BOOK REVIEW


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Over the years, ecological problems like climate change, global warming, pollution and natural disaster have increased manifold in different parts of the globe. Globalization, liberalization and privatization have given an impetus to the worsening situation by over exploiting the natural resources. History is witness that time and again, in order to mitigate the situation, various individuals and organizations, especially, NGOs and CBOs have not only become conscious of the major ecological issues, but they have also challenged those who are responsible for the poor state of affairs including industrialists, contractors as well as traders as exploiters of natural resources and the State power that gives them direct and indirect support. The book under review is an important addition to the existing literature on ecological movements.

The theme for the author’s analytical enquiry is “Why people protest: An analysis of ecological movements”. By using secondary published literature including six case studies, the book attempts to show how masses in developing countries have been protesting some major ecological issues which are inter-connected with their livelihood. Furthermore, the author has also shown that in developed countries the upper and upper-middle classes have been on the forefront for green issues like climate change, green house gas emission, acid rain, global commons, pollution (air, noise, water, soil & radiation), on the other hand, in many developing countries lower-middle class and lower class have been struggling for social and ecological issues like deforestation causing floods, shortage of fuel wood as well as vanishing of small forest produces (fruits, food, flower, fibre, fertilizer, etc.), and construction of large dams causing displacement of rural people and destruction of their livelihood resources. The author also attempts to show that contents and goals of ecological movements are more important than the organisation which is often unstructured or loosely structured without hierarchy of leaders and followers. Finally, the author aims to show that protesting people also have a vision of alternative development paradigm.

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The book under review is organised into six chapters excluding the Preface, Preface to second revised edition, Bibliography and Index. Chapter-1 “Text and context” (pp.1-10) provides the background and sets the tone for the subject matter of the book. It also deals with the leading research questions, methodology adopted and hypotheses attempted by the author. Chapter-2 “Historical background of ecological thought” (11-52) discusses the historical background of ecological thought at the international level. Chapter-3 “Ecological movements: Theory and practice” (pp.53-114) deals with the ecological thought in a comprehensive manner and got prominence in the north. It critically deals with ecological movements and their theory and practice. It highlights both tension and critical linkages between various dichotomies like universalism-particularism, uniformity-diversity, class-community, nature-culture, modernity-tradition, subject-object, science-ethics, and text-context. Chapter-4 “Ecological movements in the developing countries” (pp.115-145) focuses on why people protest. It discusses the genesis, formation and consolidation of six ecological movements under consideration of the study. Chapter-5 “An analysis of ecological movements in the developing countries” (pp.146-188) presents the analysis of the ecological movements in the developing world in terms of their context, composition, causes, goals, mobilization process, control and outcomes. The last chapter (chapter-6 “An alternative development paradigm” (pp.189-215) discusses the critique of mainstream development and whether these movements have any vision of the alternative development paradigm and highlights important policy implications emerging from such movements.

The author has chosen six ecological movements- three from India (Chipko movement, Uttarakhand, Silent valley movement, Kerala & Narmada Bachao Andolan, M.P. & Gujarat), one from Malaysia (Sarawak movement), one from The Philippines (Anti-Chico Dam movement) and one from Brazil (Rubber Tappers movement, Amazonia). Thus the two Continents of Asia and South America have been covered. These six ecological movements have wider ramifications in terms of appropriate technology, alternative development model, people’s livelihoods and planning from below.

It is absolutely true that man-nature conflict in these developing countries orginated due to the exploitative policies of various empires which ruled these ex-colonial countries. Over time, for instance, India was under the colonial rule of British empire, Sarawak (Malaysia) was under the colonial rule of Brunei and Britain, The Philippines was under the colonial rule of Spain and USA, while Brazil was under the colonial rule of Portugal. It is also notable that while Brunei and Portugal empires were non-industrial economies, implying less rigorous exploitation of natural resources of their colonies, Britain and United
States of America were industrial economies implying more rapid and rigorous exploitation of natural resources of their colonies. The British empire even illegally brought the rubber plantation from Brazil to Malaysia for colonial exploitation. Further the Spanish empire was more interested in the colonial control by religion (Christianity) as well as gold but it also created private property in land and Spanish ‘friars’ emerged as absentee landlords. In fact, these empires usurped the community control and customary access to natural resources and the state became the real and ultimate owner of forests and other natural resources. Paradoxically they claimed to introduce “scientific management” of forests and condemned the traditional forest management as ‘irrational and backward’. Further they commercialised the forests through creation of private property, hence industrialists, traders, ranchers and contractors took over forests for production for profit and, therefore, more revenue was earned by the State. The developed countries have adopted the path of modernisation through industrialisation with unrestrained use of natural resources as materials in industries and, unfortunately, the post-colonial developing countries have also adopted the same path and model of development. Therefore, natural resources like forests, water, land and minerals are being exploited imprudently by the State and its apparatus, as well as private companies independently or as joint ventures.

