

Environmental Challenges of the 21st Century

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Issues of social concern often acquire greater significance if they are also large and compelling enough to carry cross-cultural, global implications. Two subjects that have moved to centre-stage during the last twenty-five years or so are 'gender' and 'environment'. These are today recognised as issues that have always been of universal relevance, and as subjects upon which every thinking individual is expected to possess a reasoned opinion. As a formal academic exercise however, gender studies are usually perceived as lying within the ambit of social science and literature. On the other hand it is difficult to restrict the question of environment to any such specialisation. In an endeavour to reveal the multiple ways in which environment has always influenced human life, interdisciplinary approaches are becoming increasingly common.

Environmental Challenges of the 21st Century brought out by the Asian Institute of Society, Law and Economics (Shimla) is comprised of sixteen contributions from academics belonging to different disciplines. The single largest group of contributors is of economists (8), followed by that of other social sciences. Articles of only three pure scientists are also included.

The environmental issues that this volume seeks to address are large, numerous and diverse. Sustainability and sustainable development are visibly present concerns in most of the articles. As a result, the 'development-environment' paradox figures time and again, both explicitly and implicitly. Connected as this concern is with the exploitation of natural resources, many of the contributors have also emphasised the neces-

sity of resource management, conservation, development of alternative materials and the use of appropriate technology. Pollution as the inevitable consequence of industrial or industrialising economies is also the subject of some discussion. Problems arising from pollution along with the inequitable distribution of (and access to) natural resources underpin the arguments of two articles dealing with the environmental impact on human health. Ecological inequity and its socio-economic consequences are the concern of a couple of other contributors who touch upon the question of marginalisation of certain social sections or societies. At least four of the articles focus on the problems specific to the Himalaya.

Most of the contributions to this volume have taken a hard social science approach that represents the environment simply as a physical phenomenon essential for the survival and welfare of humankind. There are, however, a few notable exceptions where the environment is viewed also as a factor that permeates and moulds human consciousness. Here the environment is perceived not only as a creator, but also as a component of the human condition. It is in this context, therefore, that two or three of the articles introduce the issues of human rights, environmental justice, social values and the pressing need for establishing an ethical relationship with nature. Clearly, it is only when such matters are raised that a more adequately critical attitude can be adopted towards the exploitative nature of 'development' than is at present the case.

From the manner in which environmental questions are addressed by the

book, one might get the misleading impression that the environmental 'challenges' of the future (i.e the twenty-first century) are going to be no different from those that have been confronting the world since the mid-twentieth century. Most of the problems examined and solutions suggested are no different from the ones that have been discussed by scholars for the past quarter century or so. Even though the book summarises the major concerns that have till now agitated the minds of environmentalists, no serious attempt at the projection of a twenty-first century scenario has been made—something the title of the book seems to suggest. Many of the articles overlap both in content and argument. Moreover, it would have been more appropriate for the editors of the volume to explain in a detailed introductory chapter the intended objectives of this collection of articles. A very large (20 pages) general bibliography has been appended at the end of the book, but it is very difficult to use. Given the diverse topics that it covers, it would have been more convenient for researchers if the bibliography had been divided under different subject headings instead of being kept as one long alphabetical list.

As a ready reference to prevailing views on current environmental issues and their possible solution, this book may prove to be useful for readers. More careful editing and avoiding of overlapping sections with repetitive arguments would have made it more focused and incisive.

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Shimla