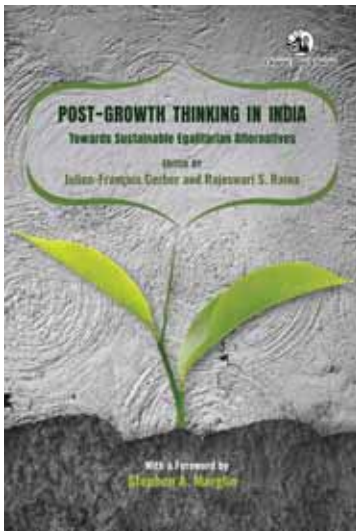


BOOK REVIEW

Shooting at the wrong target

Eswaran Somanathan*

Julien-François Gerber and Rajeswari S. Raina (eds.). 2018. *Post-Growth Thinking in India: Towards Sustainable Egalitarian Alternatives*, Orient Blackswan: New Delhi, ISBN: 9789352873937; pp. 388, INR 1075



The contributors to this book are united in their dismay and condemnation of two aspects of life in India today – the ecological and environmental ruination, and the inequality and poverty of many. They see these problems as inter-related and a consequence of the capitalist system. Many of them conclude that there is no way to solve these problems without putting an end to economic growth itself. Others are less categorical, merely suggesting that economic growth be given less importance than it presently receives. At least two of the authors, Jayati Ghosh and Kanchan Chopra, do not buy the argument that economic growth must end forthwith.

They argue for equitable growth that does not come at the cost of undue environmental destruction. It is a strength of the book that different perspectives and points of view are included, although not all of them are equally convincing.

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Anyone who lives in India today cannot be unaware of the horrendous damage inflicted on the environment, or the continuing poverty and inequality. Does economic growth cause environmental degradation? Evidently, it does. Economic growth means greater consumption of mineral and biological resources, more waste generation and, therefore, fewer intact ecosystems.

However, the first (majority) group of authors then makes a leap of logic: They conclude that economic growth is, therefore, bad, and should be halted forthwith. It is clear that solving poverty and inequality means moving to a more equal economy. But this has no connection with economic growth – if anything, it gets harder to solve the problem of poverty if there is less to go around. What about the environment? The nature of growth can be changed – growth can be made less damaging. Why not reduce or even eliminate the damage, rather than attacking growth itself?

Arguments are made that this is not feasible – for example, that energy is required for growth and energy production is necessarily environmentally harmful. It is claimed that renewable energy technologies too are environmentally harmful, even if less harmful than the conventional technologies, and that they take too much land, etc. These criticisms of particular technologies would be unconvincing even if they were fully correct (which they are not). After all, what is relevant is not current technology developed in a system that does not penalize pollution enough, but the technology that we would develop if we had the incentive to do so – as we would if pollution were appropriately penalized. In fact, this is the solution to environmental problems that mainstream neoclassical economics proposes – penalize externalities so that companies cannot profit by shifting damages to others. What is remarkable is that the anti-growth authors do not even attempt to address this solution. They simply never mention it.

But does it work? Do we, in fact, see that the places that have stricter environmental regulations or high pollution charges, there is less pollution and cleaner technology? The answer is an overwhelming yes. For example, Sweden was one of the first countries to introduce a carbon tax, back in 1990. Since then, the Swedish economy has grown as fast or faster than other industrialized countries, while its carbon emissions have also declined more rapidly than elsewhere. More generally, countries that enforce strict environmental regulations have much cleaner environments, and their economies are not noticeably poorer as a result. The industrialized countries generally have a stricter environmental regulation than the developing countries, and obviously bluer skies and cleaner waterbodies. However, this

was not always so. In fact, since they industrialized earlier, many of them haveAho been through the horrors we are experiencing today. Yesterday, as I travelled through one of the more industrial parts of northern India, I was struck by the thought that J. R. R. Tolkien could have modelled his land of Mordor on it. This is not a coincidence. In fact, Manchester, London, and other British cities at the time Tolkien was writing did have problems similar to those we are experiencing today. The infamous London fog of the winter of 1952 that killed 4000 people was caused largely because people densely packed into a city were burning coal to cook and keep themselves warm. Replace coal with wood, dung, and crop residue, and you have northern India today.

How, then, did London and other cities escape the problems we face today? Not by returning to the land, but by replacing coal with gas, and taking other measures to clean up pollution. The rich countries today are not just rich, they are also mostly clean. The assumption that cleaning up the environment can only come by reducing consumption is simply not borne out by experience. Of course, this is not to say that Sweden or other rich countries have solved all environmental problems. But it does suggest very strongly that the remaining problems should be addressed directly, rather than attacking economic growth in the hope that this will make the problems vanish.

If India is the epitome of an environmental disaster, it is because we have allowed polluters to get away with polluting without paying for the consequences, and because we have, as a society, made little effort to help the poor among us afford alternatives to polluting traditional technologies. Several contributors provide examples of community management of natural resources and revival of traditional techniques for land and water conservation to promote the idea that a good society is possible without economic growth. These are valuable and inspiring cases. The effort to raise agricultural productivity without polluting the land is crucial. But it does not follow from these examples that a good society is possible without economic growth. The examples do not address issues like air pollution. How is this to be tackled with traditional technology when the population density is 1000 persons/sq km as it is in those parts of India with the most people? The latest comprehensive study on the sources of air pollution in India shows that the largest single source is cooking fires (Health Effects Institute, 2018). This should surprise no one who has read the history of pollution in the industrialized countries, or for that matter, even anyone who has read the Sherlock Holmes stories. The only way to provide clean cooking for everyone is to expand access to electricity for cooking and heating, and/or LPG. Reducing electric power generation in the name of

de-growth will only hinder the expansion of access. Instead, the effort must be to provide cleaner electricity generation.

This is just one example, but it highlights a major flaw in the de-growth arguments made in this book. India has 1.3 billion people. Presenting the example of a traditional economy and society such as that of Ladakh before the tourism boom, or other traditional solutions to our environmental problems evades two awkward facts. It is not possible to even feed the population we will have in the next two decades with our traditional agricultural technologies, let alone provide them a decent education and healthcare. Traditional economies also had much higher infant and child mortality, and it was this that allowed them to maintain their life styles. Mortality was high enough to ensure a very low population growth rate, thus avoiding resource scarcity. Life expectancy in India in 1960, before the Green Revolution up-ended traditional agriculture, was 41 years. In 2015, it had risen to 68 years. This was a consequence of less poverty, better nutrition and water supply and the wider availability of modern medical technology, all enabled by economic growth. The demographic transition to lower mortality and lower fertility is well underway and it has avoided misery for millions of parents who would have suffered the deaths of their children, had it not occurred. Modern educational, health, and contraceptive services are needed to help complete this transition, and that is possible only in an economy that can provide the necessary industrial infrastructure of electricity, clean water, sanitation, medical education, and communications. It is impossible to achieve this without growth.

Towards the end of the book, Kanchan Chopra gently makes the argument that the focus should not be on reducing economic growth, but on green growth — improving the environment and protecting ecosystems while moving to an equitable economy. I could not agree more.

REFERENCE

Health Effects Institute. 2018. *Burden of Disease Attributable to Major Air Pollution Sources in India*. <https://www.healtheffects.org/publication/gbd-air-pollution-india>.