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EDITORIAL

Ecology, Economy and Society–the INSEE Journal

Kanchan Chopra*

As the Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE) launches the journal *Ecology, Economy and Society,* my mind goes back to a workshop on 'interdisciplinarity' it organized in 2001. Speakers concentrated on 'the divide between the natural and the social sciences' and 'the bigger divide within the social sciences'. In the years since then, one wonders whether the two divides have been widened or reduced. Undoubtedly, a great deal has been added to the understanding and literature on environmental issues. However, this has happened in many diverse ways—so diverse, indeed, that one can identify several 'academic worlds', each laying a claim to being the 'most appropriate' way of bridging the two divides referred to above. Each of these academic worlds speaks to different aspects of the same issues and in different ways. Some even attempt to craft a 'common language' which could bridge the divide, both within and across the two sets of disciplines.

Studies focusing on the 'environmentalism of the poor' adopt a political and social ecology perspective and are connected by a focus on equity. The study of environmental justice movements in Latin America and other parts of the developing world proves amply that the distribution of benefits from resource extraction and use is skewed. Justice and equity as the keystones of development are indeed a powerful metaphor to depend on. One cannot, however, help wonder: 'How important is the environmental inequity in the landscape of multiple and overlapping disparities in South Asia or, indeed, in the developing world?' And can that be the only overwhelming reason to look at ecology and society?

* Coordinating Editor (2017–18). Former Director and Professor, Institute of Economic Growth, University Enclave, North Campus, Delhi 110007; choprakanchan14@gmail.com

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The understanding of natural scientists begins from another vantage point. They maintain that an overshoot in the use of the earth's resources has occurred in several areas where our planet has crossed the 'safe operating space for humanity'. They focus on physical boundaries crossed at the global level. Ecologists, geographers, and natural scientists have developed methodologies to examine these. Ecological footprint studies, geographic information systems (GIS) using satellite-generated data, and vegetative index studies help us to see how our forests, wetlands, and cities are changing. These constitute another strand of work, and another methodology for looking at linkages between ecology, the environment, and society. But individual nations and governments need to understand what this means for them. Which are the ecosystems that a nation needs to protect? As developing South Asian countries, where have we crossed the limits of irreversibility?

And then there is 'environmental economics'—which, in a sense, looms large in its attempt to explain environmental issues and influence policy. Using the powerful quantitative techniques and metaphors of its mother science 'economics', it has evolved at a phenomenal rate in the past few decades. It uses the tools of mathematical modelling and econometrics in intellectually seductive ways. With modelling as a common tool, it has found ways to develop interdisciplinarity with inputs from the natural sciences. Other social sciences, meanwhile, question the basic paradigm of 'homo economicus', on which a number of its results are contingent.

Parallelly, 'ecological economics' in its pristine form sees biophysical processes as of the essence, and takes on mainstream economics, but not in a decidedly successful manner yet. It views economic systems as parts of a larger ecosystem, which it conceives of as the sum total of the physical world and as governed by the laws of thermodynamics. But missing from this approach is human behaviour and its levers, as also the inequity in distribution of power and wealth.

With evolutionary biology and the learning from non-human species stepping in, lessons on the drivers of human behaviour emerge. A very compelling related development looks at economic and ecological systems as 'complex adaptive systems'. In economics as well as in nature, individual agents interact with each other through competition, exploitation, and cooperation. Mathematics is sometimes used as a tool to analyse outcomes, with concepts such as thresholds, tipping points, and resilience providing depth to the analysis. These built bridges of a kind more academic than policy-enlightening. From the perspective of political science and sociology, scholars attempting to study communities, and how they manage their resources, initiated the literature on the links with diverse institutions

governing behaviour. These constitute another reaching out within the social sciences, leading to the understanding that institutional economics is indeed the economics relevant for the environment.

This new journal, in its invited and contributed sections, aims to highlight and provide examples of each of these diverse approaches to the study of the links between ecology, economy, and society. We choose to do so by attempting to publish, in each issue, representative papers and contributions belonging to as many of the genres mentioned above as possible. It is hoped that the community of scholars working on the environment will read and ponder over alternative ways of looking at the issues they study. This will constitute one small step towards bringing about a more pluralistic understanding of the challenges that our planet earth faces in the twenty-first century and, perhaps the ways we can confront these challenges.