

The Politics of Environment: The Approach and the Issues

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Abstract

The environment has added a new dimension to the political analysis in the current world. The environmental degradation and its harsh consequences have led the interests of academics to understand the human-nature relations from a fresh analytical approach namely the environmental approach to provide an intensive idea about the significance of the environmental aspect of any political activity. The human interaction with the nature cannot be a one-way traffic and therefore, every human activity has to correspond with the natural environment. The scarcity and over-exploitation of natural wealth is gradually giving 'environment' an upper hand in the process of this interaction. The politics of environment starts as and when the interaction between human needs and natural adaptability becomes a reciprocal activity. This paper attempts to understand some of the connotations of the environmental approach and the issues confronting human-nature coexistence.

Background

Politics is essentially an interaction between different self-interested entities. Environment as a distinct political entity has been ignored in the broader aspect of political analysis. The political interaction with the nature is indeed a matter of significance although this has not been an integral part of traditional politics. Neil Carter observed, "traditional definitions of politics, both broad and narrow, take it for granted that politics is concerned with the ways in which humans relate to each other." This has resulted in serious ignorance of impact of human activities on the natural environment (Carter 2012). Therefore, the human-nature relations need to be studied seriously within the arena of broader political analysis. The space for environment and human-nature relations in the study of politics has been increasingly taking strong hold in the recent day's politics. The environmental perspective of politics constitutes a new approach to study present day political activities. It encompasses not only the traditional subject matter of politics but also brings the nature into the core of political analysis.

From an environmental perspective, political activity takes place in a planet of finite natural resources. The human exploitation of those finite natural resources leads to the reasonable conclusion that sooner or later economic growth or the human interaction must reach the limits of the Earth's environmental carrying capacity (Arrow et al. 1995; Carter 2004).

The significance of taking environment into the centre of political analysis can be drawn from the nature human activity, development policies, and the risk of human survival in a contrary natural environment. Therefore, environmental consideration is very crucial for understanding a political phenomenon. The current analysis deals with the environmental approach to the politics and also different issues that have been confronting the nature-human interactions.

Labeling 'Environmental'

The politics that can be labeled as 'environmental' covers wide range of subjects of nature-human interactions. This has however been a recent phenomenon in the history of political study although there are various instances of environmental concerns in the political writings in the history. There are countless political issues that can be labeled as 'environmental' within and outside the political study. The effect of mass consumption of the scarce natural resources has been multifaceted. Apart from the depletion of natural resources, losing of bio-diversity, the global warming, ozone depletion, acid rain, and climate change are the environmental issues that have damaged the nature and also complicated the human life. Thus, any human activity that has an effect on the environment and reversely the implications of damaged environment on the human life, can labeled under the term 'environmental'. However, politics of environment starts when there is self-interested motive for special environmental policies and principles.

The effect of human activity and its implications can potentially endanger the human life in different parts of the world. The marine fishing stocks are close to extinction, with cod fisheries completely wiped out in the once abundant fishing banks of Canada's Newfoundland coast and now delicately balanced in the North Sea (Carter 2004). The land covered by tropical rainforests diminished rapidly at 14.2 million hectares per year, or almost 1 percent per year, especially during 1990s (FAO 2000). Water scarcity is acute in many of the poorest parts of the world. Long-term energy supplies are threatened by the steady depletion of non-renewable natural resources, such as oil, coal and gas. Scarcity of usable water, fast depletion of non-renewable resources, soil, water, and air pollution due to changes

in the life styles of the people etc are posing serious threat to the survival of human being. The acute link between human activity and environmental damage has led the way to the environmental approach to the political analysis.

Neil Carter has discussed the significance of the study of the politics from environmental perspective. According to him,

“the environment should not be regarded as a discrete aspect an add-on extra of political analysis. Since the 1960s, growing awareness of the threat posed by environmental problems has generated increasing political interest in the environment and environmental issues. This concern has taken many forms, including: the development of a green political ideology (often called ‘ecologism’); the formation of green parties whose electoral success has enabled them to enter government coalitions in Germany, France, Belgium, Finland and Italy; the emergence of countless environmental pressure groups whose activities range from conventional lobbying of politicians to climbing trees in protest against new development projects; and the creation of environmental ministries and agencies of the state to address these ‘new’ problems. Today all countries, at least rhetorically, are committed to the new policy paradigm of sustainable development, ‘development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ that the environment cannot and should not be treated simply as a separate and distinct sub-discipline; on the contrary, it must be brought to the forefront of what politics is about and henceforth, what political analysis should be concerned with” (Carter 2004).

