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ECOLOGICAL ECONOMY AND SUSTAINABILITY: THE FUTURES

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ABSTRACT

Today the neo-liberal policies of globalization and commercialization have assumed the dimension of a 'grand narrative' which refuses to share any space with any kind of alternative vision or philosophy. Instead of upholding and celebrating the post-modern philosophic percepts of 'difference' and diversity, the reality of the modern globalized world, founded on the principles of Western ethos of market economy, negates and subverts all kinds of alternative narratives and beliefs which could have ensured a better socio-economic and socio-natural relationships. The contemporary discourse leaves no space for the ecology of languages; the diversity of species; the existence of community living based on its own belief-patterns; the sovereignty of nations and cultures; and so on and so forth. This all works as a constraining force and hinders, in a way, the emergence of more temporarily and spatially focused attempts to reconstruct economic institutional routines and socio-natural relationships. From the dropping of the atom bombs and Chernobyl disaster to the oil spillage and industrial contamination – everything as a consequence of a certain cultural ordering or preferred socio-economic arrangements has to be an essential part of any viable discourse on ecology or economy. Ecological economics provides an adequate answer to this dilemma and moves beyond the dominant global techno-managerial mode of economics and seek to uncover possibilities for alternative trajectories with strong cultural-political and socio-economic underpinnings.

KEYWORDS

neo-liberalism, slowdown, degradation, green, environment, alternative, sustainable.

INTRODUCTION

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro marks a definitive shift in the entire ecological discourse. The summit underlined the global dimension of the ecological crisis that ferociously looks humankind in the face, with dire consequences. The Summit also hinted, though partially, at the misdirection of the entire human evolutionary discourse which has been instrumental in causing and precipitating this ecological 'problematique' of catastrophic proportion on an existential scale. As for the solution, the summit, after exhaustive deliberations, went on to suggest a new way of seeing and apprehending the reality. This new way or gaze was creatively conceptualised on the basis of the new politico-economic strategy of 'sustainable development' delineated in the 1987 United Nations' Brundtland Commission report "Our Common Future". However to the deep ecologists the conceptual basis of this 'generative metaphor' of 'sustainable development', on which the entire environmental economics is presently founded, seemed to be fallacious from its very inception. Essentially the concept means that 'we can have it all', both further growth and a cleaner environment. They term it as nothing more than a kind of vehicle for a form of "eco-managerialism" or "ecological modernization". Basic to this approach is the insistent reliance on the idea that problems, once recognized and identified, can be solved with the help of these institutions of science, technology and management.

The cynics, especially the cultural critics, have been proved right because, for the last 22 years since the Rio summit, this conceptual framework has not achieved anything concrete in reducing the looming threats of environmental degradation. In fact, all the indicators show that the situation has worsened since then. The concept of 'sustainable development' still continues to serve as a suitable vehicle for the continuation and perpetuation of the same techno-industrial arrangement and socio-cultural relationship, which is, in fact, the primary cause of the ecological crisis (Hajer and Fischer, 2). Neo-classical economics founded on the sacred pillars of sustainable development has failed to realise the critical fact that the present ecological crisis is the unintended consequence of some of neo-liberal capitalism's essential features such as the dominance of scientific rationality and expert knowledge, the strong belief in technological innovations as the agents of progress, the implicit legitimization of the use of violence and the tendency to see nature and 'other' as an exploitable resource or as an externality. Unless these premises are interrogated holistically, the vital question of sustainability will continue to haunt the present and the futures.

DISCUSSION

Since the articulation of the "Washington Consensus" (Serra, 2) in 80's, the neo-liberal paradigm has acquired a global dimension – almost the status and power of religion - crushing mercilessly every other ideological positioning on the way. This model was viewed as the only viable way of meeting human aspirations within a framework of human freedom. Such was the faith in the idea that almost all the countries on the globe readied themselves to embrace this model and willingly surrendered to the dictates of the global agencies like World Bank, IMF and GATT. The messiahs of this new religion even went to the extent of announcing the death of God. Some even felt that it represented "The End of History" (Fukuyama, 1) - that humanity had emerged onto a sunny plateau on which efficient economic organization and the interplay of open markets would generate the wealth needed by society to address whatever social and environmental issues rose in its margins. A priority shifted to just one thing – how to generate wealth. Wealth became the means and end of everything good in life.

