

Environmental Politics – The Theoretical Perspectives

BHAVANA TRIVEDI

Associate Professor

Department of Political Science,

Arya Mahila P.G. College, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi (U.P.) India

ABSTRACT

Environmental issues and intimidation have posed serious challenges before the policy makers, administrators, human rights experts, scientists and social scientists. Today environmental politics is the most relevant and significant area of debate, discussion, dialogue, interdisciplinary research and analysis. The present paper analyses the broad areas related to the theoretical aspects of environmental politics. An attempt has been made here to define 'Environment' in environmental politics. The relationship between politics and environmental studies, political system and environmental politics, amalgamating environmental science and politics, debates in political ecology, environmentalism and environmental thought and theory have also been discussed in the present paper.

Key Words : Environmental politics, Dialogue, Debate, Political system

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between human society and the natural world draws chief concern of environmental politics. Environmental politics does analytical study in its academic field by focusing on three key areas-environment related ideas and political theories, environmental stand points of both political parties and environmental social movements and the analysis of public policy framing and its implementation which affects the environment at various levels. The attitude, behaviour pattern and role of political and administrative machinery in this direction in any country are significant in identifying and resolving problems and challenges of environment from local to global level.

The Changing Perspectives of Environmental Politics :

Today environmental politics has covered a large area related to survival of human life and sustenance of entire eco-system. Though it begun with the issues of pollution, challenges of increasing population and its impact on natural resources, sustainable development and environmental conservation but, over the years, it added more issues like climate change, extinction of species, global warming, e-wastes, depletion of the ozone layer, waste management, renewable energy sources and so on. The concept of environmental security and justice became the prime concern in environmental politics today.

Many of the researches have shown that the issue of environment was not focused before 1960s. The concept of modern environmentalism started in United States of America. The studies

conducted by modern ecologists and environmentalists pointed out that the industrial development and irresponsible behaviour of human beings affected badly the biophysical environment of the earth. The book 'Silent Spring' written by Rachel Carson, which was published in 1962, awakened the people regarding dangerous effects of pesticides and increasing danger to the lives of all flora and fauna due to the ecological harm (Dryzek, 2013:5).

For the protection and conservation of environment and ecology, efforts have been made at each level of government- state, national and international level. The Stockholm Conference, on the Human Environment in 1972 was a major inaugural step in this direction (Richard, 2012:221).

In the vast literature available on the subject, environment usually commences with unfolding environmental challenges and issues. The most significant thing here is the meaning of the term environment.

Maiti, a scholar on this subject, defines environment and says that the concept of environment was not existed before 1960s. But, before this period the concern for depleting natural resources, pollution and open space was seen and this may be understood as environment and the problems related to it (Maiti 2018:7).

The term environment is derived from 'Environia', a French word that means surround. Environment is connected to both non-living and living. In social sciences, the concept of ecology has been hired from Biology, a subject of science. In the discipline of social sciences this term is studied as the connectedness between human being and environment and ecology (<http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/environment/meaning-definition-and-components-of-environment/6157>).

Many studies have revealed that the concept of free-market economy and pluralist democracy have been championed by environmental thinkers. They criticized capitalist model of development which has the problems of bureaucratic and authoritarian rule.

Relationship between Politics and Environmental Studies :

The relationship between politics and environmental studies can be explained in many ways. Environmental Studies are studied as apart of natural science. It is empirical in nature and approaches. It is studied to know and understand the problems of environment and ecology and to search the appropriate possible remedial measures of these challenges and problems. Thus, it provides the content and knowledge to environmental policies and programmes which are framed and executed by the governments. In this way, it is connected to the environmental politics. Many studies pointed out that the most significant concepts of political science such as security, justice and citizenship relate to the study of environment as environmental justice, environmental security and the role of citizens in protection of environment.

In Environmental Studies, 'Politics' is central and it is an essential part of the Environmental Studies. According to Doyle and Walker, 'Environmental study is elemental in the comprehensive sense. The existence of human beings depends totally upon the ongoing availability of inputs like water, air, foodstuffs and other resources from the natural environment. Without ecology there can be no economy and no society' (Timothy, 2016:20).

