

Leverage the trajectory

A new de-globalising world order means that to find equitable and affordable growth, we need to challenge the polluted model that has pushed us on the brink

SUNITA NARAIN



ILLUSTRATIONS: SORIT / CSE

2017 must be for reflection. Last year, more than ever before, has been tumultuous—both in terms of economic politics and Nature’s art. It tells us that something must give; something must drastically change so that our tomorrow is different, better and more secure. It tells us that there is something very wrong in the way we are managing our economy, because of which there is

such huge dissent in societies, even rich societies. But it also tells us that this same economic growth has huge impact on the environment—the fallout is on the growing cost of toxicity in our air, water, land and food, and of course, in the ultimate cost of a changing climate. It is time we took stock of this model of unbridled consumerism-led growth. It is not even working for the rich, forget the poor.

Just think of 2016—Brexit; the election of Donald Trump; and, the erratic weather and unseasonal rains, which devastated the homes and farms of the poor across the world. This is yesterday. Tomorrow will be even worse as the goalposts are shifting. What we could have achieved with less effort yesterday, will now take even more tomorrow. Today, Delhi is horribly polluted. We know that. But what we don’t realise is that politics and Nature is changing so fast that actions that would have worked some yesterdays ago, now seem almost futile.

Let’s understand Delhi’s plight. Today, it cannot be said that the government is not cognizant of the deadly problem of air pollution. It is in everybody’s face, eyes and nose. Last year, fuel and emission standards were brought forward (its impact will be seen in the few months when the country moves completely to Bharat Stage IV). In addition, coal-based power plants have been shut down. There are efforts to control all other sources like trucks that enter the city as bypass; garbage

burning; and, road and construction dust. But what is also clear is that whatever is being done is still getting negated by changes in weather patterns that are creating unusual dense fog events.

Even as I write this, the scene outside my window is white, filled with something that looks like smoke. The satellite image shows a heavy cloud, looking like sheet of snow, over entire north India. The meteorological department says this is “unusual” but links it to the deep depression in the Bay of Bengal. They say, this time, that the easterlies—light but moist winds from the east—are blowing as against westerlies, which bring cold but dry weather. All this has contributed to dense fog.

The fog is turning into smog as pollutants are trapped by moisture, and without wind, there is no dispersal. So, Delhi coughs and wheezes and misses many heat beats. What is then clear is that the actions already taken will not be enough. The smog alert system that has been designed by the government and my colleagues and I at the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) charts the steps that need to be taken as pollution increases in the city. So, as we move from grade 1 to grade 4—which is now called a public health emergency—the crackdown against pollution has to be severe. But as the wise judges of the Supreme Court, listening to this matter, had rightly observed that all this might not be enough. We may need to “shut down” the city. What is clear is that Nature is not in a mood to give us leeway to be lazy, inefficient or just do business as usual. It is telling us that we have no time to get things wrong. We need to take drastic action and take them now.

The same cyclonic activity, which is leading to a dense fog in north India, is expected, on landfall, to bring torrential rain and havoc in south India, including parts of Tamil Nadu. This cyclone, called Vardah, should remind us of the devastating floods that brought the city of Chennai to a halt. This time, last year.

So, let’s reflect once again on the three distinct developments in our world and how they all are interconnected. In December 2015, the world was “celebrating” its unison; its coming together as one big family under the Paris climate agreement. We were then the dissenting voices saying that this Paris deal was weak,

unambitious and inequitable, and it would not bring the world together, and certainly not combat climate change. The second is the greater vulnerability to increasingly weird and intense weather events. And the third is the increased toxification because of economic growth, as reflected in my city of Delhi, which is gasping for breath.

The lesson of 2015, and now 2016, is that environmental issues cannot be ignored if we want to secure life and health. This also means that development has to take a different path, for we must—starting now—mitigate visibly adverse impacts. And that since we live in a planet where warming is now unleashed, unbridled, what we do must be done at an extraordinary speed.

