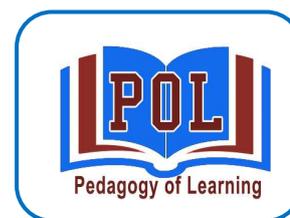


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Neoliberal Globalization, Environmental Crisis and the Role of Education for Sustainable Development: A Critique

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Abstract: *Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being through an understanding of the linkages among the issues of environment and development. It has been hoped that education would equip individuals and societies with the skills, perspectives, knowledge and values to live and work in a sustainable manner. But, the contemporary neoliberal socio-economic order based on the growth of capital entails the handing over of the natural resources to the multinational corporations and promotes mindless consumerism as an attempt to realise this growth. These developments have been annihilating the natural places by turning them into capitalist cultural spaces and thus have had devastating effects on earth's environment. On the other hand, in the field of education, neoliberalism has two agendas, the first is to make education subservient to the manpower needs and consumption needs of the emerging global economy and the second is to transmogrify education into a commodity for commercial gains. In fact, there is a need for evolving a critical education that must enable people to critique the ongoing developmental model and to endeavor to develop a sustainable alternative to it.*

Keywords: *Globalization, Neoliberalism, Sustainable Development (ESD), Critical Citizens*

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Introduction

Environmental crisis constitutes one of the most serious problems confronting the present day world. Global warming, ozone layer destruction, worldwide toxic contamination, rising sea levels, acid rain, deforestation, extinction of species etc. are a number of expressions of this crisis of monumental proportion. The continuous depletion of the natural world as a result of the intensification of economic activities is posing a grave danger for the existence of man

and other biological species. However, parallel to the ruthless exploitation of the natural environment, there has been a growing realization, especially in the past two decades or so, for protecting the environment from further degradation. Such a concern for environment has resulted in international and national level deliberations and initiatives. A vision that emerged from these efforts has been to qualitatively amend the ongoing model of development and to make it sustainable by taking care of environmental health while organizing different economic activities. Such a paradigm of sustainable development has become the theme tune of the environmental and economic deliberations world-wide.

Sustainable Development

The term sustainable development has become popular after the publication the document entitled *Our Common Future* by the World Commission on Environment and Development (also known as the Brundtland Commission after the name of its chairperson) in 1987. The Brundtland Commission defines sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987:43). However, this does not mean that the concept of sustainable development envisages slowing down of economic activities, rather it suggests that it is possible to achieve economic growth and industrialization without environmental damage. Therefore, the Commission emphasises on enhancing economic growth by stating that given population growth rates, a five to tenfold increase in manufacturing output will be needed just to raise developing-world consumption of manufactured goods to industrialized-world levels by the time population growth rates level off next century (ibid.: 15). Further, the Commission argues that the international economy must speed up world growth while respecting environmental constraints (ibid.: 89).

The sustainability paradigm thus rejects the contention that casualties in the environmental and social realms are inevitable and acceptable consequences of economic development. It has generally been accepted that achieving sustainable development will require balancing environmental, societal, and economic considerations in the pursuit of development and an improved quality of life.

Education for Sustainable Development

United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 has been another significant development in the direction of international efforts for resolving environmental crisis. In this conference, the concept of education for sustainable development gained ground. The Agenda 21 adopted in the Summit identified education as an essential for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address environment and development issues. Education is critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behavior consistent with sustainable development and for effective public participation in decision-making (as cited in Kahn, 2008: 6).

In 2005, the United Nations ushered in the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, and has thereby contended that every nation must begin transforming its educational policies in such a manner that a global framework for ecological and social sustainability can be built in relatively short time duration. Education for sustainable development (ESD) is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being vis-à-vis the earth's natural resources by creating awareness about various environmental problems and their possible solution. It is seen as a dynamic concept that utilizes all aspects of public awareness, education and training to create or enhance an understanding of the linkages among the issues of environment and development. It has been hoped that education would equip individuals and societies with the skills, perspectives, knowledge and values to live and work in a sustainable manner. ESD supports five fundamental types of learning to provide quality education and foster sustainable human development – learning to know, learning to be, learning to live together, learning to do and learning to transform oneself and society. The ESD has also been viewed as a possible tool for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All goals.

Neoliberalism and Deepening Environment Crisis

These issues of sustainable development and role of education in achieving sustainable development can be looked into by placing them in the context of emergence of neoliberal globalisation. Globalisation has been conceptualized as a technological-economic system representing geographic expansion of economic rationality and its emancipation from political jurisdiction manifesting itself in the expansion of market, free movement of goods and capital and predominance of giant transnational corporations.

Neoliberalism, as the underlying doctrine of globalisation holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market (Harvey, 2005: 3). Globalisation is thus a process of universalisation of market or as John Bellamy Foster (2002) has put it “the spread of the self regulating market to every niche and cranny of globe.” The international institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization have played a significant role in compelling the developing countries to open up their economies and formulating legal structures for working of a global economy.

