POLITICS OF ENVIRONMENT: THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT:
Any discussion on the politics of environment should essentially be concerned with the ways in which environment and its relationship with man and development has been looked at. Needless to say, there exists a plurality of perspective on this question. No single pattern of thinking can be said have a monopoly on this aspect. Also, the various political perspectives on environment represent a curious mix of consensus and divergence of viewpoints. Human knowledge on the relationship between man and environment has also grown progressively. For example, till as late 1950’s the dominant thinking was that the environment could be taken for granted. Natural resources were understood to be inexhaustible. Man was free to utilize them indiscriminately and to the hilt without really bothering about their consequences. Not only that, the natural resources were meant to be indiscriminately exploit for the material development of mankind. This perspective pervaded much of the thinking on economic development of any kind, prevalent in the industrialized world. Natural resources were not seen as having a limited availability span, but merely a means through which a materials development for mankind could be achieved. This view has now come to be questioned and repudiated. Environmental fragility and the need for conserving it have now emerged as incontestable facts. Also the environmental indispensability not just for itself but for human survival has been established as a fact of human existence. In other words, protection of the environment is not seen merely as a virtue, it is seen as a necessity. In this article, we shall make an attempt to understand the relationship between environment and development and concentrate on different kinds of political perspectives around the questions of environment.

KEY WORDS: Environment, Global context, Movement, The Debate

I Introduction- Whose Environment?
This may seem like an easy question with an obvious answer, but has many complex dimension to it. The earth as a single ecosystem has provided suitable conditions for the co-existence of a diverse variety of life forms in their respective environments. Humans, because of their incomparable supremacy, have acquired a position of superiority over all other life forms. Can it then be assumed that the environment belongs to human more than others and that they have, or should have, greater access to it, compared to others?

Human societies have organized themselves into nation states. These nation states have been further divided into the advanced industrialized nations and the undeveloped or the developing nations. However, no such formal division of the environment has taken place. But the developed nations, because of their economic and political superiority, have appropriated a much greater share of the natural resources of the earth. It is estimated, for instance, that about 27% of the world population living in developed countries enjoys about 75% of world wealth and
resources. This process has inevitably led to conditions which have created severe environment stress. And the ongoing debate between the developed and the developing nations, as to on whose door lies the major responsibility, is yet to be resolved. It is therefore, also in this context that the question ‘whose environment’ becomes relevant. Moreover, even within the nations states, there are different groups and classes. Among these groups and classes, there is unevenness of access to natural resources, based on economy, politics and strategic location. This can often lead to a situation of conflict. A plan to build a tourist hotel on a piece of land which is reserve area or an area inhabitant by the local tribal people, will raise a similar problem.

It should, therefore be clear that the questions of mans relationship with environment, competition between different nation vis-à-vis resources and its consequences on environment and the conflict between different social groups and strata regarding access to, and utilization of, natural resources increasingly become political. It is a certain kind of politics that can create a situation of conflict, which can only be resolved politically i.e. through political pressure and interventions. Finally, the debate over environment, is above all, a debate over the share and distribution of resources. It is in this sense that the environmental questions is also a political question.

II The Global Context

Any kind of politics related to environment rests on the realization from the 1960’s onwards that the mans physical and biological environment has been undergoing rapid changes. These changes, if unchecked, are capable of bringing about immense human suffering and destruction. Two development have been crucial in this respect;

1. Accelerated technological development sans environmental protection measures all over the world, particularly in the developed countries.
2. Unprecedented rise in the population especially in the developing countries.

It was believed that the two trends were interrelated in so much as they both contributed to the depletion of earths resources and environment degradation. It has been estimated that the depletion of these resources has been taking place at a place which does not provide time for their renewal in the natural cycle thus creating a run down condition. Some of these resources area also not inexhaustible. In addition, the process of exploiting natural wealth industrially can potentially lead to environment disasters. It is essentially this concern that has fed into the global environment movement. The politics of environment draws sustenance from this.

III Phases of Environmental Movement

Globally speaking, there have been two phases of environment concern and politics. The initiative in this direction has been taken by the developed countries mainly the United States of America. The first phase, starting roughly in the 1970’s, was more localized in nature. The environmental issue of local importance only were highlighted with little concern for their larger implications. The environment politics, in its first organized phase, did not succeed in leaving an impact and was dismissed as trendy and transient.

The second phase of coordinated concern for the environment was a lot more successful and attempted to integrate the local issue with the global context. The universality of the environment
issue was also emphasized. In November 1988, the leaders of 30 national environment group met the American President and presented more than 700 recommendations for his consideration for his consideration on environment issues like:

- Global warming
- Destruction of the planet ozone layer
- Loss of tropical rain forests
- Acid rain
- Ocean land and atmospheric pollution.

Unlike the first era of environment awakening, the politics of the second phase displayed a more global conception of environment degradation. It was now emphasized that the ecological ills may have local roots but they create an intricate chain of effects which link different ecosystem and natural orders. For example, gases created by the smoke clouds from the burning of rain forests in Brazil can be carried to the Antarctica region where they can deplete the tropospheric ozone layer. In short, the differences between the environmental concern of the 1970s and the 1980s was that whereas the former tended to have local concerns, the latter was more universal in its perspectives and placed the environmental concern on the global agendas for the first time.

