

## **In Search of Sustainable Solutions**

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### ***Alternative Futures: India Unshackled***

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This collection of 32 essays in pursuit of ‘Envisioning India’s Future’ touches upon four dimensions of human existence, viz., political, socio-cultural, economic and ecological. They explore solutions to contemporary challenges of development by transcending the limits of standard analytical/textbook approaches.

The solutions they suggest may appear Utopian. This is what the editors seem to sound when they cite Fernando Birri saying “Utopia is on the horizon. I move two steps closer; it moves two steps further away. I walk another ten steps, and utopia runs ten steps further away. As much as I may walk, I never reach it. So what is the point of utopia? The point is this: it makes us continually advance.” However, the collection is not entirely so. There are quite informative and enlightening essays like the ones cited in this review.

Given my specialization and comparative advantage, I would like to begin with the section on ‘economic futures’. The list of issues for economic policy is virtually endless as a look at successive five year plan/economic survey documents would show. This volume highlights select challenges and provides a perspective with essays touching upon pastoralism, agriculture and food, agro-industrial development based on biomass, crafts, industry, energy, localization, transportation and markets. The essays together propose options for a pursuit that can be economically and ecologically regenerative. In this sense, the book has something in common with the contemporary international policy emphasis on Sustainable Development Goals. What distinguishes some of these essays is that the authors’ perceptions and suggestions are based on rich experience (for example, Rathor in his joint essay on pastoralism).

The paper on ‘Anna Swaraj’ provides a refreshing break and promising perspective with ‘A Vision for Food Sovereignty and Agro-Ecological Resurgence’. Unlike the editors, the authors of this article begin with a quote which hints about India’s potential strength: “European travellers to India from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were dazzled by the food abundance they witnessed” (George and Paige, 1988). Among the authors (Mansata, Kuruganti, Jardhari and Futane), three are full time farmers, which adds to the credibility of their assessment and recommendation. The paper deserves special attention since it deals

with agriculture which has a bearing upon rural livelihoods, food and nutrition security and ecology.

India today faces challenges in the multiple dimensions of food insecurity. There is inadequate quantity of food; availability is not stable; limited in diversity not to speak of poor quality and inadequate nutrition. However, contemporary public policy discussions on issues related to food insecurity largely take place within a text book framework of supply and demand and their determinants. The approach is allopathic involving symptomatic treatments. The paper illustrates the limitations of such an approach with reference to the Indian strategy of Green Revolution. For instance, the pursuit of economic and physical access to food grains quite often ignores endowments, their salient features, preferences, institutional constraints and policy imperatives. The country has a National Food Security Act without a concept, its measure and appreciation of real constraints.

The paper on 'Anna Swaraj' provides details on how India dealt with the food security needs of the country before the 'dawn of agriculture' and before the so called 'Green Revolution'. India had a good endowment of 'uncultivated forest' providing all essentials for a healthy life: fertile soil, abundant sunshine and water, rich forests, biodiversity. Contrary to contemporary challenges, 'bio diverse natural forests' ensured perennial physical accesses to a rich variety of organic foods providing for diet-diversity and hence, eliminating scope for hidden hunger. In other words, India has a good tradition of developing a holistic approach to its socio-economic problems. That India had such a glorious past is well known and documented. But sadly for India, there are few who can pass on the knowledge to future generation. This is a critical constraint binding India today.

Indian practice of mixed farming of several food crops indeed proved to be a blessing in tackling seasonality, weather shocks like drought and ensuring diversity in food consumption even for the tribal sections of the population. This is one aspect which has received admiration from experts all over. While Perira rated traditional Indian agriculture high in terms of productivity and sustainability, Voelcker, a reputed European agricultural expert of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, called it a "perfect picture of careful cultivation". Voelcker was all praise for 'ingenuity in device of water raising appliances, of knowledge of soils and their capabilities, and the exact time to sow and reap...It is wonderful too how much is known of rotation, the system of mixed crops...'

Similarly Srivastava and Rangasamy's essay on 'Regionalization and localization of economies: A preliminary sketch for an ecological imperative' provides a very constructive sustainable alternative approach to the contemporary market based strategies for growth, which in fact, have cost in terms of ecological damage and human endowments. The paper chalks out a decentralized approach to development with an illustration from Kuthambakkam village in Tamil Nadu, wherein Rangasamy was the sarpanch (village head). With good roads, drainage system, potable water, energy efficient lighting etc., the village has all the essential features of a strategy for Sustainable Development Goals. Other articles in this section are also based on sound empirical evidence and hence are quite convincing and promising.

The subset of papers under the ecological category seek to show how unsustainable the current strategies for development are in terms of loss of ecosystems and biodiversity, toxification of water, air and soil, and soil erosion. The study by Lele and Sahu explicitly state the issues involved: (i) regulatory failure; (ii) limits to judicial activism; (iii) neo-liberal growth ideas; and (iv) misconception that 'conservatism is environmentalism'. Hence, there is a need to ensure that environmental governance embraces quality of life, sustainability and environmental justice and rework the institutional design with reference to bio-physical and social justice goals.

The volume is quite eloquent on the emerging water crisis and the issues involved. Dharmadhikary and Thakkar plead for treating water as an integral part of ecosystems with reference to its cultural, sustenance and economic values. They strike an optimistic note when they cite examples from official and non-official actors and suggest a strategy through institutional changes.

Hande, Shastrya and Mishra address issues related to energy. They lay emphasis on ensuring energy security with due regard to affordability, cleanliness and other development goals. The essay is quite informative and enlightening in terms of its description of the issues and recommended policy changes to pursue energy security at minimum environmental cost.

The section on the 'political futures' provides useful insights. It recognises the complexities of governance and power hierarchy in a society marked by inequalities based on caste, ethnicity, gender, economic power and political status. How do we empower the masses with respect to economic and political dimensions? Das proposes a 'New Power Alliance' in terms of peoples' movements and progressive forces to challenge the power structure and its exploitative designs. This proposal is further corroborated by Roy, Dey and Kashyap who suggest feasible options to ensure accountability in governance. Two convincing options are the campaigns related to Right to Information and Employment Guarantee schemes. This section becomes complete with a useful essay on the legal dimension of the political structure by Kodiveri and another one on the role of India in the global order by Dubey.

The section on socio-cultural futures includes essays touching upon issues like language, art, media, knowledge, health, sexuality, dalits and caste, gender, adivasis and minorities. These are comprehensive with respect to their coverage of economic, political and socio-cultural dimensions and policy options. To preserve languages, Devy suggests options ranging from e-libraries, literary societies to magazines for indigenous languages. The essay on 'Future of Learning in Indian Schools' by Khnidri and Biswas acknowledges its role in inter-generational transmission of ideas, life experiences, culture, knowledge and language. However, the same education system, which is a critical agency to perform such a role, perpetuates the inequalities and prejudices prevailing in the society. This is largely because education has been reduced to business with little scope for intellectual development of a child. The essay provides realistic feasible options for creating interactive, inclusive and open ended learning environment. There are a couple of other essays like the one by Rain which show how a mindless pursuit of economic gains would prove costly for the society, which

could be averted only by a strategy based on democratic values and community based knowledge systems.

In sum, this edited volume is quite informative and enlightening in terms of specification of the problem in its diverse dimensions; its analysis, and designing sustainable feasible solutions to the development challenges today.

#### **References**

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