

Book Review**Ecology, Economy and Society: the three pillars of Development****Monjit Borthakur***

Felix Padel, Ajay Dandekar & Jeemol Unni. (2013). Ecology Economy: Quest for a Socially Informed Connection. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan. xxiii + 315 pp, Rs795 (hardcover)

The material being of any society depends on how humans interact with their immediate nature. Human ability to produce their means of subsistence makes them distinct from other animal being (Marx & Engels, 1968). The paleolithic hunters and gatherers advanced the forest, the agricultural men ploughed the soil and the industrial men extracted the raw material for production of their need. Through their production relation, human being interacts with and leaves behind distinctive imprint on the nature. Some interact symbiotically and some alter it completely. The industrial capitalist society has caused inexorable damage to nature which has left behind a trail of exploitation to sustain a 'development', based on continuous production and consumption of the resources. 'What is real development?' - a financial system based on debt to support massive 'development' for resource cartel or a communitarian system based on equal right over the resources to support life and livelihood of the poor and marginalised? Seeking answers to these questions, the Book, *Ecology Economy: Quest for a Socially Informed Connection* attempts to reinvent meaning of some key concepts revolving around ecology, development, growth, right and freedom.

The book critically engages with the debate between 'two cultures' – environment and development, or, to put more explicitly – the conflict between right to livelihood and the right to determine the nature of 'development'. The introductory chapter in the book begins by raising questions about the divide between mainstream model of economic development and ecological value of traditional communities. The attempt to understand the linkage 'ecology and economy' only through economic considerations, as the authors put forwarded, cannot generate any standoff between the two cultures. To untangle the conflict between the 'two cultures', a contradiction to Jairam Ramesh's argument of 'going beyond traditional system' to 'valuing the nature' (Ramesh, 2010), requires a third perspective – the Society, which extends balance between the two poles, ecology and economy (p. 6). Society, ecology and economy are closely interlinked

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and inconceivable to understand in isolation. Throughout the book, the authors explore the interrelation of these three perspectives with some empirical evidences. The mainstream environmental economics of cost benefit analysis (CBA) and green accounting of natural resources by using monetary value ignores non-measurable social and ecological factors. To avoid the implicit bias of these mainstream models, the book argues for ecological economics that offers holistic approach to value the ecosystem and the society while accounting for any development intervention. The approach apprises that the economy of the traditional societies, the Adivasi, is closely interlinked with nature and maintains a harmony between ecology and economy through their traditional way of life.

The Affluent Adivasi Economy

The Adivasi societies are deeply rooted to the idea of long term sustainability through their symbiotic relation with the nature; driving ways of subsistence from the ecosystem without intrinsically damaging it. In his seminal work, Marshall Sahlins argued that society of the hunters and gatherers was the original affluent society, in which all the people's material wants were easily satisfied. As stated by Sahlins, "To assert that the hunters are affluent is to deny then that the human condition is an ordained tragedy, with man the prisoner at hard labor of a perpetual disparity between his *unlimited wants* and his *insufficient means*" (Sahlins, 1972, p.1). The authors have made an attempt to extend the concept to Adivasis in India to define 'Adivasi economy' as a social system which is radically decentralised and highly embedded in the idea of 'moral economy'. The 'moral economy' of the Adivasi societies – the spirit of sharing land and labour, food and drink, helps to create a social system of redistributive justice, which makes them affluent. The Adivasi economy is, thus, based on the principle of sharing, a sharp contrast to mainstream market economy of competition for continuous production and consumption of resources (p. 23). These societies, although, remain outside of unlimited desire or wants and lack in industrial mindset, are under siege throughout the world. They are being displaced from their land and livelihood by 'development projects', which are largely funded by a financial system based on debt.

Resource cartel – Dispossession of the marginalised

The resource rich belts of central India have become major focus of the world mining companies, thriving on minerals at a highly subsidised rate. These companies, through their negotiation with the state, are continuously dispossessing the Adivasis from the mountains, hills and rivers, which they have been conserving since time immemorial. Throughout the chapters from three to six, the book highlights a plethora of empirical evidences over a range of resources – water, minerals, power, land, labour and livelihood, indicating the exploitation of ecology and environment by the mainstream development paradigm. Chapter three, for instance, brings the debate on big dam and its apocalyptic power to ruin the ecology as well as the socio-economic life of traditional communities. The 'MoU virus' of the big dams was injected through loans or advance payments from private powers to the state even in the peripheral regions of the country. The major problem with these big dams, as the authors identified, involve huge discrepancies

between proposed benefits and actual outcome (p. 66). Similarly, the prodigious vision of interlinking Indian rivers and extending the Green Revolution to every nook and corner of the country would also have specific political outcome. The chapter offers a strong critique to the 'political arithmetic' of cost benefit analysis, which locates these interventions as neutral technological artefacts and engine of neoliberal economic growth.

