Alternative Futures : India Unshackled Edited by Ashish Kothari and K. J. Joy

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The book could not have been written at a more appropriate time. It is a timely contribution to enrich our understanding of what it takes to not be depressed about the state of the planet, and our world, but to find ways to work for a future of harmony with each other and nature. Students, regulators, journalists, judiciary, civil society, corporate sector, philanthropists and just about anyone who wishes to influence positive change for the present and future will find this book an invaluable read.

At a time when the world is undergoing unprecedented political turmoil, when marginalization, discrimination and violence is being normalised, when fundamental freedoms of human rights and environmental activists are being substantially compromised, and political leadership in country after country and region after region is proposing policies of intolerance, this book emerges as a silver lining in a dark political cloud hanging over our lives. This is a book that seeds hope and shows us how there is a way out to make this world a better place!

Working around broad themes, the book collects views of people who have worked tirelessly on alternatives over decades. The writing is easy, as it comes from the heart and the lived experiences of the writers. Eye catching and beautiful illustrations, aptly chosen for each of the themes, make reading of this to me pleasant. I did get lost, like a little child, looking at these illustrations. Bindia's illustrations, are particularly illuminating, and one wishes more of her distinctive art style would cheer us up, especially now.

This book is crafted with essays that use no complex language. Each essay has a summary that helps one decide what to expect, and so invest one's time with prudence, and to great satisfaction. The essays aren't too long, making reading tiring, nor too brief,

suffocating the writer from expressing with clarity. Each essay also has some concluding points which guide the reader on pathways of solutions; not in any didactic manner, but inspiring one to employ one's imagination and agency to deal with the challenge at hand. There is clarity, and no uncertainty in what is said.

When one looks up from reading this book, one is empowered with a useful lens to look at what's going on in his/her neighbourhood/village/city, and assists in how s/he might want to respond. I say this because often we are consumed by a problem, or problems, that capture our attentions that we fail to focus on possible solutions. The book helps us leave a disorienting and disempowering space and enter one where one does not feel defenceless in dealing with the complex challenges of our times. We are pushed out of a cynical space. Urban Setu in Dahanu Taluka, Mendha Lekha, Deccan Development Society, Dharani initiative of Timbaktu, the question of Bengaluru Lakes, SRI method of cultivation and several other initiatives propel the reader to get engaged in positive reform, and with sound alternatives to boot.

Systemic governance challenges are addressed as well: that of land degradation, erosion of seed sovereignty, encroachment of commons, pollution of rivers, lakes and out air, challenges of local governance. They need deeper enquiry, and that is missing in the book. In the urgency to present, even illustrate, utopic futures, and that from prevailing dystopias, this is not sufficiently explored. Distressing environmental catastrophic events that India has suffered aplenty, such as the criminal leak of poisonous gas in Bhopal, the contamination of Plachimada's ground waters, mercury poisoning in Kodaikanal, the damming of the

Narmada, the systematic despoliation of the mighty Ganges, the recklessness of urbanization, all need to be critically examined, and exhaustively deconstructed so the construction of a future is guided with care not to repeat the mistakes of the present.

Imagining utopias is essential. And some essays do that. This helps the next generation to figure out how to push beyond the imaginations of the future from the understandings of the present. Some of these exercises in imagination are imaginative and extremely well articulated, even leaving one with the feeling of living that now. But some don't – they stop short, fearing imagination and argument against the present.

The book seems simple at first glance. But do give it a detailed reading. And slowly the book will ooze out a range of positive and thought provoking ideas, and put one in an intriguing place.

A few major takeaways :

Kartik Shankar and colleagues argue "The power to produce certain forms of knowledge gives selected actors the power to govern in specific ways. We hope to see in future a democratic production of knowledge in which more forms of knowledge are included enabling what Vishwanathan (2005) has called 'cognitive justice'. This will ensure more equitable conservation governance than is currently the case" This reminds one of the rich ethnobotanical knowledge that constitutes traditional farming in India and of the extraordinary knowledge of tribal communities' of their ecological landscapes, and raises crucial questions how to protect and conserve these knowledge systems and of natural resources that they help shelter from prevailing extractive forms of development.