The inseparable relationship between 'human beings' and 'natural resources' has been the central theme in the descriptions of Leftwich, another known writer on this subject. Leftwich asserted in his writings, that to ensure distribution of resources to human beings on democratic basis is the prime objective of politics. In this regard, if we see the history of mankind, we find conflicts generated, resolution of conflicts and co-operation, has been the chief consideration in the

politics (Bloomfield, 2014: 263).

Thus, it is evident that in environmental politics, the close relationship between human beings and non-humans has been described in detail and both politics and environmental studies are closely connected with each other in many ways.

The significance and scope of environmental politics has increased over the years. Here are two important journals namely- Environmental Politics (established in 1992) and Global Environmental Politics (established in 2000) on this topic. One more example may be added here in support of their inseparable relationship. The concept of representative democracy is based on the principles of social equality, non-violence and social justice. Today, these concepts have inspired ecological experts and green activists to build concepts and theories in environmental arena. Environmental politics has promoted academic studies and research in theoretical perspectives as green political theory, encouraged analytical studies on the role of political parties, social environmental movements and governmental policies of different countries. It has also added empirical researches in the areas of people's participation and role of civil society in environmental protection and conservation (Timothy, 2016: 22).

Environmental Politics in Different Political Systems :

The inside factors of political system like (patterns of structures legislative, executive, judiciary and bureaucracy etc.) and outside factors (like political parties, public opinion, leadership, pressure groups etc.) of any political system deeply affect the effectiveness of environmental politics. As Doyal and Simpson describe it as liberal, democratic, authoritarian and hybrid systems (Muller, 1998:145). They opined that while adopting an integral approach, in the study and analysis of environmental politics, these political system should be taken into consideration because the nature of political system, the degree of control and freedom given by the state, affects the environmental problems and its politicization. So, it is essential to know the pattern of relationship between the government and its people to recognize and understand environmental politics.

Further, the central theme of politics is 'power', which plays a significant role in the study of environmental conflicts, conflict resolution and overall in the study of environmental politics. It is the 'power', which works both sides in the destruction and damage of the environment and in providing environmental safety and security. The state has legitimate sovereignty, so, the policies to protect and conserve environment are framed and executed by the state. The state also ensures the effective implementation of environmental policies on the basis of power.

In this discourse, as pointed out by many scholars on the subject, that use of the term power, analysis of power and the question of legitimacy is debatable from local to global. It is noticeable that power is used in regulation and in opposition as well (Elliott, 2004:158).

It is also interesting to see here the use of 'power' in different contexts by diverse groups at global level, such as- The 'power' is used in regulation by United Nation's Environmental Programme, environmental activists working at global level use power to raise their voice and the governments of different countries use 'power' either to give consent to international agreements and protocols or to disobey these.

In a nutshell, it may be said that in this context too, politics and environment are inseparable from each other. So, to make a comprehensive understanding of the subject, the multidimensional connectedness between politics and environmental studies need to be carefully studied and analysed.

Timothy Doyle, Doug McEachern and Sherilyn Macgregor in their book, 'Environment and Politics', pointed out that the main theme of environmental politics is- environmental security,

environmental justice and environmental citizenship. All these concepts have sufficient subject matter for empirical research and complete theoretical studies.

The Concept of Environmental Security :

The concept of Environmental Security has become significant today worldwide. The issue of biological and ecological security of the earth planet has drawn the attention of political leaders, social activists, policy makers, researcher and overall world community. In this direction, greening of earth, climate change, demilitarization, security of food, shelter and water, biodiversity and sustainable development etc. are utmost important which need to be tackled with sensitivity and sincerity. It is relevant to mention here the opinion of Sir David King, Chief Scientific Advisor, Britain, as he said, in comparison to international terrorism, climate change is a much more serious threat to the world (Timothy, 2016:38).

The issue of environmental security was mentioned in detail in the Brundtland Report and proceeded in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 at the first Earth Summit.

