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

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*Introduction*

The ideals of the nation states and professed democracy can be interrogated on the lines of the internal fracturing and marginalization of some people to create favourable conditions for 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 nation has its so-called ‘true representatives and then there are the peripheral areas, often both geographically and culturally marginal to the ‘core’. There are always critical zones that need to be controlled and exploited more than others and here the ‘nation’ makes itself felt by its projects of exploitation of resources and technologies of control. Mostly these happen to be the borderlands or zones of economic and political strategic importance, as Farrelly (2013:197) points out,” These are also places heavily connected to government projects and to the nation-state-making endeavours--”. Farrelly’s comment that refers to Asia,can be extended to include other growing capitalist economies and even to the well- established ones that still need to be fed in terms of primitive accumulation. The extractive nature of control of the centre is reflected in the manner in which the state makes extra efforts to marginalize and subjugate the people who occupy these areas. In the modern world the political genocide accompanying diamond mining in Africa is a stark example. European colonization following the growth of capitalism in the newly industrializing nations had set the norms for brutality (Taussig 1987)

But colonization was never about external access, there are always zones within, that are mentally alienated ( Zomia) while being physically encapsulated. From within itself the nation identifies areas which it must exploit 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. The more insidious fact is that most often than not, the violence and aggression is masked in terms of universal values of justice, progress and humanity, a role overtly played by USA in the contemporary global situation. Thus racism was used to justify colonization and the exploiters had to get to the resources held by people 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. Nationalism too often achieves these very ends when people who are loosely integrated into the fictive construction of ‘The Nation’ find themselves subjugated forcibly and their resources captured, as in the North-East of India. These zones usually become targets of the so-called development agendawhere 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. In this way both primitive and abstract accumulation takes place simultaneously.

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 Mountainsare 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 centres 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. Erstwhile Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for example had been pushing for the almost unbelievably devastating Tipaimukhdam 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. Highlands in all of world history have had this relation with the more populous and politically powerful lowlands like as Mathur( 2013: 90) write with reference to Uttarakhand (Central Himalayas) , “ The hegemonic representation of the mountains emanated from the large, powerful, heavily populated towns in the plains that believe the mountains, especially the farther they are from the centers, are ‘remote’ and backward’.”

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 locals who manage to have more resources usually align themselves with the outsiders and become ‘elites’ often relocating themselves to the outside or remain situated but mentally estranged from their local brethren.

*Development and Progress*

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. The social evolutionary theories of the European enlightenment had set the stage for the conceptualization and actualization of a Eurocentric model of progress that was both racist and capitalist. Even when overtly the theories of race were rejected and European supremacy ceased, the so-called developing parts of the world remained caught in its agenda. Thus the ‘pahari’ rustic peasant, the unsophisticated ‘hill-billys, the savage and naked forest dwellers, become devalued in comparison to the sophisticated urban ( read westernized ) elite and their bodies were deemed to be of much less value than the commercial value of the resources that could be potentially made available on their removal.

The alienation and ‘removal’ may not always take place as it did in the 19th and early twentieth century, in terms of physical violence and genocide. When it comes to internal colonization the violence is more symbolic than real, and takes place in steps that ensure that the local people are unaware of the real facts or are helpless in the face of overwhelming moral pressures. The steps involve firstly to educate and disseminate information in a way that idealizes ways of lives other than the local, to create models of so called ‘development’ that exclude the local culture and ways of life altogether. Jalais( 2013: 249) for example writes with reference to the people of the Sundarbans in West Bengal, that they judge themselves and others on the basis of a “ set of standards derived from and centered on , in this case , the urban”. She adds, “ Here, too a denigration of one’s ‘backwardness’ , particularly when living in the dangerous borderlands of the state, makes one aspire for greater respectability , and unfortunately that means giving up on certain shared practices.” As a matter of global history of European colonization this modernity has also become equated with ‘western’ and in the post-modern era with an American model that is becoming deeply entrenched in the global mind set. The global market forces find easy acceptance once the stage is set through information channels, pedagogy and media. The second step is to break down local self- sufficiency by creating needs that cannot be fulfilled by local resources and productive activities.

Thus is not physical genocide that we are talking about. It is about breaking down of indigenous 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’. Colonization has stood , throughout history , not only as a political process, but also as a process of environmental destruction. Guha(1989 ) for example describes the devastation caused by British colonization on the Himalayan forests and also by the consequent Indian government. Earlier in this paper we have discussed as to the use of the ‘backwardness’ rhetoric for ‘mental colonization’.

