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Radical Ecological Democracy: Escaping India's globalization trap

ASHISH KOTHARI

ABSTRACT *The global economic and ecological crises can be seen as an opportunity to fundamentally question our paths of 'development', and move towards ideologies, policies, and practices of ecological sustainability and social equity. India in its current globalizing form, presents a vivid picture of unsustainability. But, Ashish Kothari proposes that in its ancient and new ideologies and its myriad grassroots experiments in alternatives, it could also be the harbinger of revolutionary changes in the way humans relate to the earth and to each other.*

KEYWORDS *economic crisis; decentralization; alternatives; sustainability; equity; diversity*

Introduction

The global economic crisis has presented us with an unprecedented opportunity to correct the course that human society has taken. It has never before been as clear that there is something drastically wrong in the way we have conducted our economic activities, and in particular, the course of 'development' that we have adopted in the last few decades. The economic crisis is not only an anomaly that can be corrected with some reforms, it is a symptom of fundamental faults in both the ideology of development and its current *avatar*[1] of globalization. This is all the more apparent because this crisis is accompanied by other related ones, which are even more destabilizing and threatening in the long run: the catastrophic ecological changes manifested in the loss of crucial ecosystem functions, erosion of biodiversity, and climate change, and the water and food crises that dozens of countries and hundreds of millions of people are facing.

The opportunity that these multiple crises presents us is the basic reorientation of the economy and of socio-political relations, and of our relationship with nature. But, such drastic changes of course are not going to be possible without some visible signs that can convince people at large of their feasibility. Fortunately, we do have both the conceptual thinking and the on-ground experimentation to show that we can move towards more responsible stewardship of the earth and greater justice for each human being.

What is wrong with our economic model?

Why are we in the midst of these multiple crises? While anything said in a few words would be necessarily simplistic, some essential truths stare at us in the face.

First, the model of 'development' that has gained currency especially since the 1950s considers the ecological base that we all survive on as a raw material for exploitation, or a vast wastebin to absorb the effluents we produce. Classical and so-called neo-liberal economics have never considered the environment as being central to its theories or prescriptions, and though they have been criticized and challenged for decades by Marx and Gandhi among others, they continue to rule in virtually all countries, with dominant institutions, such as like the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, refusing to let go.

Global studies, such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment,[2] have shown that we are already consuming and dumping far more than the capacity of the earth to absorb. In effect, we are stealing from our future generations. In India, a study produced in 2008 by the Global Footprint Network and the Confederation of Indian Industry came to the conclusion that we were already well past our national carrying capacity, and eating into our natural 'capital'.[3] The key findings are:

- India has the world's third largest ecological footprint, after the United Sates and China;
- Indians are using almost two times what the natural resources within the country can sustain (or twice its 'biocapacity');
- The capacity of nature to sustain Indians has declined sharply by almost half, in the last four decades or so.

Confirmation of the unsustainability of India's economy (and that of several other countries) has also come from a somewhat more conventional economic approach, measuring 'sustainable development' from a perspective of 'inclusive wealth' as a measure of human well-being (Dasgupta, 2007: 1–10). The serious loss of biodiversity, with widespread impacts on ecological health and people's livelihood security, is yet another indicator of something being seriously wrong (TPCG and Kalpavriksh, 2005).

Second, although industrialized countries have devised increasingly stringent regulations to protect their domestic environment, recognizing that the captains of industry will not do this on their own, they and the institutions they dominate (IMF, the World Bank and other multilateral agencies, and bilateral donors) have preached 'free-market' approaches to poor and so-called 'developing' countries. In India, citizens have had to 'globalize', to open up our economic boundaries and make things easy for both domestic and foreign industry, which has inevitably meant loosening environmental regulations. The diversion of forests for industrial and infrastructural use has significantly increased in the last decade or so, a direct result of the globalization and liberalization policies adopted by the government in the early 1990s. Data accessed from the Ministry of Environment and Forests, using a Right to Information application, show that of all the forest land diversion that has occurred since 1981 (when a system for central government permission for such diversion was put in place), over 55 percent has happened after 2001. Over 70 percent of forest land cleared for mining since 1981 has occured in the period 1997–2007.

