

Economy vs Environment: The Great Asian Crisis

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Recently travelling through Asia, on my honeymoon, I started to realise why and how the environmental and sustainability movement is not globally pursued, as it is in 'developed countries'. The true meaning behind terms such as 'developing countries', 'sustainable development' and 'environmental crisis' crystallised during my travels. Even ignoring the rest of Asia, and focussing on two of the fastest growing economies in the world, China, and India, the magnitude of the waking economic giants is hard to comprehend. Two countries that comprise a third of the world's entire population now also suddenly find themselves as two of the fastest growing economies in the world. The two giants are making the leap from two different angles: China through strengthening its industrial might; and India through information technology (IT), and its service sector. India, in leap-frogging the industrial phase to the institutional, is less likely to trade-off the environment than China.

We are already seeing some of the world's most significant environmental trade-offs and environmental concerns emerging from China. The accelerating speed of that environmental change is most evident in the Yellow River, which has virtually disappeared. China is now the world's largest consumer of iron ore and has become one of the largest consumers of coal. There are reports of entire towns sinking from underground mining activities. Asia Times reports that two-thirds of China's cities are now short of water and the very existence of some, such as Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi, is threatened. It makes you wonder whether all the lessons learnt from industrial pollution in 'developed countries' have meant anything.

India, which recently hosted the World Social Forum, has its eyes firmly set on the fast growing IT market, with the United States and even Australia out-sourcing significant contracts to Indian firms. The more English conversant of the two countries, it is fast becoming the hub of the international IT and communications sector. Whilst it also supports a fast growing industrial sector, its economic growth is not nearly as likely to impinge on its environment as China.

Add to environmental issues the related health crises such as SARS and the Bird Flu and you see the force and the resulting impact that is Asia. Neighbouring Asia, Australia has to be cognisant of the tidal changes in Asia and the mounting inertia economically, environmentally, and socially to be able to benefit from its economic prowess, but by avoiding, and helping to alleviate impending environmental or health disasters.