Under this globalisation a handful of corporations and a handful of powerful countries seek to control the earth's resources and to transform the planet into a supermarket in which everything is for sale (Shiva, 2005: viii). As a result, today, multinational corporations scour the world for resources and opportunities wherever they find them, exploiting cheap labour, taking advantage of lax environmental regulations, and relying on tax benefits in poor countries. All of this reinforces rather than reduces divisions among the wealthy countries and poor countries. The result is a more rapacious global exploitation of nature and increased differentials of wealth and power (Magdoff & Foster, 2011: 64).

In fact, one of the most significant shifts that globalization induces, is the transformation of the very basis of life – the earth resources- into commodified private property to be freely traded. People's commons are being enclosed and transformed into commodities (Shiva, 2005: 2). The rules of economic globalization, as we see in the policies of the WTO, are rules which transform our food and water from our basic needs and fundamental rights into commodities which are controlled, owned and sold by a handful of global corporations (ibid.: 10). Every vital living resource of the planet that maintains the fragile web of life is in the process of being privatized, commodified and appropriated by corporations (ibid.:ix).

Further, as this system is based on the growth of capital it necessarily promotes mindless consumerism as a part of this growth. Meeting the needs of a consumer society leads to overproduction of consumer goods and production of more wastes, thus further contributing to environmental degradation.

This neoliberal economy as an economy which fails to respect ecological and ethical limits: limits to inequality, limits to injustice, limits to greed and economic power (Shiva, 2005: vii). In her opinion, an economy based on greed and profits alone is inevitably an economy of death, and it creates politics and culture of death (ibid.: x). At a time when issues of ecological sustainability and social and economic justice demand a change in the dominant economic paradigm, globalization has given unjust systems of agricultural production and consumption a new lease of life. New property rights over biodiversity and seeds imposed by Trade related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) take seeds beyond the reach of farmers, pushing them towards debt and suicide (Ibid.: 4). The WTO's TRIPS agreement means that farming communities lose their control over seeds as common property; instead seeds become the monopoly of corporations like Monsanto. Moreover, its Agreement on Agriculture allows corporations like Cargill to take over our food system, dumping artificially cheap agricultural products with US subsidies onto Indian farmers; and to export India's food with Indian subsidies, thus destroying the livelihoods of the rural people and depriving the poor in India of food (Ibid. : 10-11). Such an attempt to annihilate natural places by turning them into capitalist cultural spaces, a process that works hand in hand with the genocide and dehumanization of people as an expression of the market economy's perpetual expansion has been termed by Herbert Marcuse as ecocide (Kahn, 2008: 5).

Sustainable Development: A Critique

While viewing the concept of sustainable development in the above context of intensive onslaught on the environment in the era of neoliberal globalisation, we can build an argument that this concept has outlined a new relationship between nature and human society. As per the modern concept, the nature has been viewed as an entity separate from humanity, as a collection of objects, lifeless things to be controlled and used for the sake of humanity. Human beings stand outside of nature, above it, controlling it. Conceptually separating people from the earth allows us to see the earth as an object to be used. Such notions have been the foundation of science as well as that of capitalism. The conceptualization of nature

as an object separate from humankind thus opened the possibility of ecologically harmful methods of capitalist production.

Eminent philosopher Michael Foucault while explaining his concept of governmentality suggests to see this neo-liberal rationality functioning as a “politics of truth”, producing new forms of knowledge, inventing new notions and concepts that contribute to the “government” of new domains of regulation and intervention (as cited in Lemke, 2000). He insists to view the ongoing discourse on “sustainable development” in this context. Under the concept of sustainable development, in the “new world order” is the reconceptualization of external nature in terms of an “ecosystem”. Nature, which once meant an independent space clearly demarcated from the social with an independent power to act and regulated by autonomous laws, is increasingly becoming the “environment” of the capitalist system. The ecosystem conception is also a reinvention of the boundaries between nature and society. In view of today’s “global” perils, the main issue now is less the restrictive notion of the “limits of growth” as it is a dynamic growth of limits. In an age of “sustainable development”, previously untapped areas are being opened in the interests of capitalization and chances for commercial exploitation. Nature and life itself are being drawn into the economic discourse of efficient resource management (Lemke, 2000).

No longer is nature defined and treated as an external, exploitable domain. Through a new process of capitalization, effected primarily by a shift in representation, previously ‘uncapitalized’ aspects of nature and society become internal to capital. This transformation is perhaps most visible in discussions of rainforest biodiversity: the key to the survival of the rainforest is seen as lying in the genes of the species, the usefulness of which could be released for profit through genetic engineering and biotechnology in the production of commercially valuable products, such as pharmaceuticals. Capital thus develops a conversationalist tendency, significantly different from its usual reckless, destructive form (ibid.).