Paradoxically, processes that accomplish these ends of ‘primitive’ as well as abstract accumulation are almost always thus masked such that the victims themselves become willing parties to their own exploitation. When we compare USA to India, a fledgling yet populous democracy we find that similar principles of mystification work to push people out of their resource base that is then captured for profit by a few powerful stakeholders. A comparative analysis based on these two democracies will push home the point that capitalism needs to create its periphery and the means to do so are politico-economic as well as cultural. These cultural /political means often have a startling similarity across cultures, especially in terms of the essential obfuscating processes that make capitalist growth possible.

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.

*Environmental Racism*

There is a general view that democracies work for the benefit of all and the people in a democracy have a voice. However in the world’s largest democracy as well as in the world’s most functional democracy we find that people’s voices are not muted, they are manufactured. The freedom of choice that is flaunted so much in a country like USA is actually monitored so that most people are totally confused as to what they want and what is good for them. It is paradoxical that when most of time we examine marginalization in the USA it is seen from the point of view of either African Americans or Native Americans; the two most recognized marginal groups in that region. Yet when it comes to something like environmental racism, even the mainstream white population is not spared. 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. This also parallels the value of bodies to do labour and the extraction of that labour through political means that results in the exploitation of these ‘marked’ bodies; an aspect that is well known but the dimension that I wish to tackle here is one of people inhabiting certain regions that carry an excessive value in terms of capitalist accumulation and that is most conveniently extracted by eliminating the humans to whom these resources belong.

As well recognized by environmentalists, the process of racism has been inbuilt into the manner in which the developed countries have exploited and denuded the resources of the Third World countries, including dumping of toxic wastes and creation of hazardous locations, like Bhopal. What I want to show in this paper is how capitalism creates processes of internal colonization, where people are marginalized, who have equal rights as citizens of democratic country, yet fail to qualify for complete personhood. In other words, while the laws regarding rights remain in place, the projection of certain sections is that they are less as humans hence the same laws need not apply.

The term ‘environmental racism was coined in the late 1980s by Benjamin Chavis of the United Church of Christ Commission for racial Justice( Marshall et al 2012:149). “ Essentially environmental injustice has come to mean that minority and poor people are subject to pollution more than most and often get the clean up last, if at all” ( ibid). However, although this may be mostly true, it is rapidly moving beyond racism/ class to affect a far larger section of people than one may imagine.

The Appalachian ranges in the USA, that cover parts of the states of West Virginia, South and North Carolina, Alabama and Kentucky is comparable to the Himalayas that have remained a marginal zone as far as the cultural and political identity of the Indian Nation is concerned. Scott ( 2009) has pointed to the highland areas as zones of resistance to the state domination, labelling them as ‘Zomia’ but the resistance is integrated with the facts of political invisibility and economic marginalization as well. In the Post -Civil War era, while the rest of the American continent made rapid progress, these regions remained stigmatized as Stewart (2011: 3) describes, “as a land of backwardness , poverty, hopelessness, and isolance----------Its denizens are supposedly eccentric, illiterate, lazy and hard drinking” . Young people of this region spoke to me about how they are looked down as ‘rustic’ and awkward, a fact corroborated by people of up country New York region who routinely voice their opinion about the ‘ ‘clumsily dressed’ and ‘fat’ southerners; and also marginalized them as ‘They’ and ‘Those’ as opposed to ‘Us’.

This is the region that provides coal to the rest of the world, and is one of the key regions subjected to extensive mining mainly for coal. Most working class people are employed in the mines and look upon mining as their life giving occupation and way of life. In a visit to the Appalachian mountain centre in university of Kentucky and exposure to the local people revealed some very insidious trends by which the big mining companies are not only laying waste the mountain environment but also destroying community life and health of the local white population. The most disturbing trend being that these very people who are facing the brunt of such disaster have been brainwashed into supporting the mining operations of the big companies as necessary for their livelihood and subsistence. They are most vocal in supporting mining and denying environmentalists who talk against it; even though mining is playing havoc with their health and wellbeing. Most of them were vocal supporters of the Romney led Republicans who vouched to continue, “digging’, no matter what the environmental consequence as opposed to the Obama led camp that was advocating for clean energy. The state’s governor, Menchin had vowed to protect his state from environmentalist like AL Gore and to safeguard the interests of the coal and chemical industries. The local people have been continuously led to be supporters of mining even though they are its worse victims, suffering from black lungs and a degraded environment. All environmental rules and regulations have been constantly relaxed in favour of big business and the coal lobby elects its own judges to the courts, who support and set free the worst violators of environmental norms.

