

The Politics of Climate Change, Marginalized Groups and Complexities of Environmental Justice

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ABSTRACT

The rapid economic growth and modern industrial development in 21st century has arrived on the blustery winds of accelerating global change in the climatic conditions. The climate change issues due to its trans-boundary nature involves the global leaders to develop the political and diplomatic mechanism to mitigate the challenges of climate change. The continuous decline of environment around the globe poses an inordinate challenge to the sustainable development of world, even more, a serious threat to the survival of living beings, including humans on the planet earth. Although, the impacts and consequences of climate change are global in nature, but it impacted the developing nations more in terms of economic development, high level of poverty and lack of technological advancement. India with second largest population have high risk of environmental degradation especially more precarious impact on the most vulnerable sections of the society including poor or low-income groups, poor farmers, industrial laborers, and tribal communities which are heavily dependent on the nature for their survival. Therefore, this paper will try to analyze and explore the Indian perspectives of environmental justice discourses and practical implications at grassroots levels to ensure the sustainable development. The paper examines developmental policies related to environmental justice, analyzes the political dynamics embedded within them, and addresses the challenges of climate change alongside the evolving complexities of environmental justice discourse in contemporary India.

Key Words : Climate change, Sustainable development, Environmental justice, Economic growth, Marginalized groups

INTRODUCTION

The issue of climate change, manifested as an environmental crisis marked by global warming and the depletion of natural resources, has become a significant concern for both researchers and global leaders. Nation-states, non-state actors, and international advocates engage with one another in ways that shape the articulation of political interests within environmental politics. The excessive and reckless extraction of natural resources, along with an unthinking pursuit of material progress, has not only devastated the environment and climate but also adversely affects human health and biodiversity. The swift expansion of contemporary industrial practices, along with the inequitable distribution

of their advantages and disadvantages, has been intensifying various forms of injustice throughout the policy-making processes both locally and globally. Additionally, the global dynamics surrounding climate change closely resemble traditional power politics, distinctly separating developed countries from developing ones, as well as affluent communities from poorer ones regarding the allocation of burdens and responsibilities related to the environmental crisis on a global scale. Developed nations often point fingers at developing countries for contributing to global warming, while the extravagant use of natural resources by the wealthy ultimately impacts the disadvantaged and marginalized groups within any society.

A large population of world is forced to drink

severely contaminated water and breathe toxic air; acid rain in many developing countries is putting ecosystems and agriculture at great risk. Overfishing in most oceans and degradation of marine environment due to warm water and acidification; and by polluted runoff from continents resulted into the ocean dead zones. Moreover, deforestation and desertification in the most part of world led to the decline and extinction of species; therefore, wildlife is under great threat. Rising global temperature due to climate change exacerbated a very serious threat to agriculture productivity from droughts and floods as well as rise in the sea levels posed immeasurable dangers for poor low-lying regions, countries and habitats (Harris, 2014: 1).

The very disastrous problem of modern development of heavy consumerization and nuclear energy requirements is to identify the appropriate sites for dumping the hazardous and nuclear wastes (Cass, 2012; Adeola, 2002). Despite the fact that these widespread environmental issues have adverse impacts on all forms of life, many marginalized communities around the globe are often overlooked by mainstream environmental movements and are disproportionately affected when it comes to sharing the burdens and advantages related to the environment (Kameri-Mbote and Cullet, 1996: 1). In fact, environmental issues have become highly complex and interconnected, as have political negotiations at regional and global levels. Despite the presence of many national and international treaties, agreements, and cooperative efforts among state and non-state actors to address environmental challenges and their impacts, environmental injustice faced by marginalized communities has received little attention in global environmental politics.

In contemporary debates on environmental protection, Becky Mansfield (2007: 235) states that transnational institutions, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, have become increasingly involved in environmental debates in general and, more specifically, in environmental management. The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) is the intended anchor organization for global environmental governance (Ivanova, 2007). This political and social institutionalization of diverse perspectives in environmental politics, along with the aim of ensuring equal environmental protection for all citizens without discrimination, has led scholars and environmental movement activists to develop a strong interest in both

the practical and theoretical understanding of environmental issues.