Environmental governance in general has taken a beating, with many of the gains of the ecological movement in the 1980s being rolled back. For instance, the procedures for conducting Environment Impact Assessment and getting clearance from India's Ministry of Environment and Forests have been drastically weakened as a direct result of a World Bank funded 'environmental reforms' process as also lobbying by industrial and commercial interests (Kohli and Menon, 2005; Saldanha *et al.*, 2007; Menon and Kohli, 2008: 14–17), and over a dozen changes to a crucial notification regulating activities in sensitive coastal and marine areas made it easier to set up industrial, sports, or port facilities (Menon *et al.*, 2007). The most bizarre action by the Indian government to make industrial investment easier is allowing a virtually free hand to corporations in Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which are

treated almost like 'foreign lands' within India in that many labour, tax, and environmental regulations do not apply.[4]

Third, the development and free-market ideologies that underlie current globalization, and the Indian economy, have rapidly marginalized already poor or weak communities. Since Independence, around 60 million people have been displaced from their homes in India alone, mostly due to dams, mines, urban sprawl, expressways, and the like (Mathur, 2008: 3–13). Though adivasis[5] comprise only about 7–8 percent of India's population, they comprise a disproportionately high percentage of those displaced; according to India's Planning Commission, of

> a population of 21.3 million displaced between 1951 and 1990 in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa, 8.54 million (40 per cent) are tribals and of those only 2.12 million (24.8 per cent) tribals could be resettled.[6]

Even when not physically uprooted, tens of millions of forest-dwellers, fishers, pastoralists, farmers, and crafts-persons have had their livelihoods torn asunder by the ecological damage caused by 'development', their cultures, and lifestyles characterized as 'primitive' even though they are far more ecologically sustainable than the lifestyles of those who make economic policy, and after all this, in a cruel twist of logic, their status converted into legal or ecological violators as they desperately eke out a living by selling firewood, 'poaching' inside a protected area, or squatting on public land in a city. Livelihoods have also been lost in large numbers due to the cheap imports of agricultural and other goods, both especially prominent in the globalization phase (e.g., for a detailed case study, see Aerthayil, 2008). Nor are those being displaced from farms and forests and wetland, adequately being absorbed in the industry or in services. In fact, with industry becoming more and more capital-intensive, India has witnessed the strange (but not surprising) phenomenon of 'jobless growth' (Kannan and Raveendran, 2009: 80–91). Tata Steel, one of India's most iconic brands, increased the annual production at its Jamshedpur plant by a factor of five between 1991 and 2005, but nearly halved its work force from 85,000 to 44,000 (Bhaduri, 2007: 1597–1601).

Fourth, and linked to all the above, the dominant economic ideology has created huge chasms between the rich and the poor, exacerbating inequities between and within nations. The 'shining' India that the media so loves to project (with its billionaires and its homespun multinational companies, we are all supposed to be proud of) has the world's largest number of malnourished women and children, with half or more of its population unable to find enough to eat, or have access to clean drinking water, adequate sanitation, and affordable health facilities.[7] Combine this with the lack of employment opportunities among the poor. In the ongoing economic crisis, industries are laying off workers in their millions. The growing inequalities, deprivation, and unemployment are a scary breeding ground for social and ecological conflict, as already witnessed in protests across India. Rapid population growth, though not at the root of the problem, certainly adds to environmental and social disruption.

