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Safe livelihoods

By Dunu Roy

The development or closure of industry is generally based on the premise that industry must be isolated from other human activities. Not only does this throw workers out of jobs, it does nothing to control pollution, because every relocated hazardous unit will simply continue to pollute elsewhere. It would be better to promote industry that protects both livelihoods as well as environment

Industrialisation in India began in the middle of the 19th century with the building of the railways and its associated coalmines, and the emergence of textile and jute mills. By 1930, in the aftermath of the First World War, the pattern of industry had changed somewhat, with plantations of tea, coffee and rubber emerging as major employers, along with large manufacturing units in steel, general engineering, paper, cigarettes, armaments, and foundries. Mining expanded into manganese and mica, and a nascent construction sector emerged.

The Second World War contributed enormously to the growth of cement, sugar, shipbuilding, dyes and beverage units. The chemical industry also made its first appearance, and fertilisers, rayon and aluminium were the first large enterprises to come up. Massive expansion of this industry took place in the 1970s when plastics, polymers, synthetics, dyes, pharmaceuticals, resins, petro-products, paints and a range of organics and intermediates registered a remarkable rate of growth. From 1990 onwards there was a corresponding jump in the consumer goods industry, information technology and telecommunications.

For a century-and-a-half, industries were regarded as the primary engines of growth and the basic arena of conflict lay within the units – between the owners

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and the workers. By 1980, as the social and environmental impact of industry spread, larger social conflicts began to emerge between industry and its neighbourhood. Much of this had to do with where industry was located.

Firstly, there is the large industrial township built on the lines of Robert Owen's 'garden cities'. This was a self-contained area, planned to house both a single large industrial conglomerate as well as the workforce that was to operate it. An excellent early example was the sprawling township of Jamshedpur, specifically built for the first integrated steel plant of modern India. Not only was this township completely under the control of the TISCO management, it was also novel for its anticipation of future requirements. Between 1920 and 1970, it became a notable site for struggles of workers for better working and living conditions. But even the far-sightedness of this industrial group could not foresee its exponential growth. By 1980, the town had changed into a city plagued with innumerable environmental and social problems – including conflicts with the polluted and pillaged hinterland.

The second site is the industrial estate, specifically set up to accommodate a number of industrial units. In the aftermath of the political violence of the late-1970s in Bengal, when industry began to flee the state, both Maharashtra and Gujarat set up a number of industrial estates to attract this freed capital. But these industrial estates also became sites for the concentration of industrial hazards. The GIDC estates in Baroda and Ankleshwar are good examples, as they contain 77 of the 250 major hazardous chemical factories in Gujarat. They have been compelled to establish Emergency Response Centres while all the factories are supposed to have standard emergency plans with all necessary equipment and mutual aid facilities available to each factory.

Industry Associations like FICCI and CII are also involved in spreading awareness about preventing pollution in industry. But the role of these bodies is confined to disseminating information. They do not play a regulatory role; the onus of adopting relevant technology lies with members. Consequently, every unit within the estate pursues its own profit-making trajectory, while *appearing* to conform to safety specifications.

The third site is actually not a single site at all, but a distributed one. It is the outcome of rapid industrial growth that cannot be encompassed within the actual space provided by planning and regulatory bodies. This space is almost always much less than what has been formally planned. Hence industrial enterprises tend to come up on their own initiative, along major transportation routes and near markets, wherever the requisite infrastructure is available. There is no adequate regulatory machinery to supervise these industries, most of which are within the small- and medium-scale sector, and they become the objects of environmental concern. Thus, when international NGOs pushed for a total ban on the export of hazardous wastes, the residents of Picnic Gardens, an affluent colony in Kolkatta, mobilised to take legal action against the small lead-smelting units in their area. In 1994, the Supreme Court eventually ordered that the units either control pollution within a year or shut down, but this did not solve the problem. What the court did

not understand was that the task of developing clean technologies for small firms is not merely a technical one; there are also institutional and socio-economic dimensions to the process of change.

The development of these sites, and their subsequent environmental consequences, has an immediate and major impact on the lives of workers and their families. For instance, the occurrence of pneumoconiosis, or Black Lung disease, was widespread in coal mining townships, although in the early years Company doctors tended to diagnose it as tuberculosis in order to avoid corporate liability. A Greenpeace study of the chemical units in the industrial estates between Mumbai and Ahmedabad found that 50% of chemical storage tanks were in bad condition, but 80% of workers were not using personal protective equipment, while in 77-86% of units they were reporting respiratory, skin and eye complications.

There has been no major cross-sectoral study of the health of workers in the distributed small-scale sector, but a review of the literature on occupational health reveals numerous studies of respiratory diseases, thermal stress, chemical effects, musculo-skeletal disorders, and so on. All these point to the enormously heavy load of death and disease in the working class, much of which is not documented in public health records. But when industries are closed on environmental grounds, workers are doubly impacted as few of them receive compensation or any rehabilitation assistance, while the social and economic costs of relocation are traumatic.

When closure orders are issued by courts which have no grasp of the underlying dynamics of industrial development, they only serve to reinforce the pressure by global forces to change the character of the Indian economy. Thus, the organised manufacturing base within industrial areas begins to be eroded and is replaced by 'clean' service and trade enterprises, such as office complexes, showrooms and banquet halls. The 'dirty' work is outsourced to the informal sector, which has to locate its own space in the distributed sites. This, in turn, creates the looming threat of 'illegality' over this sector and it can be closed again on the pretext of pollution. It is then presumed that new formal industrial areas will be able to take up the slack. But, as the experience in Delhi demonstrates, this too remains a myth. When the Government of Delhi invited industries in 'non-conforming' areas to relocate, only one-third of the applicants were proposed to be relocated at a greenfield site, leaving 85% of the irregular industries (and their workers) out of the pale of the legal system. And even at the greenfield site, there is no provision for housing and services for the estimated 1,38,000 workers and their families – or the 'unplanned' workforce which will construct the estate.

All strategies for development or closure of industry are based on the premise that industry has to be isolated from other human activities. This does not address the essential issue of controlling pollutants, because every developed or relocated hazardous unit will continue to pollute wherever it is and affect the workers. Since both air and water pollution enter the ecosystem, they have long-term and long-range effects that become manifest over time and space and are not immediately

visible. The above strategies also bypass the plight of workers who are either thrown out of jobs or have to travel long distances to get to work. An alternative strategy could be premised on the notion that industry has to provide 'safe' livelihoods. In other words, it has to protect both livelihoods as well as environment. One can pick up valuable lessons for this from the cumulative experience of the 'mixed-use' industrial towns, the principles of occupational safety, the struggle of affected groups to protect their environment, and the creativity of small household enterprises. Within the larger context of globalisation and privatisation (as an answer to upper-middle-class aspirations) there is an emerging possibility of negotiating the Right to Safe Livelihoods for workers in a truly democratic society. This will not only protect those who toil for a living, but also those who live in the neighborhood of all work, and provide a realistic basis for sustainability.

Dunu Roy is Director of the Hazards Centre in Delhi, which provides professional consultancy services to mass organisations.

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