This warning is coming true. 2016 has seen extraordinary events that have shaken our world. The coming of Trump, or the breakdown of liberal and secular democracy that we see in the rich world tells us that there is a growing dissent against what was considered a successful economic growth model. It pushes against globalisation. But it also pushes for increasing consumption, which as I have written, is bad news for climate change. So, we are going the wrong way, even as Nature is sending us signal after signal to correct our course and to do much more differently.

In India, we are witnessing the same dissent. The fact is this year, 2016, has been the year when the so-called rich and “forward” want to be called “backward”—Patels, Jats and Marathas—are castes who are land-owning, rich and powerful. There are growing protests by the landowning class of people who say they are being left behind. In a country, where the poor are really poor and marginalised, this is an irony that should not be missed.

Revenge of the rich

So, what does the ascension of Trump to the US presidency mean for climate change? Also, what does Trump mean for our inter-connected and by now highly globalised world?

Let’s discuss climate change first. Firstly, Trump is not the only climate denier in the US. All Republican nominees, and even Democrat candidate Hillary Clinton, avoided using the “C” word during the election campaign. But there is no doubt that President Trump is of another shade of this grey. He denies climate

The breakdown of liberal and secular democracy that we see in the rich world tells us that there is a growing dissent against what was considered a successful economic growth model. Globalisation has increased inequality. This is at the core of the problem today. This is also the crux of the climate change debate

change is happening, though recently he told CNN that “humans have some connectivity” on climate change. He is certain that the US needs to dig more coal, build more power plants and do everything to ramp up production, which will increase greenhouse gas emissions. So, he is bad news for climate change.

But this is not new. The US has invariably made the multilateral world change rules, reconfigure agreements, mostly to reduce it to the lowest common denominator, all to get its participation. Then when the world has a weak, worthless and meaningless deal, it will walk out of it. All this while, its powerful civil society and the media will hammer in the point that the world needs to be accommodating and pragmatic. “Our Congress will not accept” is the refrain, essentially arguing that theirs is the only democracy in the world or certainly the only one that matters.

This happened in 1992, when in Rio, after much “accommodation” the agreement to combat climate change was whittled down, targets were removed and there was no agreed action. All this was done to bring the US on board. But it walked out. Then came the Kyoto Protocol, the first and only framework for action to reduce emissions. Here again, in December 1997, when climate change proponents Bill Clinton and Al Gore were in office, the agreement was reduced to nothingness—the compliance clause was removed, cheap emission reduction and loopholes were included. All to bring the US on board. Once again, they rejected it.

Then came Barack Obama and his welcome commitment to climate change actions. But what did the US do? It has made the world completely rewrite the climate agreement so that the targets, instead of being based on science and contribution of each country, are now based on voluntary action. Each country is allowed to set targets, based on what they can do and by when.

It has led to weak action, which will not keep the planet’s temperature rise below 2°C, forget the guard-rail of 1.5°C. This was done to please the Americans who said they would never sign a global agreement that binds them to actions or targets. Paris fatally and fundamentally erased historical responsibility of countries

and reduced equity to insignificance. This was done because the US said this was the redline—nothing on equitable rights to the common atmospheric space could be acceptable.

The Centre of Science and Environment’s analysis of US climate change action plan, *Capitan America*, showed that even under Obama the proposals were business as usual. This is when the world tiptoed around equitable rights, was bent out of shape and scraped the bottom of the barrel. Now the US will even walk out of this.

Let’s now turn to what the Trump era means for globalisation. It was in the 1990s that the world stitched the global trade agreement and made rules for free, unfettered movement of goods. It wanted an inter-

connected world, where cheap labour could be used to enhance corporate profits. It got this. The two decades that followed saw the amazing rise of China as a provider of these goods; it also saw consumption increasing manifold.

It was also in the 1990s that this same world agreed that there was a need to moderate economic globalisation so that climate change could be mitigated. This was ecological globalisation, its counter to economic globalisation. But it failed.