However the clear signs of the collapse of this model of greed became visible in 2008 when the Western economies failed and floundered under the weight of their own economic contradictions. Quite ironically the fabulous wealth generated through neo-liberal economies did not empower the governments to address social and environmental issues. Instead it created strange conditions of imbalances which compelled the governments for a cut-back in government spending and services. The neo-liberal model of economics created an unequal world, vertically divided between those benefitting directly from the new wealth and those marginalized from it. For the wealthy greed does not stop anywhere. It continues to impel them to grow even richer through unethical means by subverting democratic institutions and rules of economics, completely unaware of the blood trails left behind on the track. This can be no real economy where generating wealth becomes an end in itself.

As initially realised by the Rio summit in 1992 and from the lessons learnt in view of economic slowdown of 2008 - which still continues to haunt the neo-classical economists - , the contemporary neo-liberal paradigm has left behind many deep holes. Besides many visible ruptures in the socio-cultural ethics of living, it has also caused a hole in the ozone layer, contaminated earth; has polluted air and depleted water sources. This ecological imbalance has rung alarm bells and created shivers down the spinal cord of all the thinking individuals. The ideas generated from the near ruins of the neo-liberal capitalism have been in search of something real, some alternative model of growth which is genuinely sustainable and enduring. Of course this something cannot be radically divergent from the contemporary economic paradigm. But it has to evolve further and acquire a new gaze, a new methodology while rejecting some of the premises of the contemporary model of growth and development to make it really sustainable.

Incorporating all the relevant ideas – social, cultural and even religious – we must make a concerted and strong argument in favour of an economy which makes equity and human well-being as its central and unwavering goals. An ecological economy and its institutional mechanism must make its core focus the wellbeing of people—of all people, everywhere—across present and future generations. That essential idea puts the notion of equity in spatial as well as temporal dimension at the centre of the ecological economy enterprise, bringing to the fore the centrality of consumption questions, and demanding not just "green consumers" but "green citizens." The temporal goal of a ecological economy is the idea of meeting our economic needs without compromising our ecological integrity. That, after all, is the central premise of sustainable development. Therefore, a deep commitment to fairness and social & environmental justice is central to the ecological economy transformation. Something that is significantly different and new in this economic conceptualisation is probably the recognition that an efficient, functioning economy is also a precondition for addressing the issue of sustainability in the broader context of social and

environmental justice. Much of sustainable development activism over the past decades has been a thinly disguised effort to give the environment priority over social and economic concerns, forgetting completely the gains derived from the application of science and technology in the amelioration of many of the ills as stated by the famous economist Julian Simon:

You pick (a) any measure of human welfare – such as life expectancy, the price of aluminum or gasoline, the amount of education per cohort of young people, the state of ownership of television sets, you name it; (b) a country; (c) any future year, and I'll bet a week's or a month's pay that that indicator shows improvement relative to the present while you bet that it shows deterioration. (Simon qtd. in Garrad, 17)

An ecological economy is founded on the promise that any kind of humankind's economic activity must, in the end, address the problems of social marginalization and environmental destruction. In an ecological economy, actions taken to reach economic ends also advance social and environmental ones, just as actions taken to meet social and environmental ends strengthen and develop the economy. This seeking of an alternative model of economic organization that avoids the mistakes of neoliberal economics must underline some critical operational parameters. One essential principle of such an endeavour has to be that it cannot afford to divorce economics from its social and economic underpinnings. Only such an economy can be sustainable in which economic growth leads simultaneously to the creation of employment and livelihoods, and to the gradual elimination of social marginalization. At the same time, it must lead us away from wasteful use of the earth's resources and ecosystems, from the depletion of species, and from air and water pollution toward clean, renewable, and sustainable forms of resource use. All economic initiatives must be screened and tested in the light of their possible impact on employment, social inclusion and justice, and for their environmental footprint. Capacity to generate wealth, competitive efficiency and other traditional tests of economic activities can never be segregated from any economics; but these tests must be augmented by new tests on the social and environmental side of the equation to ensure that a triple win is being pursued and secured.

India and its political economists too realised this bitter lesson after the debacle of BJP and its slogan of 'India shining' in 2004 Parliamentary elections. After that there is a tentative shift towards what is now conceptualised as 'ecological economy'. The Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the architect of the economic reforms in 1991, has now been frequently bringing into discourse the issues of 'equitable growth' and 'development with a human face'. The legislative initiatives taken in the last couple of years such as Food Security Act, Right to Education Act, increase in allocation on Higher Education, Land Acquisition Act are sharp indicators of this shift in attitudes and practices. Even the Right to Information can be viewed as a reformative measure to improve the structures of governance which are often misused by the wealthy to lay their hands of scarce natural resources. The damning exposures in the Coalgate scandal have been possible due to the information generated through RTI, and then getting into the public and political domain. There is an acute realisation widely shared across intellectual circles today that the neo-liberal, neo-classical model of economy through its trickle-down theory is incapable of addressing the vital issues of equity and social justice. It also does not provide any adequate framework to ensure environmental justice. In the absence of an adequate human and institutional response to the issues of social justice and environmental justice, sustainable growth will be a far cry.

