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Rethinking Human-Environment Relations and Sustainability: A Brief Overview

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Abstract

With the amplifying challenges arising from climate change, degrading environment and depleting resources necessary for agriculture, it is crucial to revisit our vision of development and the ways in which it is carried out. Not only human beings but all living beings vitally depend directly or indirectly on natural resources for their survival. Since antiquities, relationship between human beings and nature has been understood in very congenial sense by refereeing nature as sacred thus invoking respect and mutual symbiosis in which both assist and survive creating a delicate balance with each other. However, the epistemology that defines the modern sciences post 16th-17th century changes the prism and nature is reduced to being merely a resource to be extracted for the anthropogenic activities. The result of this approach is here to witness in the contemporary crisis in which planet is in. In this light, this article explores the theoretical discourse and the possible alternative pathways to sustainability.

Keywords: Development, environment, ecofeminism, agriculture, sustainability

1. Introduction

The contemporary challenges emerging from the predicament of climate change are raising grave concerns for sustainability world-across. While vital natural resources are rapidly depleting there is parallel disruption of ecology and irreparable loss of biodiversity. It is believed that the nature of these causes is primarily anthropogenic and reflects a collapse of mutual symbiotic relationship between human beings and nature. The vision of development discourse of the states and the increasing consumerism in the society have also deep implications for the environment and ecology of the society*. Affluence and unlimited economic growth have been seen as coterminous with development making this whole planet unsustainable (Bahuguna, 1995) [3]. From agriculture to industry and economy, all significant sectors supporting livelihood and security are becoming unsustainable in the longer run. Hence it is crucial to critically analyze and question the foundation of dominant epistemology that lies at the very root of the escalating imbalance**. This article aims to explore and problematise epistemological basis of such structuring and functioning of our systems primarily based on a particular notion of development. However, the critique of this perspective on development should not imply rejecting development or growth per say, instead, the arguments proposes a reconceptualization of these categories "in light of the plurality of knowledge systems and the cultures in which they are embedded (de Sousa Santos, 2008) [6].

*There are be many understandings of development and not just the dominant or conventional one that predetermines its meaning singularly in terms of economic growth fueling material prosperity ingrained in neo-classical economic connotations production and consumption. Alternatively, development can be assessed on individual functioning and capabilities as proposed by Amartya Sen (1983) [25]. This paper critiques the orthodox economic understanding of the concept equating it with industrialisation, urbanization, modernization and westernisation.

**For thought provoking critique of 'mass-production and consumption' models of advanced industrial societies, refer to the Marglin, Apffel Frederique & Stephen A. Marglin (1990) [9] *Dominating Knowledge: Development, Culture and Resistance*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, New York.

2. Understanding Environment-Development Interrelationships

Contemporary thinking in development is firmly anchored in the Enlightenment ethos or the 'age of reason' that defines the understanding of growth, progress and social change (Power, 2014) [19]. This understanding projects development as synonymous with economic growth with free market as its precursor (Deb, 2009) [10]. These ideas have been theoretically contextualized by proponents of Modernization theories like W. W. Rostow proposed that in order to be industrialized and developed, all societies will have to go through five stages of economic growth as is the case of advanced industrialised countries of the North (Rostow, 1960) [20]. Countries'

aspiration to progress necessitates their passing through these phases of industrialization. Eurocentric theories such as these, have led to material-determinism of the concept, thereby creating a monolithic and unilinear development models based on insatiable desire for abundance.

