Ecology, Economy and Society–the INSEE Journal 1 (1): 105–107, April 2018

BOOK REVIEW

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Centre for Science and Environment 2017 *Annual State of India's Environment—SOE 2017*. New Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 2017; ISBN: 978-81-86906-02-6; INR 350

The 'State of India's Environment Report', published annually by the Centre for Science and Environment, is out for 2017. First produced in 1985, this report is eagerly awaited by environmentalists, policymakers, and citizens, as it contains a wealth of information that is of interest to many. This one has three essays, ten chapters, and forty-four articles: a formidable collection, by any reckoning. Does the CSE succeed in bringing all these together into one overarching vision?

The section at the end, on 'Data and Development', is the most valuable part. It summarizes that most agencies implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) do not have the latest/relevant data; only 23 per cent of soil health cards have been issued; 30 per cent of the land is degraded; there is a 12 per cent decline in environmental crimes; 36 per cent of forest clearances were for irrigation and 20 per cent for mining; cities are growing at the cost of wetlands; and there are only 2 buses per 1000 people. All this information should pose several questions, such as: why is the state of the environment such? And have the official data been checked against other sources?

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Published by Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE), c/o Institute of Economic Growth, University Enclave, North Campus, Delhi 110007.

ISSN: 2581-6152 (print); 2581-6101 (web).

To examine whether the report has done so, one could begin by asking, for instance: why has soil health not been determined? The chapter on rural development has five articles; these argue that information and communications technology (ICT) platforms will transform the agro-economy by letting farmers negotiate better prices. The authors acknowledge that demonetization has hit farmers, who are also locked into informal debt traps, and growth has failed to create employment; but they offer that things could improve if land records were digitally linked; cash use was reduced in *mandi*s (wholesale markets); and the public crop insurance scheme was made more attractive.

Only one author asks, 'Why are people poor? How do they get out of poverty?' But the questions remain unanswered. There is no mention of farmer suicides, the overuse of fertilizers, pesticide poisoning, droughts, or floods, which many independent commentators have analysed vividly.

In the related chapter on 'Disaster and Conflict', the lead author holds that the 1990s drought was of the poor India, but the 2016 drought was of the rich. Hence, one must catch every drop of water, store it, recharge groundwater, revise the drought code, and 'work obsessively to secure water in all times'. Other authors show that while Rs 11.25 lakh crore was spent on flood control measures, flood-affected areas rose in the same period by over 160 per cent; and that river beds are rising because of sediment loads, while embankments are unable to contain rising water levels. Yet, they recommend; build dams with cushions to avoid flood runoffs, strengthen embankments to withstand floods every 10 years, improve flood forecasting, and strengthen rescue and rehabilitation. Only one author argues that there is a need for a fresh outlook at managing floods that includes sediment management. No further space is given to this author's large body of work on precisely the same subject.

One would imagine that the chapter on 'Water and Sanitation' would explore this theme further. But the maximum space is devoted to toilets. Arguably, 65,000 tonnes of feces are disposed in the open daily, but how is that related to the death of one out of five children due to pneumonia (and diarrhoea), or to the outrageous Thalerian proposition that the focus should be on 'behavioural change'? The CSE's survey of 168 slums in Bhubaneshwar is used to conclude that untreated wastewater can pollute water sources, particularly drinking water sources, but how does that lead to the argument that where 'open defecation and surface disposal of faeces are common, these are the major causes of water contamination'? What is the link between wet wastewater from toilets and dry open defecation? The extensive campaign of sewerage workers, who will have to bear the brunt of waste disposal, apparently deserves no mention.

The tendency in this chapter, to underline the (mis)behaviour of the poor and encourage government schemes, is carried over into other chapters. The chapter on 'Air Pollution' praises India's adoption of Bharat Stage VI (BS-VI) emission standards in 2020, thus 'leap-frogging' the Kuznetsian inverted-Ucurve to catch up with developed countries. A CSE team that visited Gaya to monitor air quality in *anganwadi*s (childcare centres) comes to the rapid conclusion that 'rural homes across India should also be encouraged to move on to clean cooking fuels'. In the chapter on 'Energy and Industry', a study of 30 villages is used to reinforce the hypothesis that decentralized distribution generation would provide universal access to energy. Industrial pollution can be controlled by implementing continuous monitoring systems, and banks and financial institutions would be able to control non-performing assets if they only address environmental and social risks! The cumulative argument, that technology has the solutions to social problems, is pervasive throughout the report, even though the data cited in the report itself does not support the argument.

So, is there an overarching vision of an alternative to what the first essay, by CSE Director General Sunita Narain, calls 'unbridled consumerism-led growth (that) is not even working for the rich, forget the poor'? Narain proposes that there is an 'opportunity to reconsider the future strategies' based on local resources with local communities. On the other hand, the second essay, by Deputy Director General Chandra Bhushan, compares the international negotiations at Paris with those in Kigali and suggests that success can be achieved 'when we shift the negotiations from big platforms (with politicians) to smaller sectoral negotiating platforms (with experts)'. And the third essay (by journalist Rakesh Kalshian) discusses the Anthropocene with the hope that its makeover will be democratic so that 'activists, thinkers and leaders craft challenges and invitations that bring some of us a little closer to a better possible world'. All in all, the imperative political questions that concern people and the environment are relegated to the background.