The growing environmental awareness among the people has led to mould the national and international politics towards creation of norms, principles and policies at the national and international level. He also pointed out the need of a broader space for environment in lager politics. As Neil Carter further observed,

“it is apparent that environmental issues cannot be compartmentalized into a narrow issue area (although, in practice, in most countries the environment is still seen as a single issue with primary policy responsibilities allocated to an environment ministry). On the contrary, policies made in all core economic or commercial policy areas such as, the economy, industry, trade, agriculture, energy, and transport will have major consequences for the environment” (Carter 2004).

Since the policies of other issue areas have tremendous effect on the environment or the human activities in different fields have direct or indirect effect on the environment, the environmental policies cannot be separated from other general policies. The environmental consideration must get an integral part of the any policy making regarding any human activity. There is a third aspect that has also been discussed by Neil Carter as:

“actions in all other policy areas can also have profound implications for the environment. Foreign policy probably provides the most extreme case. The modern warfare is incredibly damaging to the

environment. Most obviously, in addition to the death and maiming of human beings, war destroys basic infrastructure, resulting in damaged sewage systems, leaking fuels and chemical emissions that poison waterways and harm natural habitats. Some of the most visible recent examples include the burning Kuwaiti oil wells during the 1991 Gulf War and the pollution of the Danube from NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999. The chemical and biological weapons are particularly destructive, illustrated by the decimation of habitats when the US troops used napalm in Vietnam, whilst the calamitous consequences of nuclear conflict are almost unimaginable” (Carter 2004).

The international assertion for power by any country involves increase in the weaponries and also their extensive use. War and use of weapons thus have caused serious damage to the environment. Apart from the traditional war, the war caused by natural resources in different parts of the world is also an issue of environmental concern. The conflict over oil, diamonds, forest resources are such significant concern for the politics of environment. The state policies domestic or external for exerting national power engages in damage to the nature in different forms. Thus, environmental issues need international protection norm although having a standard international environmental norm is a challenge to the global society.

Remedial Policies: Needs Attention

Environment protection is undoubtedly the need of hour. This has to be done at two different levels. The international standard of environmental norms can lead to an effective global responsibility and secondly at the domestic level, the individual state policies that can be more effective. The domestic environmental policies can have greatest impact on environmental protection. International standard of environmental norms must carry the international legitimacy. The politics of the developed countries to subjugate the interests of the developing countries in terms of imposing a protocol will not get the international legitimacy. The standard however, needs to be justified from both side of the coin, the requirements of the states and the requirements of the nature. Today, environment has become a central part of international diplomacy. There are around 200 multilateral environmental treaties and agreements, covering various environmental issues (Carter 2004). There are various environmental negotiations that have been taking part in the normal foreign policy of countries and also their bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. However, in the international diplomacy, there is every possibility to mould the interests of developing and underdeveloped countries in the line of bigger players. Thus, every environmental negotiation must carry fairness and legitimacy.

The domestic state laws and policies especially the education policy has to play significant role in creating an eco-friendly attitude among the citizens. The environmental education for example, if provided in the school curriculum at the very primary stage, children will get an idea about current stage of environmental damage and also the prospective remedies to that. The environmental education must get a space at different level of education including formal and informal, primary, secondary and higher, and also streams other than humanities and social sciences. The technical education must also carry similar curriculum of environmental education.

Apart from the education policy the moral responsibility for the healthy co-existence with the environment must be taken up at different levels. Every new drive for development has to comply with capacity of the nature. There is every possibility of sustainable growth and development provided the individual and the state pursue the moral sense of the developmental needs.

The Confronting Issues

There are various issues that have been confronting with the idea of sustainable development and also the protection of the environment. The human-nature interaction or the politics of environment is very much significant in this case. This process of human-nature interaction has always been a one-way traffic. This is possible only because the carelessness of our political activity and disrespect for the nature as well as the future generations.