Some important lessons can be learnt and theoretical framework of 'environmental economy' can be envisaged and formulated in the light of 'The Niyamgiri tribals' rejection of the Orissa Government's plans to mine the hills for bauxite. What has played out in the hills since July 18 is an environmental battle of an epic scale - 8000 'primitive tribes' waging a relentless war against the State of Orissa and one of the most powerful multi-national companies in the world, Vedanta. This event also carries a huge significance as it provides us an alternate rethink on the notions of poverty and development. A Supreme Court ruling in April this year, ordered the Odisha government to hold *gram sabhas*, or *palli sabhas* in all the villages that would be affected by the State government's plan to mine the hills for bauxite. From July 18 until August 19, these so-called "primitive" people — who have lived for centuries on the slopes of the Niyamgiri hills, drunk its clear waters, eaten its fruits, hunted some of its animals, grown small crops and merged with the natural resources abundant around them — have been asked to speak (Sharma, *The Hindu*, Aug. 3, 2013). These unlettered men and women unanimously voted against the mining project and stated without hesitation that any mining in the region would disturb what the *Dongaria Kondh* regard as their deity, *Niyamaraja*. Quite amazing were the words of Gata Majhi, a woman of over 70 years from Palberi village in Kalahandi district: "We only buy salt and kerosene from outside. Everything else we need is here. My God is spread over all these hills. No one messes with him" (Sharma, *The Hindu*). This statement must make all the proponents of modern economics pause and reframe their definition of "development" and "poverty". The people living in Niyamgiri have more than once stated in clear terms that they do not want the kind of development that gouges out their precious hills for mining. They do not want roads blasted through forests that have survived as repositories of precious biodiversity. They do not want people stomping through their villages and hamlets bringing their "development" plans for them. All of them have testified how the hills, the forests and the land, satisfy all their needs. Their model is founded on the 'culture of need'. They live by rules that ensure that no one hunts more than they need, no one cuts more trees than are needed, no one pollutes the natural springs and streams. These might be "poor" in the ways in which calculations about poverty are made by the Planning commission, but they are richer than most people in the world in their ability to live off the bounty that their natural environment provides. So it is time for all the world famous economists to pause and listen to the wisdom of the people of Niyamgiri. In a world threatened every day by direct consequence of destructive "development", the 'ecological economy' of the inhabitants of Niyamgiri acquires an urgent relevance.

To make the model of a ecological economy more effective, there should be some reshaping and shuffling in the macroeconomic policy arrangements relating to structures and principles for international trade and finance issues. For example, the role of trade in resources is central to a green economy. What is required is a clear shift in trade and financial arrangements to align international markets towards environmental and resource goals. At the same time, current organizations, policies, and practices must be subject to critical evaluation if they stand in the way of the realization of the goals and targets of a green economy. Furthermore, activities and regulations across organizations, states, and issue areas must be coordinated globally and held accountable for their deliberate failings. At the micro-economic level, the institutional challenge is to create individual incentives (including negative ones) to realign consumption and production decisions that can have significant environmental and economic ramifications. A couple of years ago, Himachal Pradesh govt. came out with a policy decision that all construction activities in the hill state can be allowed only if the concerned people take care of the issue of the environmental sustainability by planting trees so as to repair the damage caused to the ecology. This kind of intervention in micro arrangements is direly needed to ensure the passage of green economy.

CONCLUSION

To find an authentic and vibrant discourse on ecological economics, we have to move beyond the culture of greed so as to come to grips with the present day catastrophe glaring us in the face. There is an urgent need to traverse the whole historical and philosophical heritage of mankind and then, after careful consideration, re-discover the right course of coexistence on the face of earth. The humanity must open a 'dialogic discourse' to look at various sources of wisdom contained in different philosophies, cultures and traditions. Man needs to regain the capacity of 'listening to' and 'listening from' nature and other human beings. Man must rediscover better modes of socio-economic organizations and deeper realm of values and beliefs that allow man to survive with nature. My main argument in this paper is that "Ecological Economy" will be more appropriate to meet the environmental challenges of the twenty first century. I think that the time is ripe for new ideas, new thinking, and new approaches to find alternatives to the discredited neo-liberal economic paradigm. The world is also ripe for the adoption of the basics of the ecological economy as its chosen form of economic organization. I am confident that social and environmental issues can be set on a firm course toward a positive solution, within the framework of a robust and vibrant 'ecological economy' sweeping aside the "effluence of affluence" (Hajer and Fischer, 7).

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