Among the most powerful indictments of India's model of development is the number of farmer suicides, estimated to be well over 100,000 in the last few years.[8] This includes farmers in the heartland of the country's Green Revolution, the state of Punjab, where input intensive practices have been propagated for over three decades, and where the signs of ecological collapse are all-too visible (Newman, 2007). These are now being added to by suicides (or threats of suicide) of workers who get laid off during the financial crisis. Such consequences will only increase unless we make some fundamental changes in macroeconomic and governance policies.

Towards alternatives: Key principles and values

Two fundamental principles underlie the search for alternatives:

First, *ecological sustainability*: Since every credible knowledge system, traditional and modern, is pointing to the fact that humanity is already well past the ecological limits of the earth, one clear

principle for any alternative vision has to be ecological sustainability. This term has no easy or crystal-clear definition, especially since the term 'sustainability' is fraught with myriad interpretations. However, to put things simply, by this term I mean the continuing *integrity of the ecosystems and ecological functions* on which all life depends (including all hydrological, chemical, and physical processes that give us the air, water, and soil without which we cannot live). It also encompasses the continuation of *biological diversity* as the fulcrum of life, ensuring the security of species from human-caused extinction.

Second *social equity*: Given that one of the biggest failures of economic globalization and 'development' is in ensuring that all humans have the basics of life and are secured against deprivation of any kind, the second clear principle of any alternative vision is social equity. As in the case of ecological sustainability, this term is not possible to define in clear-cut terms. It encompasses a mix of features: equality of opportunity, full access to decision-making forums for all, equity in the distribution and enjoyment of the benefits of human endeavour (across class, caste, age, gender, and other divisions), and cultural security.

Linked to these is a set of the following basic values (among others) that are also crucial for alternative visions:

- *Diversity and pluralism*: Many of us grew up with school textbooks that described India in one phrase: 'unity in diversity'. While in no way belittling the conflicts and tension that have existed through the ages in India, this phrase is nevertheless strikingly true of much of our history. A great plurality of ways of living have coexisted, many of which continue even in twenty-first century India. Increasingly, though, economic globalization threatens to obliterate this diversity, by homogenizing language, food, lifestyles, technologies, ecological conditions, and entire ways of life. Both ecological and social systems are rendered vulnerable by such homogenization, as for instance the propensity of monoculture fields or plantations to collapse under pest or disease attack. Hence the urgent need to revive respect for diversity of all kinds.
- *Cooperation*: Ancient rural ways of cooperating in agricultural operations, or in times of crisis, or for other functions, have been increasingly replaced by individualized competitiveness and the breakdown of crucial community ties of collaboration (which is not to deny intense and often unbearable exploitation, and conflict in traditional communities). Yet, the most successful experiments at alternatives, such as those referred to in this paper, rely on putting cooperation back as the centrepiece of human relations.
- *Rights with responsibilities*: Everyone seems to want rights these days, and this is entirely justified, for without rights there is little security. However, rarely does this go with a demand for, or apportioning of, equal responsibility: the responsibility of exercising rights in a manner that does not endanger the collective, does not undermine the exercise of similar rights by others, and does not threaten the environment. An alternative vision would encourage and ensure such *ethical citizenship,* where individuals and collectives are responsive to each other's needs and rights, and to the needs and rights of non-human nature.
- *Dignity of labour*: Intellectual work and physical labour are equally a part of human existence, but unfortunately, we have increasingly placed a premium on the former while belittling the latter. A sustainable and equitable society will require this hierarchy to be abolished, and physical labour given the dignity it deserves.
- *Respect to subsistence*: Subsistence lifestyles, which had little or nothing to do with financial markets, are today looked down upon as 'primitive' and 'backward'. In the new thinking, the subsistence economy will again be given importance for being ecologically more sustainable as also for being more in the control of the local community.
- *Simple living and the qualitative pursuit of happiness*: In an era of consumerism, the 'good life' has come to be defined as increasing accumulation of material goods, rather than as the pursuit of knowledge, happiness, and satis-

faction through cultural and social interaction, links with nature, and simple lifestyles. This does not mean living like hermits, but about being aware of, and satisfied with, 'enoughness' rather than 'moreness' (Bender, 1975).

