

The North–South divide and the compulsions for the 21st century*

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This paper endeavours to mobilize historical and contemporary reasons for the origin and widening of the North–South divide. It is argued that the driving force for this widening gulf is science, technology and industrialization and their interplay with social values, national ideologies and selfish national interests influencing global affairs. It is reasoned that in the 21st century, the nexus between development and environment will dominate the global scene. Further, what is in store for humanity will very much depend on how the North and South deal with national and global issues to preserve the benevolence of the global commons. It is also argued that success in this will depend on how the North and South are willing to implement the new paradigm 'national good through global good' and the extent to which North will extend compassionate co-operation to the South. It is noted that the new paradigm is in general alien to the policy makers and politicians of today and that they have to be made aware of this emerging compulsion.

From renaissance to the end of World War II

RENAISSANCE in Europe, about 500 years ago, was triggered by a combination of many factors including the discovery of the printing press, the establishment of the first three universities, the beginning of modern science, the discovery of the Americas, the revival of arts and the birth of Reformation. The resulting ferment flagged off the modern era. The great advances in scientific research during the ensuing centuries, followed by the Industrial Revolution, also in Europe about 200 years ago, became the harbinger of modern industrialization and all that goes with it.

Science and technology – A new driving force in human affairs

Renaissance heralded the arrival of the modern method of science. The formulation of natural laws in the form of mathematical equations lent revolutionary precision and predictability to investigate and understand natural phenomena. The Industrial Revolution provided the timely leap forward to the application of emerging science to newer technologies. In this great human enterprise, the USA joined the Europeans and shared in full measure the fruits of industrialization and economic advancement.

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Organized and sponsored research and development had its beginning in the early years of the 20th century. Briefly interrupted by World War I, it made accelerating advances in the following decades which witnessed the dawn of new concepts and discoveries in physical and biological sciences. The scientific successes powered new technologies which in turn facilitated novel instrumentation for probing nature. It was then interrupted by World War II which fully demonstrated the power of science and technology. By the middle of the century the ground was prepared for still more stunning developments in the second half of the century.

Unnoticed all the time the multiplying industrial activity in Europe and USA spewed out increasing amounts of wastes and set in motion the phenomenon of pollution of the Earth's life support systems – the air, water, land and biota.

Pursuit of national prosperity and human welfare in the West

Until the Industrial Revolution, living conditions were harsh in Europe. With the Industrial Revolution, all this started changing. It led to a spurt in employment opportunities and a soaring of trade and commerce which in turn gave rise to rapid economic development. Increased family income, fascinating medical advances and new knowledge in every sector of human activity provided unprecedented opportunities for human development. Education at all levels flourished; private enterprises multiplied; advances in antiseptics, vaccination methods, antibiotic drugs, etc. had an amazing effect on the quality of life of people; all this had a refreshing effect

on human welfare and economic development. Western countries reaped exclusively the benefits of industrialization.

The rivalry between the European nations in the post-Industrial Revolution era manifested itself in World War I which was fought with the first versions of modern weapons. Human nature is one factor which has not changed over time.

The 20 years following World War I witnessed still greater heights in science, technology, industrialization and national wealth of Western Europe and USA. After the communist revolution in Russia, the Soviet Union was emerging as a new force to reckon with. Japan which was trying to enter the race of industrialization with cheap labour and innovative mind, was making impressive gains. Colonies in Africa and Asia were still under the European yoke. The Latin American countries were immersed in internal strife. It was in such a world scenario that World War II broke out with Western Europe and USA banded against Nazi Germany joined by Italy and Japan. This time the war was fought more globally and with unparalleled savagery, destruction and suffering on both sides sparing to a great extent USA. The finale was the holocaust wrought by the atomic bombs dropped by USA on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When peace came about, the quest of the victors, namely UK, France, USA and USSR took shape as the United Nations located in New York.

World War II left USA and USSR as the two super-powers. The two countries which fought the war as allies soon became arch rivals for world supremacy based on their political ideologies and the intense urge for national interest and global power. The Cold War was thus born with the two countries savagely competing with one another for hegemony over other countries and military preparedness. The post-war years also witnessed the demilitarization of Germany and Japan. The South was not consulted in any international matter.

