

Book Review

Business Interests and the Environmental Crisis

Kanchi Kohli and Manju Menon (eds). 2016. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

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Piecing together the complexities of business interests in the looming environmental crisis is a difficult task at hand and yet this new book, *Business Interests and the Environmental Crisis*, with a collection of essays from across the globe has attempted to undertake this effort. Each essay in the book makes the effort to peel the interlayered layers of environment in a business-oriented world. The complex debate of how the environment is defined, valued, numerically translated, and its overall impact on the world and especially the environmental crisis discourse is the main agenda of the book. The book has been well edited by Kanchi Kohli and Manju Menon; however, the essays are more rooted in economic, trade theories, as well as the environmental and ecological discourse, which may be difficult for the more uninitiated to understand or decipher.

The book begins with an essay by the editors with a particular reference to an anecdote of a Summit occurring in a Skyscraper, fully air conditioned, well-lit with giant chandeliers, well decorated with fresh flowers, and with the latest technology as a setting for the scientists, CSO, and business to discuss environment, conservation, and issues of biodiversity. This particular reference sets the tone of the forthcoming discussions in many of the essays that look at the paradox of environment crisis discourse.

The book provides an in-depth analysis of

various policies, practices, and mechanisms currently underway and their impact on the debate around environment and ecology. The discourse around many financial and trade mechanisms and their associated benefit for the environment, the new concepts of sharing and access, and commercialization of resources and environment because of such agreements and negotiations has also been discussed.

The book looks at how environment has been transformed into a commodity with a price, bargain strategy, or agreement attached to it. Post the introduction, the first essay looks at the financialization or the market for ecosystem services. The essay looks at how conservation and protection of ecosystems is transforming into a profitable venture in many sectors and areas.

One essay discusses the concept of claiming benefits and focusses on the issue of access and benefit sharing. The essay highlights how the need and the demand for Access and Benefit sharing has led and to quote the “public auction of biological resources to external bidders outside local communities”. The essay also highlights that setting up of participatory mechanisms and inclusiveness does not wipe away the core issue, that is, the deal and negotiation of the resource is still underway and eventually a settlement may be attained.

Another essay on the abstract nature of building discusses the three major development projects or initiatives that are supposed to

create major places/hubs to enable progress, development, create public spaces, and are well-developed areas that are closer to nature; however, on the road towards the establishment of such development projects—the ecological systems and the environment—are suffering and becoming a mechanism to capitalize on the environment and resources that are in the vicinity of the projects.

Another essay on the value as a justification in water resource development describes vividly how the value of natural resources is dependent on its usage and utilization by humans. It is very interesting to note how this discourse is the basis for the research framework and the core issue when resources are discussed as sectors. The essay highlights that if water is of no use in a certain context to humans, then it has no value. The essay also discusses that value is not neutral and ‘delivering value means delivering value for the powerful’. The essay discusses the need to democratize the concept and practice of value and highlights that though water holds value for both living and other non-living entities. The essay focusses on moving away from the commodification of water to moving towards the literal meaning of the word ‘value’ itself.

The essay on effectiveness and equity of payments discusses a very pertinent issue insofar as whether there is a need to provide payments and incentivize certain conservation mechanisms. The author highlights that in many cases of forest conservation, many communities and countries have undertaken the efforts to conserve without the monetary benefits attached to the process. The author discusses the REDD+ and PES schemes quite comprehensively in the essay. The author notes that the perception that financial incentives are the only way humans are motivated is a narrow assumption and such assumptions could lead to further marginalization of people who are dependent on forests and other resources for livelihoods. Another essay titled ‘Selling Nature Focusing on the Forest Villages of Northern Bengal in the 19th and 20th Century’, provides a historical discourse of the forest in the region and how it has changed over the century. The essay also discusses the political economy of

community control in the forests of North Bengal. The essay on placing peoplehood at the centre of the green economy discusses the core problem (in green economy), which is the limit of commodification and the nature of property. The essay discusses, at length, the concepts of personhood and peoplehood and the better approaches to these concepts. This essay also deals with major issue of access and benefits sharing (ABS) agreements, which are at the heart of community engagement and participatory mechanisms. The essay discusses the ABS agreement of the indigenous South African population with the South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research over the patent and traditional knowledge of the Hoodia plant. The author highlights that while an ABS agreement did occur between the two entities; however, as issues around the patent emerged, the traditional knowledge the community did hold became a commodity leading to negotiations on investments and market potential moving away from the actual discourse around development and use of historical knowledge and practice surrounding the plant.

All the essays have relooked at the many market-based and trade-oriented mechanisms and practices that have moved into the global environmental dialogue. The cost and benefit analysis and valuation of environment to conserve it is itself a vortex that is leading to commodification of natural resources and the ecology. Overall, the book evaluates the question of “what is the impact of putting a price or valuation on environment”. While the book looks at the question comprehensively, there are no immediate measures that can address the concerns raised in the essays.

The epistemic community would find the book to be an interesting read providing a window of opportunity to understand the impacts of economic and trade policies and principles, particularly on how environment seems to be viewed across board rooms and how negotiations and business deals seem to have permeated within the environmental debate and the dialogue to protect and conserve it for the future generations.