The economic reality of the region reveals, according to a report prepared by Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force (ALOFT) , that in this region , most of the land was concentrated in the hands of absentee landlords and capitalists (Scott 2012:39), who also had very good relation with the local power holders and were themselves holding more of corporate than community interests in this area. The goal of these owners was very different from that of the people who actually lived there. For them the place was just a mass of coal to be exploited and not a home, not a place of any emotional attachment. At the same time discourses of ‘othering’ were created to project a stereotype of the ‘backward, ignorant and uncivilized’ Stewart (2011:3) southerner, who were not at par with the urban and informed white populations of the North. The immediate outcome of such a discourse was that the local people were deemed incapable of ‘looking after their own interests’ and the decisions about them had to be made from outside. In this the outsiders were aided by the local upper classes , who , eager to distance themselves from their brethren, opted to side with the forces of industrialization and capitalism, all in the name of progress. In a telling article on West Virginia , Osnos( 2014:38) writes that this area, known also as the chemical valley of the USA is prone to many industrial accidents and “ Most accidents unfold deep in the mountains that contain the earth’s natural resources” and that “ The state has become a standard bearer for pro-business, limited –government conservatism” . He further writes how interest in West Virginia , for most North-Americans focuses on a revival of the carton caricatures of the ‘hill-billy’ stereotypes, “ L’ilAbner to Henry Boo- Boo to ‘Buckwild’, a reality show about West Virginia teenagers”( ibid:40). As this article shows up clearly the situation for the Appalachian mountain people is no better than that of other parts of the world, of people situated in resource rich, but social marginal areas. “West Virginia ranks among the nation’s worst states when it comes to smoking, obesity, disabilities, and prescription drug abuse; it trails much of the nation in the rate of college graduation. So many young people leave it in search for work that West Virginians joke that kids learn the three R’s : reading, ‘riting and Route77- the road out”( ibid). In fact carrying the analogy to India further we find that the West Virginia’s Union Carbide, a sister plant to Bhopal is the only place in the USA that still stores MIC, and where a Bhopal like tragedy was almost imminent.

Over centuries this region was developed as a single industry region where entire communities were formed and sustained by mining; while at the same time the mining companies kept their stranglehold both politically and socially.

While the mining industry was labour intensive there were mining communities that build up around this industry that became the locus of emotional and cultural attachments to which people identified over the centuries.

However as MTR hit directly at the community, the local people were galvanized into protests after the 1990s. Huge manmade disasters like the Massey slurry impoundment in 2000 that destroyed at least hundred miles of stream and all flora and fauna began to shake people out of their faith in mining as a livelihood. In fact the very livelihood was being threatened by MTR that rendered more and more people job less.

Apart from environmental effects of MTR, there are social effects too. The prices of real estate are falling rapidly. In one documentary, a woman was interviewed whose house value had declined from one and a half million to just twelve thousand dollars. It is getting devastating for people to know that what they had prized all their lives are now becoming almost worthless. Also anyone who has the education and ability to move away is doing so thus increasing the negative stereotype of the ones left behind as ‘worthless’.

In India too we find the knowledgeable people are those who live away from the centre of action and who depend very little upon the environments that they conspire to destroy, while reaping most of the fruits of such exploitation. These often include local leaders, educated classes and landowners as against the workers on the land.Environmental racism thus has a universal character that reproduces itself in many situations but follows the same modus operandi. Thus in India, tribal leaders side with capitalists or become one themselves to exploit the resources of their own clans and communities and also persuade the people to opt for disastrous projects as dams and mining.

In an article by Jane Qiu, in Nature News( 5th Dec, 2012), it has been pointed out how the Himalayan region is suffering the impact of almost 300 proposed dams, some of which have already been built or are in progress. While the power holders at the centre, see this as a way for boosting the country’s economic growth, the local people are protesting what they see as a complete destruction of their way of life and livelihood. My visits to the Himalayan region have shown me fields destroyed by boulders from landslides caused by drilling through mountains and rivers drying up, houses cracking up and a general feeling of climate change. Similar situations also arise in forest tribal regions being mined for bauxite, coal and uranium. In all these regions also there is a huge exodus of local people in search of jobs and livelihoods. The Himalayans villages are well known for migrant men folk and women left alone to fend for themselves.