Long back, Mahatma Gandhi had remarked: ‘Earth has everything to fulfill everybody’s need, but not anybody’s greed’. In other words, earth has enough natural resources like land, water, forest and minerals for fulfilling the basic needs of mankind if used prudently. Thus nature is not to be managed for private gains but the Arcadian model seeks to live in harmony with nature and realises that natural resources are finite and limited. Nature has been accorded the status of Gods and Goddesses both in Greek (Gaia) and Indian (Aranya devi, Lord Shiva residing in Peepal tree, Sheetala devi residing in Neem tree, Lord Vishnu residing in Amla & Banyan trees) traditions. Various local traditions in India preach and practise nature worship and ethical values attached to nature. For example, Matsya Purana mentions: ‘To plant a tree is equal to have the best son’; Skanda Purana says: ‘Lord Brahma resides in the roots of Banyan tree, Lord Vishnu resides in its middle part, Lord Shiva resides in its upper part, thus the Banyan tree is the resort of all the Gods’. Similarly, a Hindi couplet says; ‘Tree never eats its fruits, river never drinks its water/only for the sake of others, are born the saints on earth’.

The author is of the view that there is a need for harmony between development and ecological conservation in view of the growing population and increasing aspirations of the people. Brundlandt Commission of United Nations in 1987 published its report ‘Our
Common Future’ wherein it defined sustainable development as to meet the needs of present generation without compromising the needs of future generations; thus we should not implement a development model which usurps the rights and needs of coming generations. The zenith of capitalism, accompanied by consumerism, is extracting various natural resources in a destructive manner resulting into huge wastage and unnecessary mass production. Today necessity is no longer the mother of invention, rather invention and production have become the mother of superficial necessities and demands of the consumers, especially the rising middle class. Due to mass advertisement, which is a ‘hidden persuader’, the younger generation is attracted and emotionally persuaded to buy more, as ‘more is better’. Consequently the motto of enlightenment era ‘I am because I think’ has been replaced by a new consumerist motto ‘I am because I buy’. This is against the spirit of both ecology and humanity at large, hence to be discarded, as shown in this book.

As explained in chapter six of the book, all these ecological movements were critical of mainstream development paradigm wherein ‘big is better’ (big dam), ‘more is better’ (use of more natural resources), ‘planning by experts from above is better’ (World Bank projects, Asian Development Bank projects), ‘centralised planning is better’ (World Bank, IMF, ADB projects), & ‘use of high technology is better’ (World Bank, IMF, ADB projects) because this model is based on the trickle-down theory and profit motive of capitalism. On the other hand, these ecological movements emphasise on decentralised planning from below, ‘small is beautiful’ (Schumacher, Mahatma Gandhi), people’s participation, ‘think globally, act locally’, sustainability and prudence in use of natural resources as well as collective self-empowerment and self-reliance. These movements desire radical change in the structure and functioning of multi-lateral agencies like World Bank, IMF, United Nations etc. in order to be more inclusive and just. These movements have a future vision of south-south cooperation by eliminating the ‘dependency syndrome’ generated by an inegalitarian world system with unequal exchange wherein the developed countries have the final say in world trade, finance and world security. These movements share the view of Samir Amin who talks of an alternative globalisation, not liberal or negotiated globalisation but by shifting to more south-south cooperation and delinking from world system with hegemony and dominance of the developed countries in World Bank, WTO, United Nations etc.

The book contributes to the knowledge of those who are interested in ecological studies especially in the area of environmental issues or ecological problems. Thus, by using secondary sources of data, this book discusses broader issues of development and ecology by analysing
both ecological thoughts and ecological action in developed and developing countries since 1960’s. The author has critically discussed theory and practice of ecological movements (Chapter-3) in depth. He has rightly questioned the dominant development discourse which often helps the upper classes, urbanites as well as the nexus of contractors, suppliers, bureaucrats and politicians in both developed and developing countries.

Like any other important work, this publication also has its certain strengths and short comings. The first and foremost is that the study is not based on empirical data collected from fieldwork and therefore, micro level data and their analysis is missing in the work. Secondly, the author could have presented the chapters in a much better way given the coverage of information dealt with in this book, for example, in chapter five (p.188) the table number 7 could have been better placed in the preceding page before the concluding paragraph. None the less, the use of photographs of ecological movements and tabular descriptive data for compression of various aspects related with the subject matter makes the work more comprehensible.

Overall, by using updated facts and figures from various published sources the author has been able to generate public awareness on environmental issues. The content of the book would no doubt broaden the vision of the readers on an important issue like ecology and inspire the coming generations. This book is highly useful for students and teachers of Social Sciences as well as intellectuals, planners, policy makers and non-governmental organisations. The price of book is also quite reasonable and printing paper is also of high quality.