The Concept of Environmental Justice :

The concept of environmental justice connotes the idea of distribution and availability of life sustaining resources to all on equitable basis. It adopts a humanitarian approach as described by Simon Dresner (2008).

In the debates and discussions of the providing life sustaining and livelihood resources to the people of third world countries, the issue of environmental justice has been a focal point. It is seen in various studies that in developing countries, the wealth of natural resources have been excessively possessed and used by propertied class and big corporates. In these countries, a large section of population is struggling for their basic needs like food, water, and shelter. In this connection, to cater the needs of the poor people of the world, the UNO, in 2015, has also recognized and resolved its pledge to work for environmental sustainability, education, health and gender equality and empowerment (Curtis, 1998:26).

The Concept of Environmental Citizenship :

Environmental Citizenship has become one of the key areas of Environmental politics. Many of the theorists have emphasized that merely political arrangement is not the absolute answer to ecological crisis. The citizen's participation and responsibility towards this issue is also vital for sustaining the earth.

This concept asserts that the strategies to address the problems of climate change and environmental degradation should not exclude the partaking and participation of people. The environmental experts and ecologists emphasized the essentiality of environment centric approach of the people.

Now it is evident in above description of environmental studies and environmental politics, that both the disciplines are wide, interdisciplinary and relevant today.

Debates in Political Ecology :

It is essential to mention here the important debates and discussions in the area of environmental politics. This will be helpful to develop a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

The debates on 'Political Ecology' include the diverse approaches propounded by many scholars. It centers around the meaning of 'ecology' in the concept of 'political ecology', socio-economic

and political surroundings, environmental challenges and management etc., as discussed by Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) Bryant (1992), Greenberg and Park (1994), Zimmerer (2000). In 'Political Ecology' concerns have been made for both ecology and political economy. Atkinson appropriately writes that, 'Political Ecology may be studied in both ways. It may be seen as a theoretical concept and also as a social movement namely – ecological movement or green movement' (Spaargaren, 2012:41).

Further, Bruce Martin Russenttin in his book entitled, 'A Study in Political Ecology' highlighted the impact of socio-physical environment on political systems. To quote him, "As Ecology is defined as the relation of organisms or groups of organisms to their environment, I have attempted to explore some of the relations between political systems and their social and physical environment" (Forsyth, 2009:11).

Marxism asserts on rights of proletariat class and social justice in capitalist societies. Similarly, the concept of political ecology, as defined by many theorists, advocates the distribution, based on equity, of rights and resources.

Defining debates on 'Political Ecology' and 'Environmental Politics', Bryant and Bailey said that, political ecology focuses on interactions between the actors of the state and non-state. It also elaborates the physical environment of political systems. While, in the discussion on the environmental politics, it is seen that the role of the state is debated.

'Political Ecology', this term was initially used in later decade of 1960s and proceeded in early 1970s in the writings of Russett (1967), Wolf (1972), Miller (1978), Cockburn and Ridgeway (1979). During the earlier decades, the focusing area of discussion was the effect of human' activity on biophysical environment and man-environment relationship on the whole (Devall, 1985:76).

In the writings of Watts (1983), Blaikie (1985), Bunker (1985), Hecht and Cockburn (1989) and Escobar (1995), the emphasis was on social justice, global environmental conflicts and environmental struggles of developing nations (Knoefel, 2011:57).

The anthropological approach discussed by Conklin (1954), Geertz (1963) and Rappaport (1968) described that political ecology is considered as a part of cultural ecology in developing countries. A renowned cultural ecologist, Robert Netting also emphasized the important impact of cultural values on political systems and on measures to address environmental challenges.

Batterbury and Bebbington (1999), pointed out the difference between political and cultural ecology and explained that whereas political ecology is associated with political reasons for environmental change and deterioration, cultural ecology, emphasizes cultural values and practices of the respective society in environmental management (Forsyth, 2009:21).

The thinkers like Peet and Watts (1996) delineated that developing countries are much concerned with political ecology as the people of these countries believe that injustice and exploitation of poor people and natural resources are common feature here.