The North-South divide – First phase

During the 300 years between Renaissance and Industrial Revolution, the Americas, Africa and Asia were colonized by the Europeans. USA wrested its independence from the British after a violent struggle. With the pioneering spirit of the immigrants and vast natural resources, USA shaped its democratic future and joined the European industrialization and even overtook the rest of the world by the middle of the 20th century. Latin American countries which became independent early in the 19th century were plagued with internal conflicts and military dictatorships and remained paralysed and largely isolated from the rest of the world. In contrast, Asian and African colonies became independ-

ent only after World War II. The colonial masters plundered the resources and heritage of their colonies, crushed the spirit of the people, denied them their rights and privileges and used the colonies as a captive market for their goods and services. They were left with little capital, abounding illiteracy and poverty, no technological and industrial capacity, non-existent research and development, no food security, absence of export trade and were an alien to international policy making and diplomacy. In comparison, the rich industrial West collected all the benefits and became richer. Thus came into being the North-South divide.

1950 to 2000 AD – The Second Renaissance?

In contrast to earlier periods, this epoch began with the phenomenally heightened knowledge and human capacity to build the future and is characterized by the rapidity with which interactive and interdependent global ferment started taking place. A description of some of the decisive happenings of concern to us here over the last 50 years will help to highlight the different factors affecting the North-South divide.

The United Nations

Set up in 1945 by the victors of World War II, the UN has the laudable purpose of maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations on the principle of equal rights and self-determination, and encouraging international co-operation in solving international economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems. The UN General Assembly now has over 180 national members but its resolutions have only the strength of recommendations. The Security Council is the all-powerful executive organ of the UN with just 15 members of which the five nuclear powers France, UK, USA, Russia and China are permanent members with veto powers, and 10 members elected for two-year terms from the rest of the countries, a continuing mockery of democratic principles even 54 years after the UN was set up. This distortion is stretched further by USA, the present-day world super-power and an ardent champion of democracy, imposing its will and intent directly and indirectly, at times even against the majority views of its members. From all recent happenings it is clear that attempts to give greater representation to developing countries in the Council will be resisted by the present permanent members.

At the same time it must be acknowledged that the various bodies set up by the UN have played a key role in providing a unique bridge between the North and South and a soothing balm to the developing countries at times of calamities and human suffering.

The Cold War

A relentless war of nerves between USA and USSR was waged from 1945 to 1991. Many countries were ruthlessly and arbitrarily divided to balance their power equation. Each country built up a colossal arsenal of nuclear and other weapons of war. They mobilized the support of strategic countries, usually the developing ones, by inducements and threats (examples are many) to counter the might of the other. It was top time for espionage and spy satellites. Between them they created a bipolar world. USSR crumbled in 1991, leaving USA the lone super-power. But the evil impacts of antagonism created by the Cold War still remain with us. A notable post-war phenomenon is the economic bounce-back of demilitarized Germany and Japan.

Stunning advances in science and technology

We have witnessed in the short span of 50 years the accelerating and astounding pace of discoveries and advances in the whole spectrum of science and technology, lending us prodigious capacity to use them for good or evil; the choice is ours. They have also revolutionized the quality of life and our value system. What biotechnology, information technology and the likes of them hold for the future is anybody's guess. However, developing countries with their weak research and development capacity are lagging far behind and becoming dependent on North's technology and know-how.

The widening North-South gap: The second phase

After the last war the developing countries found themselves in a crippled state of economic and human development and had to compete with the North in a world dominated by them.

With freedom from the oppressive colonial rule, the countries of the South were pushed into the bipolar world. Many of them aligned themselves with one or the other of the super-powers, thereby bringing upon themselves the wrath of the other. The countries of the North freely sold arms and ammunition to the Third World, facilitating internal and inter-country violence and terrorism.

In the last two decades the gathering momentum of economic globalization and free trade system has been imposed on developing countries even before they are ready for it. In this the World Trade Organization (WTO) with its rules formulated by the rich countries, is being used by the North to make the South fall in line. The World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), also controlled by the North, give loans to developing countries. Over the years, the level of debt

service of many countries, particularly from Africa and Latin America, has become incompatible with sustainable development.

Further, the present state of poor economic condition in the South, the low quality of life and the absence of significant improvement over decades bred intense social frustration, political and administrative improprieties, bribery, corruption, criminalization and political instability. Some countries suffered from military rule, and others from ethnic conflicts and mass exodus. Easy access to guns and bombs, a disregard for law and order, high rates of illiteracy and high unemployment have hindered economic progress. What little gains were made were cornered by a minuscule of privileged people and neutralized by the swelling population. Even the Asian Tigers symbolizing rapid economic growth are under a deep economic and financial crisis.

