

Evolution of Environmentalism: A Critical Enquiry

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Abstract

The nature of environmental concern is different from time to time. Conservation and preservation were the main agendas of environmental activism in the pre 1960s, latter it shifted to modern environmentalism in nineteen seventies with the emergence of popular concern of this issue. International concern for protecting natural environment had rapidly increased in nineteen sixties on the back ground of the publication of silent spring by Rachel Carson in 1962 and increased sea pollution by oil spill from the tankers. The modern environmentalism become more powerful especially by the end of 20th century.

Keywords: Environmentalism, Modernism, Conservation, Social Movements

Introduction

Before the second half of twentieth century, the environment had a relatively insignificant place in the political agenda. But now it is emerged and expanded in all aspects of life, every day discussions both in academic and daily politics environmental crisis is a hot subject. The awareness about the eco-crisis is the factor behind this type of a global attention to this. The green movements, green theories, greening of political parties etc. are upholding a concept of sustainable development. The one of the major criticism levelled against the existing political theories by green ideology is, they followed an anthropocentric view. Now the environmental issues have had a big impact on day today politics. Environmental politics is a wide ranging subject with three components¹ first is the study of political theories and ideas relating to the environment, second is the examination of political parties and environmental movement, and last is analysis of public policy making and implementation affecting the environment at international, national and local level.

Environmentalism argues for solving of ecological crisis by controlling the human acts through state intervention, in this aspect it argues for a managerial approach towards environment without replacing our current economic and political system. In this respect environmentalism is differ from the ecologism, latter stood for a radical changes in the relations of man and non-human natural world, and a comprehensive restructuring of socio-political and economic life.²While analysing the historical context of the environmental discourses, one thing is very clear that, many of the problem presently we call as environmental issues like land degradation, soil infertility etc. were the subjects of even the times of classical thinkers like Plato, Lucretius etc. Plato in *Critias* wrote about deforestation and soil erosion as the negative side of power.

¹ Neil Carter : Politics of The Environment

² Andrew Dobson: Green Political Thought, 1997

Large scale industrial and scientific revolutions in the modern period accelerated the intensity of environmental degradation and its impacts were global in nature. Neil carter classifies the evolution of environmental issues into three generations according to the nature of issues they were faced.³

First generation environmentalism is based on the principles of preservation and conservation. Protection of wild life and habitats, local pollution, and soil erosion were the main concern of that time. The conservation movement blossomed in United States and United Kingdom in late nineteenth century⁴. George Catlin was first proposed the idea of national parks for conserving the wildlife in early 1830s but the efforts to conserve the America's natural heritage was started in 1870s in state level and it shaped as a national policy in 1891 with the establishment of forest reserve system. The entire history of conservation movement was evolved through mainly three stages, first was in late nineteenth century with an aim to conserve the natural heritage, second time was in the wake of economic recession and New Deal, and the last is the period of nineteen sixties and seventies which is now continuing. Preservatist orientation is more evident in the latter stage than the interest of economic efficiency of the former two stages. (Rickey L. Hendricks)

Nineteen sixties witnessed the larger concern about emergence of second generation environmental issues and the modern environmentalism as its reaction. Through the Popular concern all round the globe, it made environment as a political subject with its own ideology and political movement (jacobs1997:1). Modern environmentalism is differing from the earlier one in two respects. First is modern environmentalism was driven by the idea of global ecological crisis that threatened the very existence of humanity; secondly, it was a political and activist mass movement which demanded a radical transformation in the values and structures of society. Well known eco-disasters like Minamatha mercury poisoning, massive oil spillages, narratives of eco disaster like Rachel Carson's *silent spring* etc brought the issue in to global recognition as a challenge to the humanity. The mass environmental movements which are took place in various parts of the world, raised the criticism against the existing way of development, along with this, a new way of thinking about nature is also developed.