Trade won over climate; consumption won over emission control. The success of economic globalisation showed up in the balance sheet of emissions: the carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions of the rich, who gobbled up these goods, did not decrease and the CO₂

emissions of the countries who manufactured these goods increased. The planet was fried.

This is where we are today. We have Trump, who openly denies climate change and has won elections. A large majority stands with him. Calls for protectionism are growing in this already rich world. The UK’s Brexit vote is also a testimony to this anger. It is the revenge of the rich, who did not get richer. It is the revenge of the educated; the well-off who believed they were entitled to more and that this was being taken away from them by “others”. This is also a time when



the already developed world, which has long exhausted its quota of the global atmospheric space, wants to burn more fossil fuel for its growth. It believes it is growth-deprived.

The key reason for all this is the fact that globalisation has increased inequity. This is at the core of the problem today. This is also the core of climate change—ultimately, if emissions are linked to economic growth, then the question is how this growth will be shared between people and between nations. Economic and ecological globalisation are about making rules that benefit people and the planet, not in ways that some get richer or that we blow up the planet. This is what we need to work on in the present world. But this demands a change in the narrative. For too long, the two discussions on growth and climate change have been separated. For too long, we have been told that we cannot discuss the issues of equitable growth and equitable allocation of the carbon budget. This is what needs to change.

The question also is why should there be such a breakdown in communication in such well-informed, literate societies and in times when everybody is so well connected to the Internet and the social media?

This, in my view, is the core of the problem. We are increasingly a less informed society as our circles of information have shrunk. This means we are also increasingly more divided and disconnected societies as we have no comprehension of the other's position. The other does not exist. The divide is led by politicians and then orchestrated by the media. In Britain, it is said that the readers of *The Guardian* newspaper voted to stay. The readers of the tabloids, *Sun* or *Daily Mail*, were in favour of leaving. (In the US, we have seen a similar cultural explosion under Trump: it would be *The New York Times* against *Fox News*.) The trend continues on the social media. We follow the people whose opinion we value. When we say anything that is unpalatable to the other side, we get trolled. We then engage even less. The door closes.

In this way, we stop seeing and hearing perspectives. In the case of Britain, the European common market brought huge benefits to the city of London. The city, in fact, became bigger than the country. In the Brexit vote, virtually every region of England voted against London. Even Scotland and Northern Ireland that voted in, voted not saying that for them Europe was a better bet than London. The city boomed because of the so-called EU access, which was the financial

world's passport to the single market.

In the end, it reveals a fatal flaw in the current model of globalisation, which makes national governments cede power, without providing global leadership at the very top. When governments sit together to decide on global matters, they are guided by national self-interest. From climate change to wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria, it is about muscle power at the very top and not about democracy. Who decided? In whose interest and how was the decision taken? It is clear that the dismemberment of the United Nations is costing the world today.

Those bubble-wrapped in their “comfort” views have been pricked. Now it is for us to make a new, more inclusive world.

From dissent to disruption

The fact is Airbnb and Uber—the two global companies who do not own hotels or cars but are bigger providers of rooms and taxi service—are part of this inevitable change in our future. The reason is that the

modern world has formalised its economy to the point that it has become unviable. The brick-and-mortar world requires huge infrastructure, and this then requires regulations to ensure that all this operates within rules. The cost of regulations is also high and adds to the cost of running the economy. In my view, Uber and Airbnb are undercutting this world—by making best

use of the individual's assets. In both cases, they are optimising existing resources—the cars and houses people own—to make more money and share the profits. But most importantly, these businesses are working the informal space. They are doing this to reduce costs and to expand opportunity.

This is where we need to think further of what our world is all about. In countries like India, informal business is the existing order of the day. Everything—from collecting sewage from homes, recycling garbage to providing transport in our cities—is managed by millions of myriad informal businesses. But we do not consider it part of our future. Worse, it defies regulation as we know it today. So, it must go.

