

Radical Ecological Democracy: A South Asian Quest for a Sustainable and Equitable Future

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The global crises of ecological sustainability, economies, livelihoods, food and water are reflected in India as in other countries. While the last two decades of 'globalisation' has seen impressive economic growth here, enhancing the opportunities of the richer top quarter of the population, it has also seen rapidly increasing inequities and displacement of the livelihoods of much of the resto of the people. It has damaged the ecological basis that makes life and livelihoods possible for hundreds of millions of farmers, forest-dwellers, fishers, and others. With the world's third largest ecological footprint now, India is fast joining USA, China and other countries on the path to ecological suicide.

Aggressive land acquisition for industry and 'development' projects has spawned a large number of protests, some of which have taken violent form. Such movements are questioning the model of development that India has been subjected to since the early decades of independence. Another powerful challenge is contained in the myriad initiatives to achieve alternative modes of governance, production, distribution, and consumption, that have sprung up in many parts of the country (as indeed in many parts of the world). India is a strong locus of these, including initiatives to:

- Achieve food sovereignty and security through locally-managed, self-sufficient, sustainable agriculture and animal husbandry.
- Create water self-sufficiency even in the driest parts of the country, through wise harvesting and use of rainwater.
- Devise safe, dignified, affordable housing and shelter for the poor in villages and cities, using locally available materials and skills.
- Move towards 'zero-waste' urban residential colonies by composting wet waste and recycle dry waste, empowering wastepickers to manage it in healthy and remunerative ways.
- Create adequate, dignified local employment in agriculture, crafts, small-scale industry, and services, enabling people to stay on in their villages rather than have to migrate out of distress, and in many instances create cooperatives or companies that collectivise production, distribution and sale.
- Empower communities to manage health and educational facilities, reducing dependence on or ensuring accountability of the state's welfare functions.
- Create learning and educational opportunities that sustain ecological and cultural connections, while enabling children to become responsible, caring persons.
- Enable communities and citizens to sustain and manage knowledge, media, arts, and entertainment as part of the commons, escaping commercial and state domination.
- Promulgate policies and laws that provide substantial community and citizens' rights and powers, including those holding the state accountable, and facilitate

- ecologically sustainable and equitable means of production and consumption.
- Obtain, often through struggle, actual direct political and economic control in the hands of producers and consumers, and away from the state or private corporations.

One of the frameworks emerging from such initiatives, based on the Indian notion of *swaraj* or self-rule, is that of Radical Ecological Democracy. While various approaches to ‘green’ the economy are being suggested, these are often managerial or technofix-dependent, without fundamentally challenging the political, economic, and social structures that have created the problem in the first place, and without providing an alternative to ‘growth’ as the dominant economic ideology of today. In this context, Radical Ecological Democracy focuses on meeting human needs and aspirations of well-being through direct or radical democracy, localized economies embedded in ecological and cultural landscapes, notions of human well-being that relate to actual needs of people and to qualitative values like satisfaction and social security, democratic knowledge and technology generation, and sustaining cultural diversity and exchange. It proposes a mix of localization and globalisation, the former providing communities essential control over means of production and consumption, the latter affording possibilities of intercultural exchange and mutual learning.

Radical Ecological Democracy can thus be seen as ***a socio-cultural, political and economic arrangement in which all people and communities have the right and full opportunity to participate in decision-making, based on the twin fulcrums of ecological sustainability and human equity.*** Here, **ecological sustainability** is the continuing integrity of the ecosystems and ecological functions on which all life depends, including the maintenance of biological diversity as the fulcrum of life; **human equity**, is a mix of equality of opportunity, access to decision-making forums for all, equity in the distribution and enjoyment of the benefits of human endeavour, and cultural security.

While the myriad practical initiatives towards sustainability and equity are not necessarily amenable to easy replication and scaling up, what is essential is to spread the key lessons and principles they demonstrate. These include:

- The functional *integrity and resilience of the ecological processes and biological diversity* underlying all life on earth, respecting which entails a realization of the ecological limits of human activity, and enshrining the *right of nature* and all species to survive and thrive in the conditions in which they have evolved.
- *Equitable access* of all people, in current and future generations, to the conditions needed for human well-being (socio-cultural, economic, political, ecological, and in particular food, water, shelter, clothing, energy, healthy living, and socio-cultural sustenance); equity between humans and other elements of nature; and social, economic, and environmental justice for all.
- The *right of each person and community to participate* meaningfully in crucial decisions affecting her/his/its life, and to the conditions that provide the ability for such participation, as part of a radical, participatory democracy.

- Linked to the above, governance based on *subsidiarity and ecoregionalism*, with local rural and urban communities (small enough for all members to take part in face-to-face decision-making) as the fundamental unit of governance, linked with each other at bioregional, ecoregional and cultural levels into landscape/seascape institutions that are answerable to these basic units.
- The *responsibility* of each citizen and community to ensure meaningful decision-making that is based on the twin principles of ecological integrity and socio-economic equity.
- Respect for the *diversity* of environments and ecologies, species and genes, cultures, ways of living, knowledge systems, values, economies and livelihoods, and politics, in so far as they are in consonance with the principles of sustainability and equity.
- *Collective and co-operative thinking and working* founded on the socio-cultural, economic, and ecological commons, respecting both common custodianship and individual freedoms and innovations within such collectivities.
- The ability of communities and humanity as a whole, to respond, adapt and sustain the *resilience* needed to maintain ecological sustainability and equity in the face of external and internal forces of change.
- The inextricable *interconnectedness* amongst various aspects of human civilisation, and therefore amongst any set of ‘development’ or ‘well-being’ goals: environmental, economic, social, cultural, and political.

Radical Ecological Democracy resonates well with the search for alternatives emerging in many other regions, including those of *buen vivir* from Latin America, degrowth from Europe, solidarity economies, and others. As in those cases, of course, it is still a framework that is exploratory, needing to evolve considerably to answer questions of practicality and theory. While proposing such a framework, the presentation will therefore also raise some key questions for further exploration, including the role of the state and private corporations, the relationship between the individual and the collective, and the political agency for achieving the transition to such a future.