction as they are drawn into the projected inequality of being 'modern' and 'not modern'. The consumer culture pushed onto them is done in the name of cultural sophistication, for improved social status; that manages to hide the exploitative dimension of the market economy. The breaking down of local self-sufficiency leads to a forced entry into this very market that is draining out their resources, transferring them to those who remain unattainably superior and true recipients of 'national interest'. Thus environmental racism and internal colonization are interlinked to the manner in which a nation is imagined and executed and how the interests of capitalism prefix and predetermine, who is included and who is not.