The Global Politics of Environment and Sustainable Growth:

These varying levels of environmental change, and the various levels of causality, impact and response, highlight the role of politics at all levels. There are different environmental politics depending on the location, scale or issue being addressed. Walters (2004: 1) in *Encyclopedia of World Environmental History* argues that environmental politics is concerned with the way people organize themselves and structure behavior to protect their interests in the environment. It considers the dynamics of social movements, institutions and government policy-making, and the way these interact". The local environmental problems, for example, water pollution could be addressed at regional level but the global problems like climate change and those who have trans-boundary effects required the interactions of international actors, and institutions to establish a cause effective and equitable global environmental regime. To some extent environmental politics is also very closely associated with traditional notion of power politics and distributions of resource among nations and communities. As very recent work of Paul G. Harris in *Handbook of Global Environmental Politics* defines:

"Global environmental politics is largely about how government policies contribute to environmental and about specifically environmental policies (often environmental regulations) and their effects. It is about how environmental resources and pollution are distributed in society, and the role that power and influence play in that distribution" (Harris, 2013: 4).

While there are number of international negotiations and political agreements to manage the environmental issues and its consequences, but there is also an involvement of political interests and benefits of nations and Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) in formulation and implementation of environmental laws, regulations and policies. There are two levels of inequality; divide among developed and developing nations and prevailing inequalities among communities within nations. The key issue of contradiction in international environmental governance is the sharing of responsibilities and burdens of environmental degradation. According to Baram (1994: 36) and Moyers (1990: 37) MNCs operations in underdeveloped countries involve the use of hazardous

products, the extraction of natural resources, and the spread of toxic substances, all of which pose immediate and long-term health risks to the indigenous people. The most responsible for industrial pollution are the ones with the wealth and power.

Furthermore, Adeola (1994) contends that developing nations in the South are becoming reservoirs of garbage, toxic waste, DDT, and other hazardous products produced in industrialized nations. Annually, approximately 50% of the officially acknowledged volume of exported hazardous waste is channeled to the least developed nations. The number of countries involved in export and import schemes, volumes of trade, and properties of materials involved are often difficult to establish due to the covert and criminal nature of the transactions (Adeola, 1994: 31). In these developing countries, the indigenous people and other poor and marginalized groups bear the brunt of the negative environmental disruption caused by resource extraction. There are several contributing factors to leave the poor and marginalized groups in very vulnerable conditions. Thus, the environmental justice perspective within the domain of environmental politics emerged a very rich and diverse issue at political level and a very dynamic agenda of environmental activists to bring it into the fora of international human rights.

Conceptualizing Environmental Justice:

The concept of environmental justice begins with a basic recognition and understanding that the negative effects of environmental degradation often fall disproportionately on certain groups, communities and populations. The unequal or unjust distribution of environmental hazards calls for collective actions to seek fair distribution of both environmental burdens and environmental benefits. While definitions of environmental justice may vary, they all share one core belief: the burden of environmental hazards should be equally shared regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, formal education, occupation, political power, geographic location, or position in the global economic system (Schlosberg, 2009). Access to justice in environmental law is a worldwide movement dedicated to helping individuals and communities' access legal resources for redressing environmental harms. The evolution of the access to justice movement has culminated in the emergence of the access to justice in environmental law movement.

Despite increased adjudication and regulation to deal with environmental justice issues, political activism by communities at the grassroots level remains one of the most avenues pursued. "The core claim of environmental justice movement is that a variety of burdens (for example, toxic waste sites, polluted air and water, dirty jobs, under enforcement of environmental laws) have fallen disproportionately on low-income persons and communities of colour. A related claim or frequent presumption is that health risks associated with pollution have likewise been borne disproportionately by such persons and communities (Foreman, 1998: 1). Environmental Justice is multifaceted –part racialized environmental populism, part public health anxiety, and part social justice advocacy but it shares much with the larger milieu in which it operates. Its ultimate roots lie in the eternal yearning for more democratic and egalitarian society comprised of livable communities.

Environmental Justice is broader in scope than environmental equity. It refers to those cultural norms values, rules, regulations, behaviors policies, and decisions to support sustainable communities, where people can interact with confidence that their environment is safe, nurturing and productive. Environmental justice is served when people can realize their highest potential, without experiencing the isms. Environmental justice is supported by decent paying and safe jobs, quality schools and recreation; decent housing and adequate health care; democratic decision making and personal empowerment; and communities free of violence, drugs and poverty. These are communities where both cultural and biological diversity are respected and highly revered and where distributed justice prevails (Bunyan Bryant, 1995: 6). Armed with a new lens for viewing environmental injustices, grassroots movements and scholars have worked to document, study, and combat the roots of this social problem. The environmental justice frame has been extended in numerous ways and the concept of environmental justice has spread well beyond the borders of the US to places as diverse as Australia, Canada, Germany, Hungary, India, Western Africa, South Africa, the former Soviet Union, and Mexico (Walker, 2009; Agyeman *et al.*, 2010).