There are many problems defining development in a singularly economic term. It hides the hidden cost of the environment that goes into creating superfluous societies and huge paraphernalia of infrastructures. It is in hindsight only that the irreparable loss of flora and fauna and its integral impact on overall well-being of human and other species is evident. Not only it has intensified natural resource extraction and exhaustion, but it has also led to asymmetrical development raising issues of social equity and marginalization in different quarters of the world, particularly in the Global South. The seed-fertilizer revolution of the twentieth century has given rise to a universal model of petrochemical intensive, irrigation-hungry agriculture that was gradually diffused around the globe as part of extension and technical know-hows. On the other hand, environment-unfriendly practices like extensive mining and extraction of resources for mass production, intensive monocropping of selected varieties are resulting in unsettling of life and living in the biosphere. The loss is at multiple fronts-while the soil is facing declining fertility, other life forms are eliminated due to these alterations, planet's crucial support systems is debilitating, and the cumulative effect of all these result in undermining public health, livelihoods, and security in the name of development (Deb, 2009) ^[10].

By the 1970s, voices and concerns on sustainable development started gaining momentum. The critiques emerged in several forms, the primary one being rooted in the environment. A new consciousness among people, though in smaller ways directed scholarships to revisit the idea and the models of development (Marglin & Marglin, 1990; Baruni, 1990); de Sousa Santos, 2008) ^[9, 6]. People started becoming aware about the permanent damage caused to nature, and new obstacles arising from altered physical environments. Gradually, the limitations of such approaches became more apparent pitching in for acceptance of environment friendly and frugal ways of resource management. There emerged greater realization of how frittering away of resources will imperil the survival of present and the future generations. Some of the new ideas supporting sustainability have been ecocentrism, green consumerism and reliance on renewable sources of energy and so on. As a concept, sustainable development has been defined by the Brundtland Commission, 1987 as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland Commission Report, 1987) ^[23].

This model of industrial development was exported from the advanced industrial societies to the rest world in the last century. The development practices of the post-colonial societies were heavily influenced and closely guided by their erstwhile colonizers. These newly independent countries were caught up with the 'developed syndrome.' This is not to deny the fact that, due to the dismal state of being, development was essential to battle perpetual poverty, malnutrition, diseases, illiteracy and a general state of insecurity. To achieve this end, governments often implemented highly centralised development projects in the domains of housing, health, industrialization and power infrastructure. Though necessary for the society, such projects succeeded mostly at the cost of the environment. Such development programmes

extracted immense volumes of resources made possible by the state apparatus to cater to the demands and desires of the urban rural elite (Gadgil & Guha, 2000) ^[11]. Thus, the problem with capitalist development is that it is compulsorily fixated with accumulations and profiteering, creating and responding to consumer demands for new products crossing planetary thresholds, exceeding earth's physical limits to growth or its carrying capacity (Hannigan, 1995) ^[12].

This model of development has found critics in many societies. For example, M K Gandhi from India did not provide a scathing criticism of this discourse, but also offered more sustainable ways of arranging societies. His idea of village republics based on agrarian society presents a more holistic and viable model of existence. However, such ideas and arrangements are not plugged into capitalist ways of production and profiteering, hence largely not acceptable to the elite class of the society, who actually are the decision makers. Unbridled persuasion of economic growth has to be counterweighted for its impact on the overall efficiency and sustainability of the systems. Existence of human beings is made possible by a complex web of interlinkages and interdependence of large numbers of natural and man-made systems, which will be thrown off the grid with environmental exigency.

3. Theoretical Perspectives on Human-Environment Relation: Deriving an Innovative Pathway to Sustainability

There are differing perspectives that define the nature and scope of the mutual relationship between human beings and nature. Most of them are premised on syncretistic cohesion with nature, associating and engaging with nature with profound respect and reverence. In ancient times nature was seen as sacred calling for respect and reverence by various cultures. Human's dependence on nature shaped its pragmatic orientation of treating their natural environment as part of the Commons. Our environmental surroundings has been the chief determinant of the ways we organize our shelter, livelihoods, culture and other aspects of life. Because of this reason, theoretical contextualizing of human-environment relationship has been premised on symbiosis. On the other hand, radical environmentalism like deep ecology rejects anthropocentric approach to environmentalism. It criticizes the instrumental utility of the efforts to save nature in order to benefit human species. As a movement, deep ecology believes in intrinsic worth of nature and equal right of flourishing and self-realization of every species of the earth, emphasising its totality of life and preservation of whole biosphere. Nature should not be reduced to a perennial supply of raw materials, rather, interdependence and complexity of ecosystems should be the guiding point in understanding planetary existence. On the contrary, anthropocentric approaches foreground survival and prosperity of humans treating other living and nonliving beings merely as resources by using arguments of moral superiority and hierarchy of values.