The historical approach of political ecology asserts that environmental politics can be seen separated from the environmental science. The thinkers List and Rittberger also supported this view.

To sum up, it may be said that the term 'political ecology' is vague and has been used by different thinkers in diverse ways. But it keeps a significant place in the debates on environmental politics and ecology.

Environmentalism :

The theory and movement of environmentalism aimed to establish environmental safety, security

and quality through a change in behaviour of individuals and by adopting policies and strategies in political, social and economic organizations towards environmental sustainability. This concept views that controlling of pollution, restoration and preservation of environment is imperative for socio-cultural development of society (www.merriam-webster.com).

The growth of excessive industrialization, population, lack of environmental consciousness and sustainable development and increasing adverse effect of pollution on human life and health are the main causes for the emergence and growth of environmentalism in modern era (Guha, 2014:11).

As mentioned earlier, the well-known book 'Silent Spring' by Carson (1962) had made revolutionary impact on the activities and movements conducted in 60s and 70s. In many ways, the decade of 70s became the period of systematic beginning of laws, policies, discussions, agreements and movements in environmental area. The movement for environmental protection was further strengthened by the writings such as - 'The Population Bomb' (1968), by Paul Ehrlich and 'Built Momentum for the Movement' (2000) by Pearce etc. The increasing pollution of air, water and deforestation also inspired environmental activists to raise their voices collectively and pledge themselves to this cause. The subsequent decades of 80s and 90s were committed to upgrade, modify and to bring new arrangements and regulations for environmental protection. Further, since the mid-nineties, the ecological modernization theory stress to build a blend of traditional and eco-centric paradigms. In other words, it advocated modernization with ecological rationality. The names of theorists like Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause may be taken in this context.

The scholars Egri and Pinfield, while describing the relationship between environment, society and economy pointed out that welfare of people is dependent upon economic growth and this growth proceeds through exploiting natural resources. In this paradigm, production and economic growth have been given main importance.

The radical environmentalism and reform environmentalism present different viewpoints in this matter. Radical environmentalism gives prime value to nature and emphasizes the dependency of human's socio-economic need on larger ecosystems. Many thoughts and theories like Neo-Marxist, Deep ecologists etc. are associated with radical environmentalism.

Reform environmentalism believes in greening of earth for the survival of mankind. This theory is derived from many theoretical sources which emphasizes the interconnectedness between environment and economy. .

In the environmental discourse, many ideas related to environment have been incorporated. Different scholars on the subject have shared different viewpoints. Some scholars view the valuable role of governmental and bureaucratic structures in resolving environmental problems while others have emphasized political philosophies that are related to environmental themes. Similarly, for some scholars, the policies of the governments are focal points of debates and discussions.

The postmodernism views that 'nature' and wilderness are social constructions and are context oriented (Bennett and Chaloupka, 1993). The cultural values of the society affect the environmental values (Cronon, 1995 and Soper, 1995). These scholars while giving their arguments in this connection also give importance to 'nature'. They emphasized that this should be kept in mind that 'nature' is not a sub-category of culture.

Environmental Thought and Theory :

There are two main approaches related to the study of environment, namely-anthropocentric also known as "human-centered" approach and biocentric, known as "life-centered" approaches.

This is also known as “technocentrism” versus “ecocentrism” approaches. The anthropocentric approach elaborates the negative effects of environmental degradation on human life and health (www.britannica.com/topic/environmentalism).

The anthropocentric approach, as described by the theorists, advocates that the nature is a resource which can be exploited by humans for their interests. In this way, this approach may be seen as the supporter of environmental destruction for the benefit of human beings. In contrary to this, the biocentric approach emphasized to ‘save the nature’ in the interest of all living organism and declares that people are bound ethically to protect and sustain nature. It also explains that all living and non-living organism including human beings of the nature may be seen as one single moral ecological community (Bookchin, 1980:219).

The findings of scientific researches and explorations in 1960s and 70s showed the deteriorating conditions of environment and warned the world for environmental harm. It also helped to develop a deep concern to protect the environment and many experts, activists came forward for the safety of the earth. During this period, international agreements, environmental policies, ecological movements, emergence of green political parties, pressure groups and NGOs became active on this issue (Spaargaren, 2012:190).