Radical ecological democracy: Diversity, localization, and landscapes

Moving towards sustainable and equitable alternatives is not only about recycling and reuse, clean technologies and waste reduction but also about fundamental changes in the way we relate to nature and to each other.

It requires a radical form of democracy in which each citizen has a responsible say in decision-making, that is very different from current representative forms of democracy in which we vote once in five years and leave all decisions to those who come to power. There is nothing new in this concept, it has been advocated by many (e.g. Markovic, 1994: 131–145). But, this is not enough, it also requires that each citizen is aware of, and responsible towards, the needs of ecological sustainability, including the survival of non-human nature. Such a *radical ecological democracy* (RED) would consist of a number of political, economic, and social arrangements.

One of the first mistakes we must immediately correct is the imposition of one economic model, or indeed one model of governance, education, health, and environmental management, on the enormous diversity of ecological and cultural situations that defines India. It is ironic that even bio*diversity* conservation laws can be monolithic, as is the case with India's Wild Life Protection Act imposing uniform management prescriptions for protected areas in vastly different ecological conditions. Moving away from such uniformity and the domination of one worldview, would entail giving respect and recognition to many ecologies and many human ways of living. These would include systems once considered valuable but now considered outdated and 'primitive': subsistence economies, barter, local *haat*-based[9] trade, oral knowledge, work-leisure combines, dignity of labour, the machine as a tool and not a master, local health traditions, handicrafts, learning through doing with parents and other elders, frowning upon profligacy and waste, and so on. This does not mean an unconditional acceptance of traditions – indeed there is much in traditional India that needs to be left behind including women's subjugation and the exploitation of *dalits* or 'lower' castes- but rather a re-examination of the past and building on the best of what traditions offer. And lest anyone mistake this to be the kind of revivalism that India's right-wing Hindu chauvinists talk about, let me hasten to add that communalism of this or any other kind should have no place in the India of the future. Traditions need to be rescued from those who use them in a bigoted way (Sharma, 2009).

A key plank of the alternative futures will be *localization*, a trend diametrically opposed to globalization. This is based on the simple but powerful belief that those living closest to the resource to be managed would have the greatest stake, and often the best knowledge, to manage it. Of course this is not always the case, and in India many communities have lost the capacity to manage their surrounds because of two centuries of government-dominated policies. Nevertheless a move towards localization of essential production, consumption, and trade, and of health, education, and other services, is eminently possible. The thousands of Indian initiatives at decentralized water harvesting, biodiversity conservation, education, governance, food and materials production, energy generation, waste management, and others in both villages and cities, are testimony to the power of localization (Agarwal and Narain, 1997; CEE, 2002; Satheesh, 2002; Pathak, 2009)[10] These are still a drop in the ocean, but serve as forerunners to a growing trend that will emerge as globalized economies collapse. Taking the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution (mandating decentralization to rural and urban communities), to their logical conclusion, could well be possible through such initiatives.[11]

However, the local and the small-scale are not adequate. For many of the problems we now face are at much larger scales, emanating from and affecting entire landscapes (and seascapes), countries, regions, and indeed the earth. Climate change is an obvious example, but there were

many well before it: the spread of toxics (DDT has been found in penguins in Antarctica, thousands of miles from where this pesticide may have been sprayed), and desertification, to name two. Landscape and transboundary planning and governance (also called 'bioregionalism', or 'ecoregionalism', amongst other names), are now exciting new approaches being tried out in several countries and regions. These are as yet fledgling in India, but some are worth learning from. A people's effort, the Arvari Sansad (Parliament) in Rajasthan, has aimed at managing a 400 sq.km river basin through uniting all the villages in the basin and making integrated plans and programmes for land, agriculture, water, wildlife, development, and even law and order.[12] In Orissa a bold effort at bringing several thousand sq. km of the Chilika lagoon and catchment hills under integrated and participatory planning with the creation of a Chilika Development Authority has run into difficulties, but even as a partial success it has important lessons to teach (Kothari and Pathak, 2006).

