



India 2100: Towards Radical Ecological Democracy[☆]



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ABSTRACT

India is floundering in its quest to meet basic social objectives of eradicating poverty, hunger, malnutrition, unemployment, inequality and other socio-economic deprivations. It is also on a steep path of ecological unsustainability. These issues can at least partly be attributed to a fundamentally flawed model of development, its flaws having been accentuated in the last two decades of economic globalisation. At the same time, however, peoples' initiatives at sustainable and equitable well-being in various sectors are growing, and some policy shifts have also taken place in this direction. Building on this, an alternative framework of well-being, here called Radical Ecological Democracy, can be envisaged. This involves a new political governance with decentralised decision-making embedded within larger, ecologically and culturally defined landscapes, a new economics that respects ecological limits and democratises both production and consumption, and a new cultural and knowledge-based society that values diversity, collective synergism, and public innovation. The combination of peoples' resistance to destructive development and alternative, solution-based initiatives, with support from other sections of society, can lead India to be firmly on the path of such a framework by 2100.

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1. Heading towards ecological, economic, and social collapse?

65 years after gaining independence, it is clear that India is very far from achieving the basic objectives any society or civilisation should aim for – security of food, shelter, water, health, and clothing, and fulfilment of human potential through educational, socio-cultural, and political opportunities. Depending on which measure one takes and whose estimates one believes, anything between a quarter and three-quarters of India's population suffers from deprivations of one or the other kind. This includes economic poverty, malnutrition and undernutrition, lack of safe drinking water and sanitation, unemployment or underemployment, inadequate shelter, and other such situations that are violations of minimum standards of human rights and well-being. These are often so serious as to cause irreversible health damage, premature mortality and suicides. Many of these have roots in traditional socio-economic inequities and discrimination, which have been compounded, or added to, by the inequities and exploitation of modern times.¹

To this has been added a rapid erosion of the natural environment on which we all depend for our lives. A 2008 report suggests that India has the world's third biggest ecological footprint, that its resource-use is already twice of its bio-capacity, and that this bio-capacity itself has declined by half in the last few decades [5]. Anyone travelling through the country will see what is happening. Natural ecosystems are under stress and decline everywhere, with exceptions only in the case of

[☆] Parts of this article are adapted from or based on Kothari [1,2] and Shrivastava and Kothari [3].

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¹ Detailed facts and analyses on these are available in a series of UNDP Human Development Reports, and a recent report by the Working Group on Human Rights [4]; Shrivastava and Kothari [3] contain a detailed account of how economic globalization has added to the deprivations.

some protected areas and community conserved areas; wild and agricultural biodiversity are under varying rates of erosion as vast monocultures take over; well over half the available water bodies are polluted beyond drinking, and often even beyond agricultural use; two-thirds of the land is degraded to various levels of sub-optimal productivity; air pollution in several cities is amongst the world's highest; 'modern' wastes, including electronic and chemical, are being produced at rates far exceeding our capacity to recycle or manage; and so on.² Economic globalisation since 1991 has significantly worsened the negative trend by increasing rates of diversion of natural ecosystems for 'developmental' purposes, and rates of resource exploitation for domestic use and exports [3]. Climate change impacts are being felt in terms of erratic weather and coastal erosion, and the country has little in the way of climate preparedness, especially for the poor who will be worst affected [6,7]. Projections based on the historic trend of materials and energy use in India also point to serious levels of domestic and global impact on the environment if India continues on its current development trajectory modelled on industrialised countries [8].

While discussions on the aspects above have been extensive, the interconnections between continued or new deprivations, including poverty, environmental degradation, and inequities on the social, economic, and political fronts have not been brought out in such a detailed manner. Or, conversely, neither have the positive interactions amongst poverty eradication, environmental sustainability, and empowerment. Thus, planning and programmes of the government, and usually those even of civil society, focus on one or the other element of the picture, in the process ignoring or even negatively impacting other elements. For instance, several poverty eradication or food security programmes are ecologically damaging (for example, chemical-intensive agriculture); conversely, several environmental protection programmes exacerbate poverty or create new forms of deprivation (examples being exclusionary protected areas for wildlife that forcibly displace resident communities, or watershed programmes that stop pastoralists' access without providing alternatives).

Several policy pronouncements of the Government of India, such as the National Environment Policy 2006 or the Approach Papers of various Five Year Plans, have promised the integration of development and environment. These policy frameworks could have been opportunities for a holistic pathway towards sustainable, equitable well-being for all of India's people. There is, however, little evidence that these policy pronouncements have been followed up with actual action to achieve such holistic well-being. Contrarily, in fact, the country has headed towards greater unsustainability and inequity. An integrated approach to human well-being that enhances the economic, social, and political opportunities for those traditionally or currently deprived, curbs the obscene levels of wealth and consumption of the super-rich, conserves nature and sustains the ecological basis and resilience so crucial for our existence, is not evident in the priorities of the government.

There are, however, strong counter currents. There are a number of positive initiatives by the state relating to poverty, environment, employment, and empowerment. Even more widespread is the exciting and innovative work done by many communities, civil society organisations, institutions and private sector agencies, towards alternative approaches for well-being. All of these are indeed elements of a more sustainable and equitable future. However, at present these are submerged and overwhelmed by the sheer bulldozer effect of current macroeconomic policies and political governance structures that are taking India further down the path of un-sustainability, deprivation, and inequity. A number of course corrections, including better implementation of progressive policies and programmes that already exist, reforms in other existing policies and programmes to make them more progressive, and fundamental changes in pathways of development and governance are necessary if holistic human well-being is to be achieved.

2. Three scenarios for India's (and the World's) future

What will India (and indeed, the world) be like in the future? There are at least three possible scenarios (adapted from [3]), with some resonance to future possibilities put out by the Global Scenarios Group [9]:

- i. *Business as usual*: As today's economic growth paradigm continues its domination, there is increasing ecological collapse and socio-economic inequity. Alternative visions and experiments remain marginal and scattered. Conflict inevitably rises as masses of deprived people retaliate; the privileged try to defend their riches and power using the forces of state and private power; situations in many parts of India (and other countries) approximate civil form. Biological extinction reaches its peak. State and corporate totalitarianism is attempted. Eventually, ecological collapse drives humanity itself into either extinction or a constant, desperate struggle for survival.
- ii. *Slow transition to sanity*: Today's dominant models prevail for some time, leading to partial ecological collapse and increase in social conflict. However, existing alternatives become stronger and spread as more and more people realise the folly of business as usual. Localised initiatives linked up into larger landscapes and through socio-political struggle slowly edge out centralised domination by the state and by large corporations. In the immediate future (next 20–30 years) human suffering and biodiversity loss continues, but in the longer run the alternative forces coalesce into a critical mass to take society towards sustainability and equity (evolving into the Radical Ecological Democracy framework outlined below).

² Honest official reporting on these is uncommon, sometimes found in the annual Economic Surveys of Government of India, and occasionally in the Ministry of Environment and Forest's annual State of Environment reports; more is found in independent reports such as the State of India's Environment reports by Centre for Science and Environment. Facts and analyses for some of the trends are given in Shrivastava and Kothari [3].

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