Discussing Pastoral futures, Ilse Kohler and Hanwant Singh Rathore in their vision for 2047 discuss Livestock Keepers Revolution, in which the livestock keepers have become empowered through education and organisational strengthening and are adept at managing the country's livestock wealth healing the pastures. They draw attention to many international and national efforts empowering pastoralists, and examine how we can turn away from prevailing conditions when commons are under attack eroding pastoralism itself. It leaves the reader with questions how to organize pastoralists now, mobilize them and ensure their livelihoods are secured, how selling meat, milk and wool craft gets better and fair price. How does one ensure they can lobby powers that be and demand their right to exist and prosper is secured.

Uzramma closely examines the state of cotton grow-

ers and the handloom sector, and draws our attention to the fact that India still retains one of the largest scales of craft production. The essay has beautifully woven accounts of the nature of the handicraft form, which uses hardly any resource but demonstrative of great ingenuity: "the artisan is naturally frugal; it is part of artisanal respect for and relation to nature". She also throws light on the syncretic folk philosophy, of how Kabir's verses often referred to earthen pots and woven threads resonating with a diverse continent. As one travels across India and pays close attention to the different kinds of textiles, the yarns, the embroidery and other craft works that are typical of each region, one realizes the delicate fabrics and products are interwoven with the lives, livelihoods and futures of the craftspeople. . It reminded me of the range of embroidery of the Kutch region: Suf, Khaarek, and Paako, Rabari, Garasia Jat and Mutava, each with its own distinct style, using the needle, thread, pattern, mirror, beads, etc. and each style emerging from a different community.

It is all so fascinating how the womenfolk of the Rabari community, who are essentially cattle breeders and embroiderers, craft with joy that also build the economy. There are various villages across the Kutch region famous for their exquisite Kutchi embroidery with appliqué work, as well as Kutch embroidery on leather. Uzramma argues for a law that will protect artisan's rights to collect raw materials from forests, and at once also allows them to prosper with their craft. She bemoans how prevailing policies destroy the landscapes that support such rich tradition - bamboos given away to paper mills almost free, local craft based communities are not allowed to touch the bamboo or it is rationed to them. There are many other interesting vignettes Uzramma narrates, such as the one on Indigo - how it is fermented; the story of Guruppa Chetty; the Kalamkari artist's childhood and how they got a little pocket money from indigo dyers!

Discussing *Industry, Workers and Nation*, Dunu Roy describes the Assembly line that gave birth to the Human Relations discipline, and the emergence of automation. This, he argues, has resulted in prevailing outsourcing and contractual arrangements. He details how many formal, informal and 'illegal' workers' protests across the country, to secure rights and access justice, are slighted by such industrial models that extract to reward a few and punish most others. It takes the reader back in history to the days when many of our cities and towns were witness to rallies and protests organized by the public sector trade unions, watching workers take out a protest march

every now and then shouting slogans; and makes us wonder whatever happened to such a spirit of asserting rights and claims for fair distribution of wealth. Where are such protests today? It sure is an essay that disturbs settled notions of our understanding of labour, and on the basis of empirical evidence challenges the reader to examine prevailing growth models with great criticality. To put it in Dunu's words, it is about being "part of the politics of a politics of challenging and changing the structures of exploitation, inequality and injustice that are deeply rooted in contemporary capitalist society"

Dare to Dream, the essay by Parameswaran, is thoroughly enjoyable. An interesting line from this essay: "Our Panchayat is freed from alcoholism. It is not total abandoning but tempered consumption". This essay is not about utopia, but of securing the possibility of simple living with high thinking. It helps reorganize our thoughts on the socio economic, ecological and cultural dimensions of a city/village/neighbourhood, and make them work without worrying about limits. The ideas from this essay are exactly what our planners need now to aid in redesigning our cluttered cities, towns and neighbourhoods. It provides all the right ingredients to make a perfect dream come true.