But given that the formal economy comes with costs, we cannot replace this informal and thriving business. But to kill it, we neglect it; make it illegal and all together despise it. But still it stays. We just can't make it work. So, is it time we thought of a different business future?

We are increasingly a less informed society as our circles of information have shrunk. This means we are also increasingly more divided and disconnected societies as we have no comprehension of the other's position. The other does not exist. The divide is led by politicians and then orchestrated by the media

De-globalisation and the new business

In 2016, we published our report on how India (and other such countries) can clean up their mounds of garbage: reinvent the very idea to process waste and not “landfill” it. This requires households and institutions to segregate their waste at source so that it could be managed as a resource. It also means that we need to limit how much is dumped by imposing a tax on landfill.

But this reinvention is not possible unless we incorporate and not negate the role of the waste recycling industry. Currently, it is said (data is weak however) that recycling of dry waste provides employment to about 1-2 per cent of a city’s population, often the poorest women and children. In large cities, there are 2-3 tiers of waste buyers, all very well organised and specialising in specific wastes. What is not recognised is that this trade—which happens in the backyards of our slums and is shoved aside by policy—is the only thing saving cities from completely drowning in waste. It is also this trade, which ensures that less waste reaches landfills.

The situation is the same with sanitation. We know that cleaning is not just about building toilets. It is about building toilets that people can use, and most importantly, are linked to the waste disposal and treatment systems. This much is clear. But how will this be done?

The reason is that we do not even know where our waste comes from and where it goes.

My colleagues studied the excreta sums of different cities. The city “shit-flow” diagram shows that the situation is grim as all cities either do not treat or safely dispose the bulk of the human excreta. This is because we often confuse toilets with sanitation. But the fact is that toilets are mere receptacles to receive waste; when we flush or pour water, the waste flows into a piped drain, which could be either connected, or not, to a sewage treatment plant (STP). This STP could be working, or not. In this case, the faecal sludge—human excreta—could be conveyed, but not safely disposed as it would be discharged into the nearest river, lake or a drain. All this will pollute.

In most cities, this connection from the flush to the STP does not exist. According to *Census 2011*, the flush water of some 30 per cent of urban India is connected to a piped sewer. But our survey found that in most cases, these underground drains have either lost their connec-

tions—they need repair—or are not connected to STP.

There is another route for excreta to flow. The household flush or pour latrine could be connected to a septic tank, which, if it is well constructed, will retain the sludge and discharge the liquid through a soak pit. The faecal sludge would still need to be emptied and conveyed for treatment. But in most cases, our survey found the septic tank is not built to any specifications—it is a “box” to contain excreta—and it is either connected to a drain or emptied out. This is where the drama of faecal sludge begins.

This is the sewage collector’s tanker business—in almost all cities, it is private, thriving and underground. The economics are simple: tankers with pipes suck and empty the sewage for a fee that ranges between ₹800 and ₹1,200 per visit. The faecal sludge is then emptied into the nearest drain, river, lake, even a field or forest.

But this is not all bad news. The fact is that septic tanks are decentralised waste collection systems. Instead of thinking of building an underground sewer-

age network—that is never built or never completed—it would be best to think of these systems as the future of urban sanitation. After all, we have gone to mobile telephony, without the landline. Individual septic tanks could be the way to achieve full sanitation solutions.

2017 and beyond, this is the challenge. The fact is that the global economy has slowed and will need to seriously rework for wellbeing of the people and the planet. This also means that there will be less power to purchase goods and services from the still developing countries. The model of cheap labour and cheap goods that fueled the last two decades of growth are over, even before Trump strikes (or doesn’t) the last nail. It will hurt the still developing countries, who will see this as the door that shut on their face, even before they entered the party.

This could be an opportunity to re-consider the future strategies. If growth is not in manufacturing, but services, then we need new businesses, which provide employment and provide services at affordable rates. In this way, localisation is not a bad idea. It is building a new future, based on local resources with local communities. This challenge of affordable growth is what will drive sustainable growth in the future. ■