The combination of localization and landscape approaches also provides massive opportunities for livelihood generation, thus tackling one of India's biggest ongoing problems: unemployment. For many years now, civil society organizations in India have been saying that land and water regeneration, and the resulting increase in productivity, could provide one of the country's biggest sources of employment, and create permanent assets for sustainable livelihoods. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), one of the current government's flagship programmes, as also other schemes such as the National Urban Renewal Mission, could well be oriented towards such environment-employment combinations. Also important in the new 'green job' deal would be a renewed emphasis on labour-intensive rural industries and infrastructure, including handlooms and handicrafts, local energy projects, rural roads, and others that people can be in control of, building on their own traditional knowledge or with easily acquired new skills.

Building on decentralized and landscape level governance and management, and in turn providing it a solid backing, would be a rational land use plan for each state and the country as a whole. This plan would permanently put the country's ecologically and socially most fragile or important lands into some form of conservation status (fully participatory and mindful of local rights and tenure) including biodiversity hotspots, sacred sites (especially of traditional communities), territories of vulnerable adivasis and fishers, community conserved and government managed protected areas, water catchment forests, and so on. Mining, ports and industries could simply not come up here. Such a plan would also enjoin upon towns and cities to provide as much of their resources from within their boundaries as possible, through water harvesting, rooftop farming, decentralized energy generation, and similar activities; and to build mutually beneficial rather than parasitic relations with rural areas from where they may still need to take resources. The greater the say of rural communities in deciding what happens to their resources, and the greater the awareness of city-dwellers on the impacts of their lifestyles, the more this will happen. Ultimately as villages get vitalized through locally appropriate development initiatives, rural-urban migration which today seems inexorable, would also slow down and may even get reversed as has happened with villages like Ralegan Siddhi and Hivare Bazaar in the state of Maharashtra.[13]

If communities (rural and urban) are to be the fulcrum of the alternative futures, will there remain a role for the state? Or for non-state actors such as civil society organizations and the business sector? Certainly, the state will need to retain, or rather strengthen, its welfare role for the weak (human and non-human), facilitating their voices in decision-making. It will assist communities in situations where local capacity is weak, such as in generating resources, providing NREGA kind of schemes, and ensuring tenurial security. It will rein in business elements or others who behave irresponsibly towards the environment or people. Civil society and business will serve communities, the former also acting as watchdogs against misuse of powers by any sector. Markets will once again be, at their core, local, emphasizing trade amongst people who can relate to each other; with national or international trade being built on this

core, and subject to local ecological and social considerations.

The reversal of economic globalization does not entail the end of global relations. Indeed there has always been a flow of ideas, persons, services and materials across the world, and this has often enriched human societies. RED, with its focus on localized economies and ethical lifestyles, learning from each other, would actually make the *meaningful* flow of ideas and innovations at global levels much more possible than in a situation where everything is dominated by finance and capital.

Is such a transformation possible?

Radical ecological democracy entails huge shifts in governance, and will encounter considerable resistance from today's political and corporate power centres. But, in India, there are many signs that people's power may prevail. There has been a marked growth in mass movements against destructive development projects, especially among communities most impacted by displacement or the degradation of their environment, supported by civil society groups in urban areas.[14]

Added to this are widespread initiatives, such as the use of the Right to Information Act, to challenge corruption and opaqueness in government functioning, tribal self-rule in some parts of central India (e.g., in the village of Mendha-Lekha, see Pathak, 2009), 'communitization',[15] community-based water, forest, and sustainable agriculture movements across the country, village-level planning in the southern state of Kerala ('People's Plan Campaign'), citizens' planning initiatives at national and state levels,[16] and many others. All of these provide an indication that such change is possible. Indeed, it is happening even in the most globalized economies of the world, as in the localization of production and consumption and finances, or the slow food movements in the United Sates and Europe.[17] This trend will increase as countries realize that the roots of the economic crisis lie in the globalization of economic and financial systems.