Rajni Bakshi's essay entitled *Future Bazar in India* begins and ends with reference to the kulfiwala in Shivaji park, Mumbai. The kulfiwala's business model: a limited quantity of resources, no branding, affordable pricing, and devoted customers, and without any ambition of scaling up, is the story of thousands of self-employed across India. The essay touches on various aspects of the bazaar: those socially anchored all the way to the impersonal capitalist Markets. It discusses the implications of organizing a bazar justly to local agriculture, food chains and trading. The essay concludes with the need to materially reward and socially honour those who celebrate sufficiency, and make their living intricately linked to the common good. This is a very rewarding read, particularly to those who love shopping and eating off the street, making friends with street vendors and small enterprises, and thus enjoy living in a community sense – a world that is being quickly obliterated in many urban areas.

Sujit Patwardhan in the essay on *Alternative Transportation in Future India* discusses many examples from across the world, and also in India, of how to make travel and transport work without costing us the earth. The cycle rickshaw eco cab of Fazilka is a great example that can be easily adopted in every one of our cities and townsm if we are really keen on

cutting carbon emissions and making our cities friendly to non motorized transport.

The essay on *The Future of Languages in India*, by G. N. Devy, captures how the many languages of the subcontinent have disappeared and how this is linked to the threats there are to traditional and indigenous communities and their knowledge systems. He discusses the implications of how human societies can get reduced to digital identities. At a time when women self-help groups and farmers in tribal areas are using smart phones and tabs to capture their meetings, upload information, videos, voice recordings and more, in responding to the demands of development interventions guided by funding agencies, a model that government portals want to upscale, the dangers latent to such methods is alerted to us in Devy's writing. It is worrying how easily we seem to shovel so many to fall between the cracks of accessing 'development' and securing the right to live justly and with sovereignty of language and culture. Is technology causing distance and dividing us more, erasing memories and culture, is a crucial question that emerges from this essay.

Pallav Das explains in *Power and Violence* how India's Future is determined by its energy policies. Quoting Dahl's idea of Power "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" he paraphrases Dahl to assess the Future of Power as "A would exercise no Power over B in pursuit of any task and vice versa, yet the two would form a relationship of equality, reciprocity and sharing where all the necessary tasks of their lives get done under rubric of mutual care". Such unpacking of assumptions is fundamental to our learning as a society if we are to address Power and its latent Violence, and ensure energy is empowering and not violent and disempowering.

Aruna Roy and colleagues from MKSS take the reader through the journey that resulted in the Right to Information Act, onward to MNREGA and then to securing the Forest Rights Act. The essay opens with: "Given the fact that democracy reflects complexity, dreams of the future are bound to be hazy, untidy and unfinished; the wonder lies in its ability to serve as a platform of our collective conscience". It leaves one wondering if we have secured gains from the freedom movement, and of ensuring "collective interest" and "collective thought" being fundamental to our democratic futures.

Khindri and Biswas articulate the problems of the current education system in the essay *Future of Learning in Indian Schools*. A line that resonated with me

was “ During the first forty years after independence, large public sector undertakings and comparatively inclusive townships provided a space where in children (and Families) from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds lived side by side and this provided an environment rich in diversity in settlements as well as learning spaces. That has also shrunk drastically and almost evaporated today” Growing up in cosmopolitan towns and cities which were essentially a hub of the Public sector undertakings that caused cosmopolitan living, children grew up learning multiple languages -Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and also developed a taste for the varied cuisines. All this helped build syncretic traditions. But today living in Metros has become increasingly and experience of being gated. This essay draws us to take a critical look at how our schools are adjusting to this

new reality, instead of aiding students with skills to challenge the status quo.

In offering their concluding perspectives, Shrishtee Bajpai and Sarita Bhagat discuss how the authors came together for a dialogue. The motive behind the book, we are told, is to enable a cross fertilization of ideas, as in nature. The narrative of these discussions has been captured so well, that one gets the feeling one was there!

The last of the essays, *Looking back into the future : India, South Asia, and the world in 2100* : leaves the reader spellbound, may be even teary eyed. Yes it's possible that this is the positive world one will leave behind for the future generations! This essay is like one has the agency to construct facts into the Utopian world we are all egging to imagine, so we head in the right direction from here on!