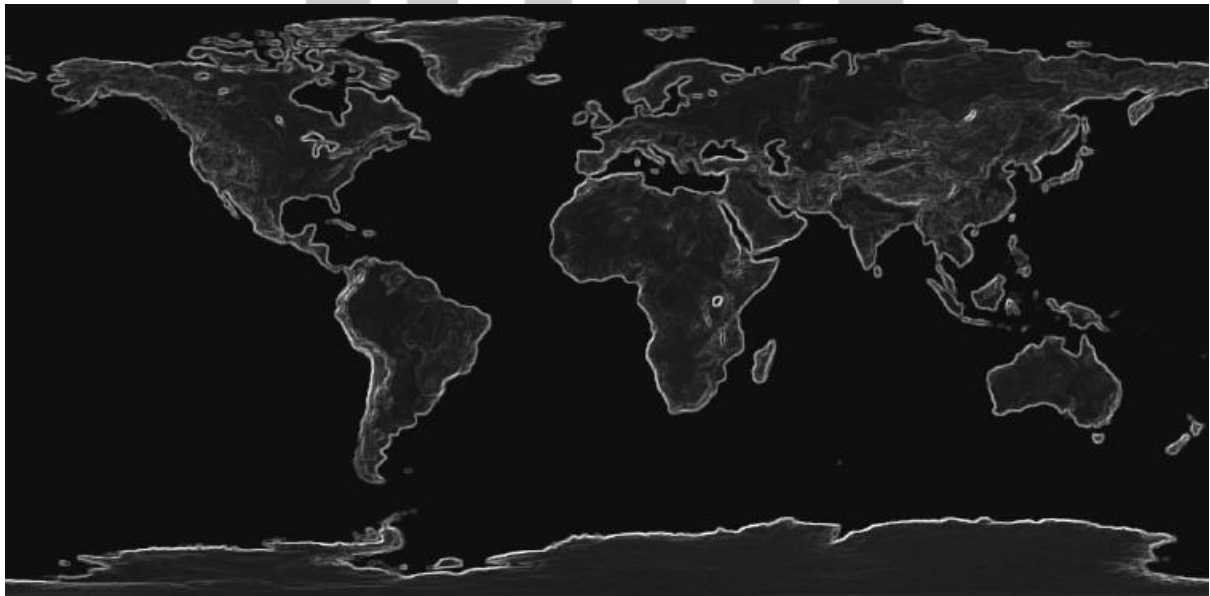




ENVIRONMENT GETS THE BOOT

Environmentalists celebrate the disaster for 'helping' the natural world, it must be recognized that this is nothing more than an artificial condition.

Veritas et Aequitas



JULY 13, 2020
PROJECT STATECRAFT



The COVID-19 crisis has occupied centre stage and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. But it has stolen considerable attention from nature's onslaught on the subcontinent in the recent months. In May, the Amphan cyclone decimated the coast of West Bengal and Odisha and wrecked the city of Kolkata in an overnight deluge. Soon after, heavy rains lashed Mumbai, India's COVID-19 capital, making its situation doubly hard. In the midst of all this, there was also a freakish locust outbreak in several parts of North and North-West India which many researchers now claim was caused by a case of [unusual heating](#) of the oceans.

It doesn't take a scientist to figure out that we are staring into the face of an ecological crisis. The earth is heating up at an unprecedented level. After 2016, 2020 has become the hottest year in recorded history. Temperatures in the coldest edges of the world rose up by as much as 10-degree [Celsius](#). In India, the number rose up to over 50 degree [Celsius](#) in Churu, Rajasthan. We are facing mass extinction, loss of biodiversity, depletion and pollution of precious natural resources and an insurmountable gap between the rich and the poor. The seriousness of our predicament could not be more obvious.

The pandemic and the ensuing lockdown effectively shut down economic activity across the globe, releasing the chokehold around the environment for a brief period. But before environmentalists celebrate the disaster for 'helping' the natural world, it must be recognized to remember that this is nothing more than an artificial condition, and a very short one at that.

It shouldn't surprise us, therefore, if [countries](#) become more fiercely committed to conventional growth and development models in order to make up for lost time (and money). Recent events indicate that this will certainly be the case in India. Once the pandemic dies down, attention to the climate crisis and protection of the environment will take a backseat as the country attempts to get back on the growth wagon. Business and economic activity will be heavily prioritized at the expense of the environment. Concessions and compromises, largely on the side of the environment and the poor, will be deemed necessary and inevitable as India hurtles towards its goal of becoming a [\\$5 trillion economy](#) by 2024-25.



Chasing Growth - At what cost?

Across the world, activists have noted how the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed governments to [roll back](#) environmental protection laws and regulations and we are no exception. Over the last few months, the security and safety of ecologically sensitive areas as well as environmental protection laws have been heavily compromised.

