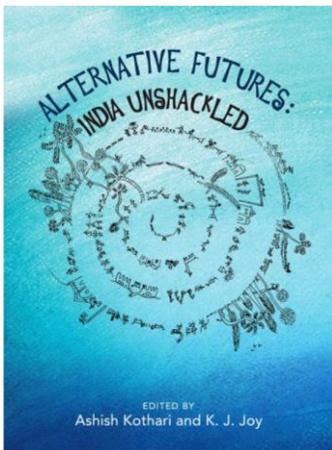


## BOOK REVIEW

# Envisioning a Just and Sustainable Society

Harsh Dobhal \*

Ashish Kothari and K J Joy (eds.). 2017. *Alternative Futures: India Unshackled*, New Delhi: Authors Upfront, ISBN: 9788193392478; pp. 704, INR 995



*Alternative Futures* is a compelling collection of thought-provoking essays on how India's several political, economic, environmental, and social challenges might play out towards a hopeful future. The editors Ashish Kothari and K J Joy, however, do not intend for the volume to serve as some sort of a road map for future-oriented action. Rather, *Alternative Futures*, as Shiv Visvanathan underlines in the foreword as well, should be best understood as affirming Gandhi's notion of the ashram as a laboratory for 'futuristic, ethical and scientific experiments'.

The 35 essays by 50 writers are clubbed under five broad sections—ecological, political, economic, socio-cultural, and concluding perspectives. While taking a full stock of the varied visions, imaginations, and insights will be impossible in this limited review, one could, nonetheless, dwell upon some of the striking viewpoints and perspectives that suggest a general conceptual slant in the volume. For one—unsurprisingly, perhaps—many

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of the essays make clear their strong disagreements with the prevailing hegemonic beliefs in economic growth, consumerism, and the role of neo-liberal markets. The alternative imaginings, on the other hand, argue for a provocative range of possibilities for achieving economic justice, social equality, ecological sustainability, and the deepening of democratic values and practice.

In the section ‘Political Futures’, Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey, and Pravitta Kashyap provide us helpful arguments for ‘direct democracy’, their claim here being that a ‘rainbow coalition of grassroots social movements’ could assemble both the intellectual and organizational muscle to make democracy more participative and meaningful. Aditya Nigam’s essay, with similar reasoning, weaves together the often differing thoughts of Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore, and even M N Roy to make a compelling case for ‘radical social democracy’. In sum, the essays in this section urge us to reconsider the critical differences between the electoral logic of representative democracy from that of striving instead for popular participation in which communities and citizens can meaningfully decide upon, and have agency in realizing, their interests.

The essays in the ‘Ecological Futures’ section cover themes such as water, environmental governance, biodiversity, and energy. Shripad Dharmadhikary and Himanshu Thakkar argue against large dams and the now infamous scheme of interlinking rivers. For them, centralized water infrastructures—besides displacing traditional access of local communities—fail to ensure that rivers have sufficient ecological flows. For them, moreover, only water infrastructures that allow inclusive community access and are sensitive to ecologies of flow can enable the sustainable management of water resources. Kartik Shanker, Meera Anna Oommen, and Nitin Rai point out, in a similar vein, that the history of exclusionary conservation in India or what is widely referred to as the ‘guns and fences’ approach to environmental protection has largely failed. Not only have subsistence communities been denied access to their traditional livelihood means in such elite, expert-driven, and bureaucratically administered conservation agendas but whole worlds of traditional knowledges and local expertise have been marginalized. In the opinion of these ecologists, the effort for an inclusive conservation must be premised on a more ‘holistic’ approach in which heterogeneous multi-use landscapes are encouraged and communities living within biodiversity-rich zones are made part of the striving for environmental justice.

The ‘Economic Futures’ section deals with diverse sub-themes such as food sovereignty, pastoralism, crafts, industry, urbanization, transportation, and technological alternatives. Aseem Shrivastava and Elango Rangasamy

elaborate upon the need for the localization and regionalization of economies. The belief here is that these new scales might offer better opportunities for crafting ecologically stable and collectively self-sufficient societies. Bharat Mansata, Kavitha Kuruganti, Vijay Jardhari, and Vasant Futane debate a range of possibilities for achieving food sovereignty, dignified livelihoods to farmers, and ecological sustainability. K J Joy draws our attention to a biomass-based future, which, he hopes, can tie together livelihood and ecosystem needs. Dunu Roy urges us to think about industrial manufacturing without having to be competitive or profit-driven.

The theme 'Socio-Cultural Futures' engages with the issues of languages, schooling, arts, alternative media, knowledge, health, dalits, gender, minorities, and adivasis. Paranjoy Guha Thakurta explores possibilities for an alternative media which can be made responsive to public concerns and is based on collaborations between media practitioners, representatives of civil society, whistle-blowers, and other stakeholders. Arguing that language is just not a mode of communication but a world view, G N Devy suggests that language diversity in India is an important inheritance and helps us sustain our multicultural identity. Anand Teltumbde emphasizes on the need for the socio-economic, sociopolitical, and sociocultural empowerment of dalits and argues that empowerment is vital for working towards the abolishment of caste and communal consciousness. Gladson Dungdung's passionately written essay on the adivasis (indigenous people of India) discusses not only the legacies of violence, exploitation, and domination that have shaped the latter's contemporary worlds but also compellingly outlines a possible adivasi future comprising a need-based economy, cooperation, and communities living in harmony with nature.

While these essays are persuasive, they offer no particular road maps for achieving or realizing these better alternatives. Nonetheless, the essays in *Alternative Futures* remain useful for not only helping us understand the many social, economic, political, and environmental ills that afflict contemporary India. These writings also set the stage for fuelling a range of possible discussions amongst academics, public intellectuals, journalists, legal practitioners, and peace activists. In sum, there is now a meaningful conceptual template for all those interested in working to a future that can be better than the present.