IV The Debate

Whereas there would be consensus of concerns on the questions mentioned, there are many more aspects which offer very different perspectives on the issue of environment. Broadly speaking, at the global level, one can discern three different positions and accompanying concerns.

1. This position can be said to have originated in the third world or the developing countries and it represents some of the apprehensive of these countries on the environmental initiatives of the west. This potation looks upon the general environmental concerns as the conspiracy of the developed countries of trying to prevent the third world countries from developing their economics, by raising the bogey of environment. Briefly, the argument is as follows: the western countries have developed their economies by going through a process of rapid industrialization. They did it by intervening in the environment in a big way and by exploiting the natural resources of the earth to the maximum with the help of advanced technology. Having achieved general prosperity for their population, their priority now is to generate a clean environment, which they can enjoy. Therefore, the question of environment should be taken up only after the developing counties have achieved the same level of production and consumption.

2. The second position is quite close the first in that it also has its roots in the developing countries. It tends to dismiss all talk of environment as a luxury of the rich, whenever they are. According to this position, the preserving of the tiger and the aesthetic, beauty of the nature is a prerogative of the moneyed people and societies which have nothing more than a tourist interest in the environment. The obsession with environment diverts the attention from the problems of the poor. The environment is seen as a non-issue as for as give better deal to the poor is concerned since their problems can only be solved by creating employment. The environmental concern should not, therefore, stand in the way of societies trying to solve their basic problems of hunger and employment.

Voices reflecting this concern had echoed at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in 1972 in Stockholm. Many delegations from the developing countries argued
that the solution to the environment problems lay in economic development. The Brazilian delegation declared smoke to be a sign of progress and not of environment degradation. India’s Prime Minister declared: “Poverty is the biggest polluter”. The general impression by the third world countries was that the west was trying to stretch the environment concerns.

3. The third position, taking roots mainly in the developed countries, attempts to turn the first and the second upside down by considering the poor countries as mainly responsible for the degradation of the environment. This perspective consider the ever growing population responsible for environmental crisis. According to this position, the scare natural resources are put to a severe strain by the growing population in the poor countries. The industrialized west has taken measures to minimize its environmental problems, mainly those of air and water pollution, by the application of advance pollution control technology. But these problem continue to grow in the third world countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The advance counties have succeeded in providing a cleaner atmosphere to their people. At a meeting of the United States in 1982, the minister for environment in the British government declared that all environmental problems in the west had been solved and they remained only in the third world!

V Interpretation

Without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing with any of these perspectives in toto, let us analyze them critically. Needless to say, these are extreme positions and therefore none of them can be credited with convening the whole truth about the environment. Nonetheless all the position have some merit.

The first position, for instance, does contain truth in some measure, in holding the west responsible for many of their problem. The utilization and appropriation of the colonies natural resources for the development of the west during the days of imperialism is reality known to all. But this phenomenon continues even today. The major environmental problems in the third world countries are those related to the misuse of natural resources base like soil, forest and water resources. These problem are created because of the pressure to provide raw materials for the industries. This raw materials is often used for the industries of the west. For instance the Japanese and the western timber industries have been mainly responsible for the forest destruction in southeast Asia. The thick forest in the basin of the river Amason in Latin America are also threatened with extinction at the hands of the Japanese timber companies.

For example, a major drought in Sahel region in west Africa during 1968-74, claiming nearly 10000 livers may have been caused by the French policy to motivate peanut farming in these areas to secure a source of vegetable oils. The west African cultivators were forced to cultivate groundnuts on previously food cultivating lands. Groundnuts cultivation gradually depleted the soil. It also spread to traditionally fallow and forest lands not conducive to groundnut cultivation. This had the effect of upsetting the balance between land for farming and cattle grazing. A further extension of land for groundnuts cultivation also pushed the nomadic tribes from their land into the desert. Thus amount of land providing food and fodder for animals reduced dramatically. This left the tribes of Sahel entirely unprepared for the draughts which killed many men and animals.

The use of ex-colonies for the dispersal of the nuclear waste, by the western countries is yet another example of environment degradation in the third world countries caused by the leading
countries. The nuclear waste from developed nations was brought and dumped in the third world countries who were largely ignorant of their harmful effects. However, it is also true that a phenomenal increase in the world population in the 20th century, caused largely by population explosion in certain pockets of the third world, is quite capable of creating fatal human intervention in the environment. An increase in the human force puts pressure on our environment which may not be able to cope with it. Moreover, the advanced modern technology, which may have been responsible for much of the depletion of our natural resources, can also be employed creatively by minimize the misuse of the environment and to make use of our natural resources. It is in this direction that the west, with access to better technology and resources, can provide their lead. Also, whatever its roots and cause, the threat to the environment and the resultant threat to the human race is real and global. It is the entire earth, not just any specific pockets in it, which is confronted with the threat of extinction. Therefore beyond a point it ceases to be a question of the developed countries verses developing countries and becomes an issue for the entire human race. It is in this sense that the environment politics is truly a global politics which requires a global movement.

VI Conclusion

Thus from the discussion we have learnt that the politics of environment started from the late sixties and culminated into global environmental movement in the seventies and eighties of the 20th century. The movement, initiated mainly in the west, started with local concern but in its second phase acquired a global perspective.

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