During the last 50 years, the overall gap between the North and South has widened prodigiously. The UNDP Human Development Report 1992 says that the income disparity between the richest 20% of the world population and the poorest 20% was a factor 30 in 1960, and 32 in 1970; it grew to 42 times in 1980 and 59 times in 1990. According to WB Report 1997, this trend still continues. Many other financial and human development indicators prepared by UNDP, WB, WTO, the UNCTAD, the World Resource Institute, etc. confirm this widening gap.

The inference is that in the present national and international state of affairs, many developing countries will not be able to, by their own efforts, achieve adequate economic and human development for many decades to meet the expectations of their people.

National interest vis-à-vis global good

Homo sapiens are basically self-seeking. Among early humans, collective interest became imperative for peace and prosperity of the group. Individual interests and rights were then transferred to the group. As the population grew and communication and transportation improved, the boundaries of the group expanded from tribes to nations and welfare of the tribal was replaced by welfare of the nation. National welfare and self-interest have been the cornerstone of all national policies and governance so far.

We are currently witnessing a qualitative change in our concept of collective good and its boundaries. Communication, transportation, trade, economy, finance and now environment have all been globalized. International interdependence has reached a level where the world has shrunk to a global village, and global good has become imperative for national good. Poverty alleviation, reduction of glaring imbalances between nations

and equity within countries and between countries are becoming inescapable for global peace and security.

Environment – A new global threat

Beginning with the Industrial Revolution and even up to about two decades after World War II, industrial wastes were mainly produced from Europe and North America. It is now recognized that the Earth system is a highly interactive multicomponent entity intimately connecting its geosphere and biosphere through complex processes and cycles, the scientific basis of which is yet only partially understood.

The global environment movement

The West was awakened by acid rain and pollution of water bodies in the sixties and the discovery of the relation between stratospheric ozone depletion and the emission of chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) as industrial waste. The UN took a number of global initiatives like the Conference on Human Environment in 1972, the setting up of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in December 1972, the establishment of the World Commission on Environment in 1983 and the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, generally known as the Earth Summit in 1992.

UNCED resulted in a Conference Declaration of 27 principles on the rights and privileges of nations in their march towards human development, and a blue print for action – Agenda 21 – on how to make development socially, economically and environmentally sustainable, all endorsed by the 179 participating nations. The Declaration includes lofty principles, all extremely commendable in intent and spirit. The conference secretariat worked out the cost of implementing Agenda 21 to the developing countries from 1993 to 2000 AD and arrived at the staggering figure of 561 billion US dollars per year. The Rio Earth Summit also approved a statement of principles on forests and two international conventions, one on Climate Change and the other on Biological Diversity. (Source: *Agenda for Change 1993*, published by the Centre for our Common Future)

The contents of the Earth Summit documents will reveal the colossal environment and development-related challenges and threats for the 21st century over and above all that we have tried to capture in earlier sections. The implications to the South are horrendous: (i) coming at a time when it is already gasping to provide a better life to its people, the South is dismayed with the new challenges; (ii) the kind of capital needed for sustainable development in 21st century is nowhere in sight; (iii) scientific understanding of the functioning of the interactive Earth System is very weak; (iv) eco-

friendly and energy-saving technology and know-how is absent; (v) expertise and capacity to protect and promote national interests in international negotiations on environment are weak; and (vi) since the Summit the North has not demonstrated adequately its intention to assist the South with finance or transfer of technology. Item (vi) and manifestations of North's policy and action plan for dealing with crucial environment-related problems may be illustrated by the example of the UN Framework Conference on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Presently, the key element in UNFCCC is the urgent reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emission especially carbon dioxide because of disastrous effects like global warming, climate change, sea level rise and changes in plant growth and productivity. It was agreed in Rio in 1992 that 35 industrialized countries will reduce GHG emission to 1990 levels by 2000 AD and that there will be no cuts for the South. Yielding to pressure from the powerful domestic lobby, the US government backtracked on its Rio commitment but made a new demand that since the South will also make significant emissions in the course of time, they must also meaningfully participate in the negotiations. They also came up with the idea of trading in carbon dioxide emission wherein they can continue their high emission level in lieu of assisting afforestation projects and transfer of carbon dioxide saving technologies to developing countries. This will open the door for commercializing the environment. At Kyoto, countries like USA, Japan and Australia mounted coercive negotiations among North and South and finally succeeded in beating down their commitment to the reduction of the six GHG emissions to just 5.2% below 1990 level by 2008–2012 AD; the protocol has no provision for monitoring nor any measure for non-compliance. At the negotiations for COP-4 at Buenos Aires in 1998 the North discussed Emission Trading (ET), Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) in which emission credits are given to the North against transfer of technologies to the South, and Joint Implementation (JI), all beneficial to the North for their continued high GHG emission. It is likely that to start with, some developing countries will opt for ET and CDM for short-term gains. However, in the long run this will go against the interest of not only the South but the whole world.