What is common with West Virginia and Kentucky and Jharkhand and Kinnaur is that all of them form peripheral regions to the core of the national economy and society. David Walls, an American sociologist had identified the Appalachia region as peripheral to the core American economy ( Burns 2007: 2). In other words the prosperity of the core, depends on exploitation of the periphery. Thus when dams are built in the Himalayan region and coal is mined in the Appalachia, the principle is the same. The people in these regions do not matter, they are residual. What matters are the key resources of these regions and their value to the prosperity of the core or the mainstream.

Thus increasingly efficient technology, roads and communication channels and the ownership of land by people who are not themselves having any emotional and moral attachment to it has led to increased level of concept of profit at any cost, which could cause enormous and irreversible human and ecological damage. One has already seen parallels in India where local sharecroppers who actually lived off the land are left in the lurch as absentee landlords try to commercially exploit the land (like Singur). In Most of the Himalayas, the land belonged at least notionally to the local royal families who were the first to turn over their resources to the outsiders for profit.

The most threatening aspect of this is that all this is being done in the name of progress. The local people are still protesting against the closure of mines and mining companies because they have been deluded into thinking that coal is their only livelihood and worse still, this is all that they are capable of. The negative stereotype created about them has entered into their psyche, making them actually believe that coal mining is all that they can do. However local intellectuals and more aware community members are attempting to raise consciousness, not only about hazards of mining but about the alternative economic opportunities and sustainable livelihoods that they may have; such as bee keeping, organic agriculture and revival of degraded mining sites. There are hopes of a slow turnaround as the overall level of awareness is getting higher.

*What is development?*

If we compare to India and our own peripheral regions such as the Himalayas, where local communities, often with connivance of their own leaders are getting deprived of the most basic sources of subsistence and at enormous environmental costs, we find the same rhetoric of progress, jobs and development are being used here as well. Based on my fieldwork in this region for the past two decades I have found that the process of negative stereotyping of the mountain people as ‘*jangli*’ ( Guha 1999 :17, Gellner 2013: 13)has eroded their self- confidence and belief in their own cultures and way of life. People are selling off their forests and trees to buy designer jeans and live an urbanized life, only to be more ‘civilized’. Thus external models of ‘good life’ make complicity in one’s own self exploitation easy, much in the manner pointed out by Gramsci.

However it is not just at the level of ideology but at the level of the actual economy that the manipulation is being done. The attempts to break down subsistence economies into cash and exchange economies as is being done in remote villages of Himachal illustrates the ‘single industry’ dependency works well for capitalist growth but is dangerous for the people concerned . The aggressive pushing of apple as a cash crop in place of varieties of subsistence crops that were being grown locally for self- consumption by the local villagers greatly boosts the market economy and pushes up figures of ‘economic growth’. It also lures the people into a consumption pattern that they will then find difficult to get out of. Thus both cash crops and markets are flourishing in those regions where there was practically no dependency on the market even a few years back.

In search of cash the environment is being degraded and the people becoming less resistant to projects like dams and tourism as they feel that the cash income generated will help make them ‘civilized’ and also more modern. Grandparents happily feed their grandchildren Lay’s potato chips, Coca-Cola and a host of other junk foods as a way towards being ‘modern’ and urban. Apple orchards are being sprayed liberally with pesticides even as the people grow vegetables under them. As one old man told me, earlier they were growing at least forty varieties of rice, but now all that knowledge was gone as younger people either opted for growing apples or wanted to open a hotel.

Thus the complex forces at play include the cultural pressures of stereotyping (Channa 2005) of the people of the peripheral regions, the destruction of subsistence economies to which the people self -comply because of the negative effects of the stereotyping so that they too believe that they are either ‘*jangli*’ or ‘hill- billys’ and finally the deliberate creation of an image of modernity and progress that is highly dependent upon capitalist expansion. In the process the local people become captive to a process of exploitation of their resources by the power holders, both external and local, so that by the time they realize what is happening it might already be too late. What Appalachia and the Himalayas have in common are they both form the periphery of large democracies , where the democracy sustains itself by creating a mirage of ‘development’ and an active practice of ‘othering’( Kabeer 2000) to push through their agenda of environmental racism. Thus the North-South divide that we often hear of and which as Harding ( 2000:243) tells leads to a particular form of de-development of the South so that resources are diverted to men[[1]](#endnote-2) in the North, does not function as a geographical or even a geo-political divide; it often takes the form of internal colonization even in the most developed country such as the USA.

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1. Harding’s work focuses on gender which has been kept out of the brief discussion in this particular article. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)