

Rurban Republics

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[Editor's note: this summary is based on M.P. Parameswaran's article on GRAND OCEANIC CIRCLES: A GLOBAL NETWORK OF HORIZONTALLY LINKED, SELF RELIANT RURBAN REPUBLICS and his responses to Erebus Wong's and Kho Tungyi's comments and questions.]

Abstract

A feeling that we are moving towards an ecological and cultural crisis based on historical experience and futuristic studies is gathering strength. This is the result of the way humans have organised themselves-demanding ever increasing production of goods and services and competition. Unless we reorganize ourselves, the future is bleak.

Socialism as experimented with in the past century cannot be the basis of reorganization. It suffers from many of the features of capitalism, especially the mistaken notion of abundance. A synthesis of Marx's concept of 'ending the contradiction between town and country' with the Gandhian vision of 'network of self-reliant village republics' in the form of 'grand oceanic circles' is perhaps the solution.

Such a network has to be built from the micro to macro. The new society has to germinate within the wombs of the old society, grow and finally transform the old society. This process of seeding should be done consciously. This essay delineates a probable protocol for the seeding process - 'enterprise model for seeding social transformation'.

Marx and Gandhi

Capitalism has to be replaced by a new, sustainable society in order to resolve the Human (Capital) - Nature contradiction. This requires the acceptance of Need and Greed as two separate categories which the conventional Marxists find difficult to digest.

Independence should begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or panchayath having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sufficient and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. It will be trained and prepared to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any onslaught from without.

In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual, always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages until at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance, but ever humble, sharing the beauty of oceanic circles of which they are integral units.

The Communist society of fully emancipated individuals which Marx dreamed of too is a utopia. The two have very much in common. Majority of Gandhi's colleagues were, however enamoured by modernism of the west. Modernization meant, for them, industries and metropolitan cities. Villages were considered ugly and weak, cities beautiful and strong.

The new society will be characterized by, (1) wisdom to differentiate need from greed; (2) Increasing equity, diversity, tolerance, sustainability, social leisure and quality of life or happiness.

This new world will be a horizontally networked federation of Self-reliant Rurban Republics. 'Rurban', because it will be neither a rural village solely doing only agriculture nor an urban town having no agriculture but only industries. Such a Rurban structure had been suggested by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*: "Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries: gradual abolition of the distinction between the town and country, by a more equitable distribution of population over the country". This is required to mend the rupture that has taken place in soil metabolism and to ensure continuous and cyclic flow of soil nutrients.

This is the vision of socialism of the 21st century - a grand network of self-reliant sovereign Rurban Republics, with nations sans 'nationalism' restructured on the basis of language, culture and natural agro-climatic features. It is evident that we cannot begin to act from the outer circle and progress inwards and construct such a new world. That demands a global revolution first while the inner circles are not yet ready for such a change. That will fail as we have seen in the experiments in socialism during the 20th century. We have to begin from the innermost circle, the Rurban Republic.

The strategy conceived essentially consisted of (a) strengthening local economy, especially in primary and secondary sectors; (b) strengthening self-reliance and self-sufficiency, particularly in food, water and energy and (c) self-imposed change in consumption pattern – substitution of corporate products with local products.

Rurban Republics/Communities

The term 'republic' was borrowed from Gandhi. He used the term to denote the innermost circle in his 'grand oceanic circle' model to emphasize its suzerainty in relation to the outer circles or larger formations. We can, for the present use the term "community", instead.

In the distant future the Rurban community- the term Rurban connotes a resolution of the contradiction between town and country as indicated in *The Communist Manifesto*- as I conceive it, will be classless, caste less and devoid of all divisive identities. Land and other natural resources as well as other means of production will be owned by the community. Products will be divided among the members on mutually and socially accepted and flexible principles. The various formations between the local and global will be drastically reconceived -no national states and armies to defend them. A Rurban community may have a few thousand population at most. It will develop institutions formed through consensus to oversee the affairs of the community. Every citizen will have to be part of such institutions in one way or other. The community would have acquired all the knowledge and

skills to make small scale operations as efficient as large-scale ones and produce all the necessary basic needs of all its members.

Gandhi's concept of 'the individual ready to die for the village against the whole world' is not related to military aggression- no village will be able to do so- but against economic and cultural aggression, which they can resist to some extent. The Walmart's, Costco's and their ilk will be totally powerless against the Rurban community which can live as well without the products they sell, a total boycott.