Thus, the concept of sustainable development has not been in contravention to the dominant neoliberal model of development, rather it provides a theoretical rationale for its operation. The concept of sustainable development thus argues that there is no contradiction between the unlimited accumulation of capital and the preservation of the environment. The Brundtland Commission’s Report through its different recommendations builds a discourse in favour the ongoing model of economic development that gets intensified under neoliberal globalisation. For example, on the one hand, the Commission recognises the environmental damage caused due to the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, but at the same time it argues that the use of agricultural chemicals is not in itself harmful (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 126) and countries can and should increase yields by greater use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, particularly in the developing world (ibid.: 135). In order to have a truly sustainable economy, much of the economic activity causing pollution has to be reduced, but the commission’ report has made recommendations its further expansion. In the world of John Bellemy Foster and Brett Clark, the concept of sustainable development envisages that the system can continue to expand by creating a new

“sustainable capitalism”, bringing the efficiency of the market to bear on nature and its reproduction. In reality, these visions amount to little more than a renewed strategy for profiting on planetary destruction (Foster & Clark, 2009).

Role of Education for Sustainable Development: A Critique

As far as the role of education for sustainable development is concerned, there is a need to understand the nature of education under neoliberal globalisation. In the neoliberal educational policy discourse education is being viewed and defined more in terms of the needs of the emerging global economy and also as a profitable commodity. The school education in the global discourse of Education for All (EFA) is viewed more in terms of skills to be acquired by masses, which are considered as prerequisite for the smooth functioning of the emerging economy. Moreover, with the development of new information and communication technology and its widespread introduction in the industrial and service sectors, the nature and purpose of knowledge has also undergone a change. In this context, Francois Lyotard in his seminal work entitled *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* opines:

The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so. The relationship of the suppliers and the users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume- that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production; in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its ‘use value’ (Lyotard, 1984: 4-5).

As knowledge has become the principle force of production, to have education, it seems, is only to have the necessary information for optimizing one’s performance and market efficiency (Pathak, 2009:48). Further, the obsessive use of technology is transforming the very character of a learner. One becomes a consumer of information. And the process of consumption, one is told, must be fast, efficient and technologically sleek. The more one consumes the more saleable one becomes (ibid.).

This instrumental paradigm has been gaining ground in Indian educational policy discourse. The Ambani-Birla Report presented to the Prime Minister’s Council on Trade and Industry states that we have to fundamentally change our mindset- from seeing education as a component of social development to realizing that it is a means of creating a new information society (Ambani & Birla, 2000). It further viewed that education imparts knowledge and skills and shapes values and attitude Education is universally recognised as an important investment in building human capital (Ibid.).

On these lines, National Mission on Education through ICT has been designed as a programme for enabling India to emerge as a knowledge super power of the world by

nurturing and honing our working population into knowledge or knowledge enabled working population. The Mission aims at sustaining a high growth rate of our economy through the capacity building and knowledge empowerment of the people. Moreover, ICT is also being viewed as a medium which could be made more accessible to populace and a virtual equality could be created. Thus, the orientation of the mission is more towards the realization of the emerging manpower needs of the economy.

In the context, eminent educationist Prof. Anil Sadgopal comments: The goal of education excludes building a democratic, egalitarian, just, secular and enlightened society. Instead, education has become an instrument for only improving productivity, promoting consumerism and establishing market control over knowledge and the public mind such that every human being becomes a ‘useful’ resource for the global capital (Sadgopal, 2010:33). But, such an education would not lead to development of critical citizens, having an ability to understand social, economic, political and environmental problems and to strive for their resolution for a sustainable society. In a society having constitutional commitments to democratic values of equality and social justice, the role of education is not merely to be subservient to the needs of any ongoing developmental model, but also to present its critique. Further, if the developmental model is causing devastation and destruction of life, it is expected from the education system especially from the higher education system to suggest alternative model of development. Therefore, in the present times, in the face of predominance of the neoliberal model of development characterised by the monumental environmental crisis, a critical role is expected from education. Eminent thinker Istvan Meszaros has put this role as *breaking capital’s logic in the interest of human survival* (Meszaros, 2009:229). There is a need, as Paulla Allman reminds us, of ‘critically reading’ the world of global capitalism- to fully grasp the absurdity of capitalism and the impossibility of humanity’s survival if it remains shackled to this inherently crisis-prone and totalizing system of social and economic injustice and domination (Allman, 2010:3).

Conclusion

Sustainable Development has been viewed as a model of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It has been propagated as a possible solution to the problems of environmental degradation, resource depletion, poverty etc being faced by the present day world.

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is a vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being through an understanding of the linkages among the issues of environment and development. It has been hoped that education would equip individuals and societies with the skills, perspectives, knowledge and values to live and work in a sustainable manner.

But, such an education would not lead to development of critical citizens, having an ability to understand social, economic, political and environmental the problems and to strive for their resolution for a sustainable society. Such education which is subservient to ongoing neoliberal capitalist economy, which itself is the root cause of monumental environmental

crisis and perpetuating inequalities, would not lead to a sustainable future. In fact, education must enable people to critique the ongoing developmental model and to endeavor to develop a sustainable alternative to it.

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