The recent controversy around the Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary and its associated ecosystem is a case in point. Located in Assam, not only is it home to several endangered species like the Hoolock Gibbon and the Pig-tailed Macaque, but this large tropical rainforest supports thousands of people and provides invaluable ecosystem services as a giant carbon sink. But under the pretext of “[ease of doing business](#)”, Dehing Patkai was one of the many sites in the country where clearance was given for expanding mining operations. A massive campaign to protect the forest revealed that illegal mining was ‘quietly allowed’ even before. Dehing Patkai, is by no means, a singular case. Even during the lockdown, the future of ecologically critical sites like Mollem National Park and Bhagvan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary in [Goa](#) and Vedanthangal Bird Sanctuary near [Chennai](#) have been threatened by clearances to operate or expand industrial establishments.

The responsibility of reviving the economy has been placed on the shoulders of private capital and industries. In a bid to restart the economy, privatization will be the goal in many non-strategic industries as the government looks to cut spending and losses and improve efficiency. This push to encourage spending has been followed by weakening of regulation and oversight. A recent [finding](#) by *Indiaspend*s revealed that between 2014 and 2020, 87% of all projects submitted for clearance have been approved. Only last year, it was reported that the [time](#) taken to grant clearances had been shortened from 640 days to just 108 days and there are plans to further reduce it.

But perhaps the biggest blow to environmental regulation in the country in recent years came when the Environment Ministry released a draft of the Environment Impact Assessment Notification 2020. These will legalize and legitimize projects that were operating without an Environmental Clearance (EC). It also exempts certain classes of projects from public consultation and EC certificates, if deemed to be of strategic importance ([Mongabay.com](#)). Scrapping EIA will allow highly polluting industries to operate in critical ecosystems and



protect industrial establishments and developmental projects from public scrutiny and oversight.

In Whose Name?

In the coming months, Development will be pit against the Environment with leaders demanding that lives be prioritized before the protection of the Earth. But it would do well to remember that the consequences of an environmentally degraded world will not be shared equally among the populace.

In other words, the ones who are worst affected by the pandemic will also be the ones to bear the worst of the environmental crisis. There is enough and more evidence on how socio-economically disadvantaged and marginal groups will face the [maximum impacts](#) of environmental pollution and degradation although their relative contribution to the crisis is minimal.

The poor often are the first casualties in the race for development. One only needs to look at the situation of millions of migrant workers post-lockdown. Decades of neglect and parasitic growth have killed the rural economy, forcing people to migrate to cities. But the poor are no better off in cities. The growth of ‘invisible’ cities in the form of slums have made possible our metropolises but they neither receive support nor recognition. Without adequate access to resources, they are also at most risk of the effects of the ecological crisis.

It is reported that over 91% of premature deaths due to air pollution is in low-income and middle income countries. The fact that 21 Indian cities are featured in the recent World Air Quality [report](#) published by *IQAir* is alarming and requires serious intervention and introspection. While the rich can afford to work from home and turn on their purifiers on bad days, the poor have no choice but to toil outdoors.

In fact, several experts have suggested that mortality due to COVID-19 [may be higher](#) among the poor. Not only do they have a greater chance of suffering from comorbid conditions like Tuberculosis, living in congested spaces also increases the risk of catching/spreading infection.

Rapid economic growth and industrialization has caused natural resources to dip to critical lows. Clean and potable water is becoming increasingly scarce in the country. NITI Aayog has reported that 20 cities



will run out water by the end of this year. As resources like clean air and water become commodities, the needs of those who can afford to pay for it will be prioritized. [Reports](#) of swimming pools and amusement parks functioning during the water scarce summer of 2019 in Chennai is a clear reminder that economic inequality goes hand-in-hand with the ecological crisis.

Where do we go from here?

The pandemic provides an opportunity to reassess our developmental models and critically look at its exploitative and extremely unequal foundations. However, India seems to have already made a choice. The Prime Minister announced that “self-reliance” will be the strategy for the future with the five pillars being economy, infrastructure, technology-driven systems, demography and [demand](#). While the sentiment of self-reliance is appreciated, in policy terms it simply means restarting with the same raw, cold economic principles at heart.

The pandemic has thrown the failures of conventional developmental models into sharp relief. (repetition of phrasing from previous para, alternative phrase would do good) It also gives us time to re-evaluate our priorities and shift our focus away from short-term gains to long-term sustenance. At a time when zoonotic diseases like COVID-19 and Ebola are on the rise, deforestation and venturing into deeper tracts is equivalent to shooting ourselves in the foot.

The ways in which the human world is inextricably tied to the natural world are only beginning to be understood. But one thing is clear: restoring the balance once its severed will prove a lot more costly than protecting it by making sensible and proactive choices. In a recent report published by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the current growth-seeking model will result in a loss of over 1.5% to the total GDP. Water scarcity alone will cost India close to \$9.2 [billion](#) by 2050.

India’s developmental challenges are enormous; there are no doubts about that. But our current trajectory is tantamount to putting the most vulnerable and impoverished of our nation at great risk, over and over again. This decision demands serious introspection and critique.