The environmental movement started with describing the earth is in danger, this fact was emphasized by the anthropocentric school of thought *i.e.* apocalyptic environmentalism. The famous writings, for example, Rachel Carson’s, ‘Silent Spring’ (1962), Garrett Hardin’s, ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’ (1968), Paul Ehrlich’s, ‘The Population Bomb’ (1968), Donella H. Meadows’, ‘The Limits to Growth’ (1972), and Edward Goldsmith’s, ‘Blueprint for Survival’ (1972) emphasized the greater need to work for the safety and survival of the earth (Guha, 2014:98). Further, Robert Heilbroner in his book, ‘An Inquiry into the Human Prospect’ (1974), and the writing of Julian Simon and Herman Kahn’s, ‘The Resourceful Earth’ (1984), underlined the significance of saving the earth for the welfare of all flora and fauna (Guha, 2014:102).

‘Emancipatory’ environmentalism adopts a holistic approach and inspires to search alternative technologies, recycling of wastes and democratization of socio-economic planning benefitted to all. This approach was promoted by theorists Barry Commoner and Ernst Friedrich Schumacher.

Apart from the above mentioned environmental theories, eco-feminism is also a significant thought related to oppression and discrimination of gender and environment. Eco-feminist scholars have asserted that ‘nature’ ‘women’ both have commonalities in the sense that both have life giving and nurturing capabilities but both are discriminated, exploited and treated as objects by men in patriarchal society. The objective of eco-feminism is to place women in greater role, for a sustainable society based on social equity in real sense.

Eco-feminist thinker Linda Vance advocated to reframe the relationship between women and nature because they have common history of oppression. The writings of Tony Morrison’s novels like ‘The Bluest Eye’ (1970), ‘Sula’ and ‘Beloved’, Françoise d’Eaubonne’s book *Le Féminisme Ou La Mort* (1974), Susan Griffin Merchant’s ‘Women and Nature’ (1980) are significant in development of eco-feminist thought. The eco-feminist authors like Vandana Shiva, Evan Bondi, Maria Miles and so forth notably contributed in eco-feminist debate in modern scientific and value free system (*Gaard:1998:224*).

REFERENCES

Bloomfield, M.J. (2014). *Shame Campaigns and Environmental Justice*, Oxford University Press.

- Bookchin, M. (1980). *Ecology and Revolutionary Thought*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey.
- Curtis, J. (1993). *Challenges of Environmental Security*, Princeton University Press, Australia.
- Devall, B. (1985). Sessions G., *Deep Ecology*, Peregrine Smith Books, Salt Lake City.
- Dryzek, S. John (2013). *The Politics of the Earth (Environmental Discourses)*, Oxford University Press, U.K.
- Elliot, L. (2004). *The Global Politics of the Environment*, Macmillan Books, Basingstoke.
- Elliott, Lorraine (2018). "Environmentalism" www.britannica.com/topic/environmentalism, June 6th, 2018.
- Forsyth Tim (2009). *Critical Political ecology-The Politics of Environmental Science*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Gaard, G. (1998). *Ecological Politics: Eco-feminists and the Greens*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Guha, Ramchandra (2014). *Environmentalism-A Global History*, Penguin Books, Gurgaon.
- Knoefel, Peter (2011). *Environmental Policy Analysis*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Mandal Puja, "Meaning, Definition and Components of Environment" <http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/environment/meaning-definition-and-components-of-environment/6157>
- Muller Rommel, F. (1998). *Explaining the Electoral Success of Green Parties: A Cross National Analysis*, Cambridge University Press, U.K.
- Richard, K. Murton (2012). *Global Politics of Environment*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Spaargaren, Gert, Mol, P.J. and Buttel, H. Frederick (2012). *Environment and Global Modernity*, Sage Studies, U.K.
- Timothy Doyle, Eachern Mc Doug and Macgregar Sherilyn (2016). *Environment & Politics*, Routledge, London & New York.
- www.merriam-webster.com