In the Rurban community, there are several levels or tiers of production. Most of the exchange takes place at same levels at mutually negotiated prices. Finance capitalism can exist only under present conditions. Share markets and stock- markets don't have any role to play there. Even today finance capitalism cannot strangle the Rurban economy which produces all the food and most of other daily needs through co-operative enterprises.

The new community will have to be 'porous', that is transparent, plural and tolerant. Without 'association' the concept of 'freedom' is meaningless. Solidarity comes from the benefits and joy of association. Freedom does not and need not mean freedom to disrupt. In the new society 'needs' of everybody will have to be satisfied, leisure time increased and opportunities to enjoy it developed. The present state is non-porous and rigid. Whether we can change it or not is not a theoretical question but one of practice.

Outline for Building a Rurban Republic in Kerala

The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad is a People's Science Movement working in Kerala for the past 55 years under the banner of 'Science for Social Revolution'. The revolution it had in mind was to transform the existing society into something similar to what was outlined above.

The next strategic step is to carry out a large number of Focus Group Discussions to convince the general public about the feasibility and necessity of changing the profit-oriented development trajectory of capitalism to a social happiness-oriented trajectory of humanism/ socialism.

One important step is to close the cyber gaps, to make every one cyber literate and proficient and cyber-connected. The second step is to take control over trade by establishing a People's Marketing Federation, to link local producers and traders with consumers. They studied Alternative Trading Systems attempted in other parts of the world, like Alternative or Local Currencies of Chiapas, Local Exchange and Trading Systems in Great Britain, Hours system in Ithaca, etc. The entire population being cyber literate, they finally settled for an improved version of the bullet-board system of accounting. Both national currency and local 'pass-book' currency will be in use. The third step is production planning. Ensuring food, water, energy and livelihood security for all is the first objective.

For education, proactive intervention in the class rooms will initiated from the very beginning. Teacher will be trained to transact the curriculum in a life related, environment oriented, activity based and child-centred manner imparting them skills and values of equity, diversity, tolerance, democracy and above all sustainability. The students will be helped to internalize the truth that none of the goods

advertised in the media- electronic and print media - has any welfare value, that they do not help improve their health or longevity, that they satisfy only our vanity and that make development unsustainable.

Beside agricultural products, they need several industrial products. Some of them, especially agro-industrial products- are already produced locally. These micro-enterprises will be strengthened and brought under co-operatives, there production increased to satisfy the needs of the people, and several new ones will be started in a planned way in which producers, traders and consumers are all partners.

The panchayath has about 5500 families, most of them members of the Panchayath Development Society (PDS). It entered into an agreement with the rubber growers: they rubber will do slaughter tapping of the entire area within two or three years and will not replant with rubber but will deposit the land with the PDS to cultivate tapioca, other tubers and food giving timber trees like jack, mango, breadfruit etc.

A total water balance study inclusive of ground water monitoring will be initiated. Water levels in selected 500 wells will be monitored at two-week intervals for five years. A full-fledged weather station will be set up. Additional weirs will be constructed, both to store water and to measure the outflow.

The new cropping pattern will be:

Coconut	300 ha	6-7 million nuts per year
Tapioca	300 ha	12,000 te per year
Vegetables	150 ha	3,000 te per year
Fodder grass	200 ha	40,000 te per year
Paddy	100 ha	400 te rice per year

Each Agrico unit will have one or two aquaponic farm of 200 cu.m pond size and 600 sq. m vegetable area capable of producing 4 te of fish and 12 te of vegetables annually. The total production of fresh water fish in the panchayath could be 150 to 200 te. Vegetable production from these units will be about 600 te. The worker-owners of these Agricos will be trained and retrained in dairy, aquaponics, fodder farming, olericulture, coconut care, climbing trees etc. All these are skilled and technical jobs.

The PDS will set up a 10,000TPY tapioca processing plant to convert tapioca into more nutritious and delicious pasta, macaroni and other products such as rice-like pearls which can be cooked as ordinary rice. The PDS will set up, also, a full toiletry unit to produce soaps, detergents, lotions, cleaning agents; a pickle and other condiments unit; a tailoring and garment making unit, a bakery etc. etc. All products will bear the brand name of the panchayath and citizens are persuaded to buy their own products.

They had estimated the maximum electrical energy they need to achieve the highest quality of life is not more than 1500 units per person per year and that they will not be foolish to consume vanity goods or self-destructive goods. This much of energy will be produced locally. Each house will install solar power units capable of generating per year twice their annual consumption-2kw to 5kw or more; 30 to 40 MW in all. The panchayath produces annually about 6,000 te of burnable biomass capable of producing 4 million units of electricity.