India is perhaps uniquely placed to lead in such a transformation, for a variety of reasons: its thousand years of history and adaptation, its ecological and cultural diversity, its resilience in the face of multiple crises, the continued existence of myriad lifestyles and worldviews including of ecosystem people who still tread the most lightly on earth, the powerful legacy of Buddha, Gandhi, and other progressive thinkers, the adoption of revolutionary thinking from others like Marx, zealously guarded practices of democracy and civil society activism, and the very many peoples' movements of resistance and reconstruction. But of course, it cannot do this alone, it will need to convince, teach, and learn from other countries and people as it has done for many centuries.

Notes

1 A Hindi term for 'version' or 'manifestation', commonly used for the various forms of gods and goddesses, and therefore apt here because 'development' in its various versions has been elevated to the status of an omnipresent, omnipotent ideology.
2 www.millenniumassessment.org.
3 http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/blog/indias_demand_on_nature_approaching_critical_limits.
4 www.ncasindia.org/public/staticpages/sez.asp, accessed 28 May 2009; *Advocacy Internet* Vol. VIII No. 3, May–June 2006, at www.ncasindia.org/public/AdvocacyInternet/ai_may_june_06.pdf; several articles on http://infochangeindia.org.
5 The term used for India's indigenous or 'tribal' peoples, meaning 'the original residents'. There is a complex debate on the various terms used for and by these communities, due to the very long history of influx and settlement of the Indian subcontinent, which we need not go into here. The percentage of population referred to here is what the Indian government officially recognizes as 'scheduled tribes', that is, those listed in a schedule of the Indian Constitution and given special protection and rights.
6 http://www.planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/10th/volume2/v2_ch4_2.pdf, accessed 1 June 2009.

7 All of which place India abysmally low on the UNDP Human Development Index, at no. 132 on a list of 179 countries in December 2008; see http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/, accessed 1 June 2009.
8 Sainath (2009) estimates the number to be 182,936 between 1997 and 2007, and notes that the number has increased in the phase of economic globalization, with a majority of the victims being cash crop farmers.
9 Haat is a local market in rural India.
10 For several dozen case studies, see http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/sereport/ser/seeds/stdy_seed.htm; see also www.ddsindia.com, www.tarunbharatsangh.org, and *Down to Earth* Special issue 'Good News', at http://www.downtoearth.org.in/default20090115.htm.
11 Decentralization has so far had very mixed impacts in India: widespread bureaucratic resistance, local power play, and lack of capacity amongst communities to handle decentralized functions, have undermined implementation across much of India, but in many states organized communities and civil society groups, and sensitive officials, have also managed to utilize it for people's benefit. For a detailed review, see various essays in Jayal *et al.*, 2006.
12 See Hasnat, 2005: 16–17; http://www.tarunbharatsangh.org/programs/water/arvariparliament.htm, accessed 1 June 2009.
13 See Pangare and Pangare, 1992; Sakhuja, 2008; http://www.fao.org/docrep/x5669e/x5669e06.htm, accessed 1 June 2009.
14 For examples, see Shiva *et al.*, 1991; Agarwal *et al.*, 1994; *Humanscape,* special issue on movements, October 2000; Kothari *et al.*, 2003; Oommen, 2008).
15 Providing greater local control of education, health, and other aspects in the North-East Indian state of Nagaland (http://www.nenanews.com/ANE%20June%201-15,%2007/special%20report1.htm, accessed 1 June 2009).
16 For example, a 4-year process to produce a draft National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, see TPCG and Kalpavriksh, 2005.
17 See for instance, Hines, 2000 and http://www.slowfood.com/.

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