Another perspective on human-nature relationship is offered by ecofeminism which views man's domination of nature as synonymous to man's domination of women. The quest of man has been to control and harness nature. Since women are ideologically compared with nature for their reproductive capacity and nurturance, nature's subordination coincides with the subordination of women by men. Early proponents of modern science like Francis Bacon emphasize that "knowledge and power is synonymous with male who commands the service of nature and enslaves her" (Bacon

quoted in a republished book in 1999) [4]. Such positions projecting men as controllers and women and nature as subservient are found to be reductionist, patriarchal and oppressive by ecofeminists. Vandana Shiva, the ecofeminist, criticizes modern science for its patriarchal overtones. She states that “a new awareness is growing and questioning the sanctity of science and development, revealing that they are not universal categories of progress, but special projects of modern western patriarchy” (Shiva, 1988, p.18) [21]. In her book *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant highlights the masculinist orientation of science and the extent to which scientific activities have been detrimental to the persons most in need of benefit. Many of the scientific projects, are inherently patriarchal and premised on subjugation and control of nature and female, both. As human beings are inevitably embedded in the natural world, we must root our behaviour in communion with nature rather than domineering it.

Other arguments for nature’s protectionism are fueled by utilitarian concerns. The guiding idea is that the approach and policies towards nature should be based on delivering maximum benefits for the maximum number of people. Nature conservation is promoted for its utility for survival of future generations and present generation are also expected to be sacrificing towards indulgences. Utilitarian approach believes that wealthy countries should come forward to bear the cost of conservation efforts (Smits, 2016), something similar to the implied principles of fund raising under Kyoto Protocol. On the other hand, egalitarianism proposes environment protection for ensuring equal opportunities to its use by all generations including the future ones. On a differing note, Hillel Steiner and Joel Feinberg question if the generations who are yet not born have any rights in reality. Nevertheless, scholars like Brian Barry demand that conditions of equality must be available to inter generations and intra generations (Babst, 2011) [2]. Communitarians also advocate for environmental conservation to ensure the state of wellbeing of the entire community. A crucial understanding of environmental adversity caused by modernity and industrialization has been offered by sociologists Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and others. They state that modern societies are ‘risk societies’ that are over occupied with managing risks and insecurities associated with modernisation leading to ‘reflexive modernization’ redirecting science and technology to make it sustainable and accountable.

In fact, Ulrich Beck proposition is a good point to talk about reforming our wider development programmes and projects so as to make systems sustainable.

4. Conclusion

While deliberating on the theme of sustainability, one of the most significant visions is offered by the Gandhian understanding of human-environment relationship. Gandhi’s ideas reflect syncretism with nature advocating renunciation and frugality to achieve a balanced and peaceful coexistence with the natural environment. Modern civilizations have indefinite desires and wants, seen as disruptive by Gandhi for their potential to bring discord and dissonance between human and nature. To reclaim and re-establish the harmony, Gandhi practiced and campaigned for swadeshi, supporting small scale industries of local villages. Likewise, the ecological practices of agroecological farming are based on similar considerations. All forms of alternative agriculture including organic farming, natural farming, zero budget farming are inspired by the ecological and economic

efficiencies of small-scale landholdings. These alternative pathways of agriculture offer a sustained and holistic approach that will restore human-environment balance to a great extent. Additionally, these models display great climate resilience vis-à-vis chemical agriculture as they are less demanding on fertilizers, irrigation, pesticides and weedicides. They also ingrain a critical role of women in agriculture thus also having a space and scope to empower women.

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