Marginalized Communities and Environmental Justice:

There is a significant connection between the unequal impacts of environmental degradation and the

socio-political, cultural, and economic circumstances of marginalized groups. In this context, marginalized communities refer to populations defined by race and ethnicity, lower-income or impoverished individuals, indigenous populations, economically disadvantaged farmers, industrial workers, and socially marginalized or tribal groups. Generally, these communities have long suffered from social, economic, and political exclusion by more privileged groups, while also relying heavily on natural resources for their livelihoods. Often, they are forced to reside in extremely unsanitary environments and face dire health conditions, with malnutrition being a prevalent issue. Research highlighted in environmental justice literature indicates that minority groups, low-income households, and other disadvantaged populations are disproportionately situated in such adverse conditions.

Most of the time the dumping of hazardous waste has been done in developing countries or in the regions where there is the dominance of marginalized groups or low-income communities (Bullard, 1996). This grim reality is exacerbated by the fact that environmental hazards disproportionately affect poor communities, communities of color and other marginalized communities around the globe (Brehm and Pellow, 20014: 308). Specifically, in all countries throughout the globe, indigenous peoples are systematically excluded from participation in decision making, evicted from their lands, disproportionately exposed to pollution, and restricted from using ecological materials within their territories (Agyeman *et al.*, 2010). Park and Pellow (2011) argue that environmental privileges result from the exercise of economic, political and cultural power that some group enjoy, which enables them exclusive access to coveted environmental amenities.

While marginalized people living in poor rural towns, in inner cities, and on reservations battle polluting industries and intransigent governments, those living in wealthy enclaves enjoy relatively cleaner air, land and water (Pellow, 2013: 311). Activists and journalists have tried to dramatize and legitimize environmental justice as a problem by drawing attention to examples of local environments that have received short shrift from political and economic system. Grassroots environmental activism emerged to sensitize these communities about the violation of their fundamental rights, and about the adverse effects environmental injustice and inequality on their living conditions.

This discriminatory and unequal environmental

treatment for certain community groups intensified the demand for environmental justice to protect their basic human rights. In the beginning, the environmental justice movement started in the United State in 1982 as struggle of Warren County, North Carolina residents against the construction of a polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) landfill in their rural, predominantly African-American community in eastern North Carolina. The environmental justice movement emerged to challenge the unfair distribution of toxic, hazardous and dangerous waste facilities, which were disproportionately located in low-income communities of color (Bullard, 2000). Furthermore, the environmental justice, both as a normative and practical issue, has developed significantly since its humble beginning in the United States of America where the movement evolved as a campaign against the uneven distribution of environmental polluting activities and projects Warren County, North Carolina.

The dumping of hazardous waste and other pollutant substance in the predominating areas in which these marginalized communities reside, have become a very well-known fact across the globe. The issue generated a very strong resistance of environmental activists and indigenous people that started from USA and now has placed in almost every part of world. Despite this issue these groups have to suffer several other environmental consequences produced by capitalistic approach of development. For example, in India the environmental justice problems of these marginalized groups represented by many grassroots mass leaders. The case of *Narmda Bachao Andolan (1985)* and tribal people's resistance to oppose the *Vedanta and POSCO* projects are some of very recent one. The local people also have shown their resistance to protect the nature through so many environmental movements; the *Chipko Movement (1973)* and *Silent Valley Projects (1978)* resistance are some of them; in which common masses participated to protect the environment.

In most of the cases, to pertaining environmental justice remained a big challenge for these groups, since the governments fulfilled the interests of capitalists while these displaced people had to suffered the vulnerable conditions. The *Bhopal gas disaster* in 1984, the site of one of the world's most devastating industrial disaster in which toxic fumes from pesticide manufacturing plant killed at least 6,000 people that have come to be a classic case study for environmental justice in the urban context, which emphasizes right to an environment safe from

pollutants, hazardous waste and other toxins. Moreover, in addition of this approach of environmental justice in Indian or Asian perspective, for rural poor people, Moore (2002: 14) argues “More fundamentally, environmental justice for rural people and their communities has much to do with whether they have and are able to exercise rights to own, access and use the natural resources on which their livelihoods depend, as it does with the quality of the resources themselves”.