Efficient use of solar water heaters, hot-boxes and planned cooking operations can reduce domestic heating energy. Or 30 to 40 million units. Adoption of LED lamps, DC fans and other DC equipment like washing machines, mixer-grinders, TV etc will avoid the necessity of large capacity inverters and storage batteries. Everyone is energy-conscious.

There are a large number of 'industrial' goods which they consume daily, such as processed foods, dairy products, toiletries, bakery products including high end ones such as chocolates, papads and other fryems, jams and pickles, ready to eat foods, etc. Every one of these will be produced locally. Production units will be set up for all of them after assessing the market for each item. Repairs of all gadgets and vehicles will be done locally. All house-hold repairs too will be done by local home-repair shops.

The PDS will set up a Green Technology Centre with the following mandate: install 'state of art' roof top SPV units, provide total maintenance, stock necessary spare parts; provide training services to upgrade the skills of artisans and mechanics; service Green Task Forces in the 'waste to wealth' program; provide entrepreneurship training for agricors, repair shops, toiletries, bakeries, integrated agriculture, aquaponics etc, etc; installation and operation of bio gas plants.

All the enterprises will be under group ownership-as co-operatives or as producer companies. Shares are limited to workers and registered consumers and are non-negotiable. The citizens have, since long, realized that 'shares' have no real value except when involved in actual production of use values and that share market is merely a gambling den.

With increased local employment and neighbourhood schooling, need for internal motorised travel can be brought down drastically. They have entrusted resident engineers to design an efficient network of footpaths and cycle-paths. The need for motorised vehicles will come down drastically. An efficient taxi-pool can reduce the need of private vehicle still further.

In the areas of food, energy, transport, education, health care, water supply and sanitation increasing self-sufficiency is accepted as the objective. The following steps are considered:

The panchayath will produce all necessary carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins and minerals enough for a balanced diet of all its members. It will produce all the electrical energy required to meet its internal demands and to supply to the grid the embedded energies it consumes. It will take total care of the health of all its members. The chain includes roving health workers, Primary Health Centres, tertiary services and specialized services. Neighbourhood system of schooling will be adopted willingly because there is no special reason to be otherwise. Good quality public education will be assured. Children will walk or cycle to schools. Safe cycling paths will be made. Motorised internal transport is

reduced. Private cars will become unnecessary. An efficient public taxi system will be established. By providing local livelihood opportunities and producing food and other items locally travel and transportation will be considerably reduced.

A Green Technology Centre to service these enterprises and to set up new ones will be established. 'Produce Local, Buy Local, Consume Local' will be the central slogan. Branded products of national and multi-national corporations will be boycotted, as far as possible. Things which require larger scales of production will be produced at the next level.

What I have indicated is based on the decentralization experience in Kerala. People at large still have not internalized the fact that we cannot go on the BAU path for long. The days of runaway changes in ecology and economy are not very far off. Slight uneasiness has set in. The first step, as some of us here contemplate, is to build producer-trader-consumer cooperatives. Since everyone is both a producer and a consumer at the same time, we hope to convert commodity production to use value production. The only way to go forward is to take the first step forward and not to stand still.

Living with Climate Change

Humanity will not be able to escape from a runaway climate change. The GHG content in the atmosphere is likely to exceed 550-600 ppm CO₂ equivalent. If we do not prepare ourselves from today onwards to meet this, the species may become extinct or, if lucky, degenerate into barbarism. There are ways to avoid this.

Develop a new fruit and tuber-based food regime instead of cereal based ones. Cereals are more sensitive to climate changes. In Kerala we are advocating Jack fruit, Bread fruit, Coconut and Cassava together with fish as food for future. The Kerala government has already adopted jack tree as its national tree.

Food growing timber trees have yet another function: to sequester carbon and fix it in the form of structural elements. A rough, on-the-envelope calculation shows that we can sequester all the additional CO₂ we have put into the atmosphere and fix it in the form of roofs, walls, and floors within a period of 150 to 200 years. We do not know whether this will reverse the climate changes. It is wiser to learn to live even with runaway climate changes. The species population may come down to one tenth of the present. This scenario is not for a distant future but for this century—within two or three generations.

We need not feel guilty of being anthropocentric. We cannot be otherwise. Our concern about nature destruction, species extinction etc. stem from our species self-interest. 'OUR' should mean all of us and not a few powerful ones. We are concerned about the destruction of nature, rightfully belonging to all of us in the interest of Capital. How happy all of us would have been if we could destroy mosquitoes, cockroaches, bed-bugs and many others!