With such obstacles to implement the goals of the Framework Conference on Climate Change, what can we expect in future in more complex areas like Forests and Biological Diversity, both of which remain non-starters even six years after Rio.

Challenges and compulsions for the 21st century

Currently, USA is the unquestioned super-power and world leader in economy, technology and military might.

Guided by domestic policies and interests, it adopts in international affairs aggressive and threatening methods, in diplomacy, negotiations and agreements to further its national self-interest and promote its ideologies, values and global domination. Presently, Russia is only a skeleton of the erstwhile USSR and is in total economic disarray. The European Union is garnering its collective strength to balance the US power and authority in a calculated way. Demilitarized Japan with a US security umbrella is in a vulnerable position in spite of its economic eminence. The rules for international agencies like IMF, WB and WTO are framed essentially by the North with inbuilt clauses in their favour. In order to maintain steady national progress, the North uses economic and financial globalization to pressurize the South for free trade and open markets. While majority of the developing countries fall in line with the North, there is smouldering antagonism and rancour on the treatment given to them. China is the only developing country which has a permanent seat in the Security Council and challenges in many subtle and calculated ways the power of the North, particularly USA.

After 50 years, population of the South would have tripled from 1684 million in 1950 (67% of the world population) to an estimated 4900 million in 2000 (80% of the world) with 1300 m below the poverty line. Economically, they are in deep trouble and measured by the human development index, they have often fared even poorer. These are the challenges for the developing countries.

Also, the national and global pollution amelioration measurers, safeguarding of the injured life system and the cost and expertise of sustainable development are assuming alarming dimensions. The reluctance of the North in implementing the recommendations of Agenda 21 in the spirit of the Rio Conference Declaration, and the continuing aggressive policy of national interest at the cost of global commons forebode additional threats to the South in the 21st century.

Global good vs national good

If we have to enjoy global peace and security in the 21st century, the horrific inequalities currently prevalent in economic and human development conditions within and between countries must quickly be lessened. The new compulsions of sustainable development and the protection of the global commons for common good must create an universal awareness that the self-interest of nations is only served through global good, i.e. good of all countries. Ignoring this will result in destruction of human civilization.

South-South co-operation

Following the above challenges and compulsions, the South must examine diligently, ways and means of strengthening South-South co-operation. In spite of their diversity, the developing countries have much in common. There is immense scope for joint action in many fronts, particularly technology development, trade, international diplomacy, collective negotiations and sharing of one another's strengths and know-how. But thus far, our track record is not encouraging. It is hoped that the challenges of the 21st century will help to amalgamate and strengthen South-South co-operation to a new high.

New compulsion in North-South relation

It must be acknowledged that the North has assisted the South in certain sectors. But considering the historical exploitation of the South, their industrial progress at the cost of pollution of the global commons and that in future sustainable development and global good are inseparably linked to the national well-being of all countries, the support extended by the North to the South is not enough. In the shrinking world, relationships and transactions of the North with the South must be blended liberally with the better part of human nature involving compassion not only for their inherent morality but also in their long-term national interest. The North, and in particular USA, has a great opportunity to provide an initiative to this so that we can move towards a new world order.

Epilogue

Throughout history, there have been many exemplary instances of extending compassion to reduce glaring economic inequalities. Nearly 3500 years ago, Babylonian kings would periodically release debts, revert land holdings to their original owners and release slaves taken as pledges on debts, a practice called Mesarum, meaning equity and justice. About 2800 years ago, a similar practice was followed by Jewish kings once in 50 years, the year of Restoration or Jubilee. We may also remind ourselves of the spontaneous and loving support that handicapped children are bestowed in every society. Let the year 2000 AD be a Jubilee year when at least all national debts of the least developed countries will be written off by the North.

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