Another very vital issue is the immigration of rural poor or minority groups toward the cities in search of livelihoods. These people remained in very unhygienic and very vulnerable climatic conditions; most of them have heavily concentrated in slums areas and do not have access to supply of clean water and good sanitation and health facilities. Moreover, a large number of poor people work as laborers in industries which produced the toxic products. The studies reveal the fact that these people bear the negative brunt of harsh climatic change. The rich or privileged people are able to reduce the adverse effects of climate change.

The rich are able to buy costly health commodities and modern education, while poor populations remain in such an environment which very extremely produced the health risks to their life and posed a great threat to their survival. Another, adverse effect of climate change is on the agriculture production; low yielding and use of pesticides poses the great risk for the poor farmers in rural areas. The drought and floods which are the consequences of climate change and global warming, destroying their croplands and leave them in vulnerable conditions. The rising sea level and its temperature due to global warming adversely affect the life of fishermen and other indigenous communities those are heavily dependent on sea resources. Whole issue of environmental inequality and injustice of these marginalized people is very closely associated with the violation of their fundamental human rights; specifically, the right to livelihoods and human dignity.

Response of Global Environmental Governance

Since the 1980s, when the issues of environment came into the forefront of environmental politics; there have been several efforts by international community to mitigate the challenges through international cooperation and negotiations. *World Wildlife Fund, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Conservation International, and Earth Island Institute* are trans-boundary international

voluntary associations organized across state boundaries that work toward environmental protection at the global level, and make their participation in international environmental policy making processes. Environmental degradation or resources depletion that exacerbates existing global inequalities can tenably and constructively be described as unjust, and international regimes that fail to account for the perspectives and interests of the world’s disadvantaged can invoke the same criticism. The poor or developing countries of global south is contributing very less in climate change rather than countries of global north where living standards of people and consumption patterns contribute per capita more in carbon emissions. The disparities among income groups within all countries, exacerbating the disadvantages of the world’s poor by making them most vulnerable to environmental change toward which they have contributed relatively little (Vanderheiden, 2014: 303).

Such global governance initiatives have encountered some resistance from individual activists, social movements, non-state actors and weak state actors, representing a form of politics from below (Maignuashca, 2003:5). National governments often more responsive to corporate interests; nor are the interests of citizens necessarily adequately represented. The Rio declaration on Environment and Development states; “Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level” (Rio Declaration, 1992). As reflected in the Rio Declaration, national authorities should promote the internalization of environmental costs by taking those actions necessary to ensure that pollutant and users of natural resources bear the full environmental and social costs of their activities (Hunter, 2013 :132).

The *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* also recognizes the environmental inequality, though less explicitly. The 1997 established legally binding reduction obligations for wealthy countries responsible for the overwhelming majority of carbon emitted into the atmosphere. The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People* (UNDRIP 2007) is another example of institutional action. Importantly, the UNDRIP articulates that lands, territories and resources that indigenous people have traditionally owned or occupied are rightfully their property and should be free from hazardous materials. Furthermore, it explicitly states that these territories and land also must not be slated for development by external institutions

without informed consent of the indigenous occupants.

Conclusion:

The discourse on environmental justice is inherently complex; however, enhanced social awareness and robust institutional interventions have the potential to reshape the evolving dynamics of global climate politics. Efforts undertaken by international governmental organizations and related institutions to promote the equitable distribution of environmental costs and benefits frequently fail to adequately incorporate the perspectives of marginalized communities. Furthermore, internal divisions among Northern countries, along with the persistent disparities between developed and developing nations, must be critically examined in order to better understand the institutional shortcomings of contemporary global environmental governance. The unequal distribution of environmental burdens and its disproportionate impact on marginalized and low-income populations, including indigenous and tribal groups, constitute a compelling case of environmental injustice and a violation of fundamental rights. Addressing this pressing issue requires the establishment of binding global environmental legal frameworks that explicitly safeguard the rights of indigenous populations and ensure their enforcement across all political entities and national governments.

Environmental injustice experienced by marginalized communities cannot be understood solely as an environmental issue; rather, it is deeply embedded within the broader social, cultural, economic, and political power structures of the global system. Therefore, the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of environmental justice must be examined within the wider framework of environmental justice discourse. Addressing challenges such as poverty, household food insecurity, and environmental degradation in marginalized regions requires, above all, the empowerment of local communities and the provision of adequate resources to enable their active engagement in resource management. In this context, the significance of localized development initiatives and strengthened systems of local governance must be emphasized. Ensuring equitable and sustainable development necessitates the meaningful participation of these communities in decision-making processes. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for binding international environmental mechanisms capable of guaranteeing equal protection for all communities without discrimination, alongside the equitable distribution of the

benefits derived from natural resources.

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