The ravaging illness, mining the minerals and generating power for an industry increasingly geared towards export, is discussed in subsequent chapters. Considering the ecological importance of mineral deposits, the authors assert a fundamental question, 'do we really need these metals so much, so fast, at such a terrible cost?' (p. 80). The mining companies, however, completely ignore the irreparable damage caused by their 'development' interventions to the ecosystem as well as communities. The book draws an array of examples to substantiate the argument that mineral production, (be it aluminium, iron or coal) has posed a grievous threat to the well-being of traditional communities. The role of the state, providing huge subsidies on land and water to these mining companies, is also highly questionable. The extent of these subsidies in India, though remain unrevealed till date, yet it is assumed to be very large and have been pursued continuously by the resource cartel. The authors named the Adivasi regions of the country as 'resource-cursed region' to summarise that abundant resources attract abundant exploitation, where the ruthless invasion of subsistence villages is projected as 'development' (p. 92). The book further illustrates that, the privatisation of natural resources in the mega power generation projects through coal, nuclear energy and natural gas is a 'theft of the global commons', which only contributes to deterioration of the environment and displacement of the locals. The authors appropriately raise some vital questions - 'are water and minerals, forests and animals, basically resources, to be exploited for maximum profit? Or, to survive, will we have to start viewing these resources primarily as 'sources' of life itself?' (p. 139)

Struggle over land, labour and life forms

As a sharp contrast to the Independent India's aim of land redistribution, the neoliberal state policy is marked by rising land speculation, corporatisation of agriculture, informalisation of labour, privatisation of agro-based industries and promotion of global production chains. Chapter six provides a holistic overview of the struggle over land, labour and life forms. The increasing burden on agrarian system and farmers' suicide is an indication towards a systemic crisis to agriculture. Withdrawal of the state support, against which we can locate India's agrarian crisis, has resulted in low public investment, absence of minimum support price, formal credit institutions and extension services in agriculture. The authors categorically highlight the necessity to understand the agrarian crisis and the incidence of farmer's suicide within the context of neoliberal development paradigm. The growth emanating from globalisation and open market, as visualised by mainstream economics, fails to reduce poverty through the trickle-down effect and the book goes on to elaborate that 'globalisation becomes a cause of poverty than a solution' (p. 152). The growth process in India has generated more employment than output in the informal sector, pushing more and more numbers of workers without

any stable employment and income. Informalisation of labour through 'labour rationalisation' involves ruthless exploitation of the workers negating their fundamental rights. Globalisation or integration of global production chain has changed the way production is organised. The global finance capital has been shifted to the 'developing' countries to absorb cheap labour in the production network. High rate of profit is achieved through lowering the price of labour power or by increasing the intensity of work (p. 157). Alongside labour and employment, some of the ancient life forms of India, the pastoralist and Adivasis, have lost ground under the same profit motive of the global finance capital.

Finance capital and the burden of debt

Over accumulation within a given territorial system means a condition of surpluses of labour and surpluses of capital. These surpluses - labour and capital, may be absorbed by temporal displacement through investment and spatial displacement through opening up new markets and production capacities. The relocation of labour and capital requires mediating help of financial and/or state institutions, which have the capacity to generate credit (Harvey, 2004, p. 64). Chapter seven discusses the basic pattern of spatial displacement of capital in the form of loan or investment to support the massive 'development projects'. The imperialist forces of the global north with their controlling power over global financial institutions (like World Bank and IMF) are able to break the economy of the developing countries through growth bubbles based on debt. The book underlines the association between debt, associated money-laundering through tax havens and 'development' trajectories towards exploitative interventions. In recent years, debt has emerged as an instrument of control to subserve the political institutions, whereby key policy decisions are being controlled through global financial institutions. This financial system has inverted the benefits of the 'development paradigm' and caused rapid ecocide of global south. The authors argue for an alternative economic system, a transition towards 'planned de-growth', to have harmonious coexistence with nature. The book deserves credit for emphasising the capacity of rule of law to place life-supporting ecosystem and Adivasi economy on top of the directives of global financial elites. The rule of law, for instance, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996' (PESA) and the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 provide strong legislation for protecting the environment, as well as right to life and livelihood. It also highlights the contravention between the 'pro-corporate' and 'pro-people' laws (PESA and FRA), which limits the implementation of the later and necessitates drawing the centralised legal procedure in the perspective of customary laws to find an equitable balance between ecology and economy (p. 233).

The book is worthy for its critical engagement with present development discourse seeking transformation to a 'real development' for collective well being. Although the book does not locate the issues of ecology, economy and development within a detailed theoretical framework, nevertheless, it does raise pertinent questions on 'mainstream development' discourse. For instance, though the authors have discussed Adivasi mode of production, dispossession and enclave colonialism, the book misses out systematic explanations to these concepts. The book's strength lies in its empirical

evidences and is an important contribution in understanding the socially informed connection between ecology and economy with the role/character of the neoliberal state. The book offers the reader a wide terrain of clues to rethink future engagements on political ecology debates in India.

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