The aspiration of the states for faster economic growth without taking the environmental capacity into consideration has become a challenge to the notion of environmental sustainability. There are different confronting issues such as the destruction of forest resources, over-exploitation of mineral resources and cleaning of agricultural land for infrastructure development are threatening the human-nature co-existence. The politics of consumption in the modern lifestyle has also been a matter of serious concern in this regard.

However, environmental protection has been getting significance in the state policies in recent times. As the pressure of international agreements, international organizations including international non-governmental organizations, domestic pressure groups, and local demonstration have compelled the concerned states to adopt nature-friendly policies regarding their drive for faster economic development. Anil Agarwal (2012) has rightly observed,

“It looks as if environment is an idea whose time has come. Newspapers give prominent display to environmental horror stories. Editorials demand better management of natural resources. Government statements on the need to preserve the environment are commonplace. Government programmes, too, are quite numerous and increasing in number day by day. There are massive schemes for a forestation, for instance. In the last four years, some 1,000 crores seedlings are said to have been distributed or planted. There are new laws for control of air and water pollution and for the conservation of forests. India has been praised all over the world for what it has done to preserve tigers. Nearly three per cent of India’s giant land mass is now protected national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, and there are demands to strengthen their protection and increase their area. Plan documents and party manifestoes take care to mention the importance of environment” (Agarwal 2012).

The Northeastern region of India, a potential economic hub with enormous deposit of natural resources, has been targeted for boosting economic growth of the country in the recent times. The uneven exploitation of natural resources such as petroleum in Assam, the uranium in Meghalaya, and others are posing serious threat to the environmental sustainability in the region. The growth potentiality of hydro-electricity in the region has led to construct the big dams especially in Arunachal Pradesh which has emerged as contesting issue in the last few years. The demand from various social and environmental organizations to cease the construction work of big dams has been instrumental in forming an anti-big dam movement. The environmental organization such as Aranya Suraksha Samiti has played a significant role in making people aware of the consequences of such unsustainable projects. The role of All Assam Student Union and other students unions in the region and Krishak Mukti Sangarm Samiti are also instrumental in the anti-big dam movement in the region. Apart from the uneven exploitation of natural resources and the construction of big-dams without taking care of its consequences, there are issues in the region that have confronted the idea of environmental protection and sustainability. Among others, the protection of the national sanctuaries and reserve forests, protection of animals including that of one-horned rhinos, the developmental projects in the region which have destroyed the environment in various ways, lack of a proper environmental vision for the region etc. have been posing serious threat to the human-nature co-existence in the region. The environmental protection movement in the region needs to be strengthen for better protection and management of natural resources in the northeastern region in particular and the country in general.

Although, there is a growing consciousness among the all stakeholders of human society for protection of environment and promotion of environment friendly initiatives, there is much to do to achieve human-nature coexistence. In the words of Anil Agarwal, “the post-independence political debate in India has centered on two major issues: equity and growth. The environmental concern has added a third dimension: sustainability. India’s biggest challenge today is to identify and implement a development process that will lead to greater equity, growth and sustainability.” Therefore, our developmental policies have to integrate these three dimensions.

Concluding Remarks

The environmental approach to the politics has brought about a change in the study of a political activity. This new approach has given ‘green’ attire to the politics both at domestic as well as international level. This has led to a broader concept of political activity that includes not only the activity of governments, institutions, political parties, but also conflict and co-operation over the use, production and distribution of resources (Carter 2004). However, environmental sustainability is the core of the idea although, the politics of environment that takes place at various level, international and domestic, stands a clear concern of this perspective.

The requirement for the faster economic growth and its subsequent implications on the environment has been the prime challenge before the current generations. The popular lifestyle that results in the massive increase of mass consumption has been damaging natural environment and its adaptability. The remedial measures have to take place at both levels, local and global, as the consequences of environmental degradation do not understand the territorial boundary of any country. Further, the local actions such arousing mass consciousness, empowering the young generation, educating the children, and mass awareness for protection of natural resources and promotion of environment-friendly atmosphere will have a positive effect on human-nature interaction. Through this multi-level course of action will broaden the scope of studying the politics of environment as well as the environmental approach to the politics.

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