The third generation environmentalism started with the Stockholm Conference of 1972, environment became a global agenda and it took shape of environmental politics by appearing a new political idea and ways to think about environment⁵. One of the impotence of this third generation movements is it emerged as a part of the 'new politics' of New Social Movements (NSM) in 1970s and 80s. The environmentalist bodies which were emerged in early 1970s with a challenge to the political system they embody, they are differing from the traditional movements for protecting the nature, on the organisation, political mobilisation, political representation etc.⁶

Global Environmentalism

With industrial revolution of second half of the eighteenth century and the scientific and technological development of latter centuries, environmental degradation turned to a new era. Emergence of capitalist

³ Neil Carter : Politics of The Environment

⁴ Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Britain, Sierra Club in USA

⁵ Neil Carter: : Politics of The Environment

⁶ Gayil Talshir : The Role of Environmentalism: From the Silent Spring to the Silent Revolution

agricultural production increased its degree of destruction on natural environment primarily because; it was based on not subsistence but on trade, exchange and redistribution etc. As a reaction of this trend Conservation movements emerged in this contest in the nineteenth century in Britain and America. Early environmental students and geographers and geologists⁷ expressed their concern in their studies on the same issue but their writings were remained in literary and academic level not exceeding concrete public actions⁸. Concrete level action was started in the area of environmental policy, only after the environment became focus area of international politics in the second half of the twentieth century. Massive level of exploitation of natural resources like soil degradation and erosion, over fishing in the sea, deforestation, increase in population due to rapid industrialisation, led to the emergence of these problems at a global level.

Increased exploitation of the resources made its impact beyond the boundaries of respective countries, thus an environmental degradation of a relatively local area and related problems transcended its local nature and reached the global level. This necessitated into a situation in which the solving of this problem was only possible at an international level, in this context environment became an agenda in the larger framework of international politics.⁹ Earlier initiatives in this path were much more concerned about the resource management and conservation. The International Treaty in 1889 for protecting flora and 1902 convention for protecting birds were best examples to prove it. These movements were geared towards dual purpose; these two are economic interest and conservation interest. Some of the historical conventions in the world can easily elucidate the above mentioned dual interest. The 1911 convention for the protection of birds was an effort to protect birds which are useful for agriculture. International maritime organisation's (IMO) treaty on marine pollution in 1954 and United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organisation's (FAO) agenda for natural resources were part of the economic interests behind the conservation of natural resources of natural resources at international level.¹⁰ The main guiding spirits behind the formation of the environmental concern at a global level can be attributed to the following causes:

Role of Environmental NGOs

Nongovernmental organisation's participation in the realm of international affairs can trace even in eighteenth century in the areas of international laws concerning various socio political issues. In the twentieth century, they got a prominent role under the framework of League of Nations ,but in the post second world war, they got relatively not much less importance until the 1970 mainly because the newly emerged governments and various agencies were performing the latter functions of NGOs. But at the same time, lack of a UN agency in the area of environment created new opportunities for environmental NGOs, and led to the formation NGOs like International Union for the Protection of Nature in 1948.

⁷ Earlier studies like George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature*, and E. Reclus's *Nouvelle Geographic Universelle*, a 13 volume book.

⁸ Indian institute of ecology and development: Green and environmental movements.

⁹ Owen Greene: *Environmental Issues in Globalisation and World politics*. oxford

¹⁰ Owen Greene: *Environmental Issues in Globalisation and World politics*. oxford

Nineteen seventies and onwards witnessed the emergence of many worldwide reputed environmental NGOs like Greene Pease International and Friends of Earth. UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 witnessed the participation of around 4000 NGOs, Farhana Yamin states about the role played by NGOs in Rio conference “the 1992 Rio Earth Summit marked a watershed in the relationship between governments and NGOs. The preparatory committees for the summit were followed in detail by hundreds of NGOs who contributed to the development of Agenda21, the forest principles and the Rio Declaration, as well as the climate change and biodiversity treaties which were opened for signature at Rio”¹¹ further Owen Greene states that “delegates from organisations such as Greenpeace, World wide Fund, or Friends of the Earth at international meetings were frequently larger and more expert than those of all but the largest states, and through their access to the media and their expertise were able to shape international agendas”¹²

Through various activities and functions of NGOs which are working on national and international level, produced successful impact up on the policy frameworks of the concerned areas. Environmental NGOs like, World Research Institute, World Watch Institute, and International Institute for Sustainable Development, played a key role in enhancing knowledge base not only to policy makers to solve the problem but also create awareness to the common people. Some other NGOs followed and advocated the policy of lobbying, they used formal and informal means intended to influence the policy makers, for this purpose they organising informal forums for discussing with the concerned parties.¹³ NGOs playing a role of agenda setting by “define a problem, outline the scope of its solution and to mobilize public pressure in support of their definition is difficult to measure in an objective fashion, precisely because it operates outside the formal sphere”¹⁴. In the area of implementation NGOs scrutinised the government’s failure to live up to international commitments and bringing back the state to the right path.

Environmental NGOs working in national and international level made impacts mainly upon two main areas. At the international level, first concern was the environmental governance and second one was the creation of awareness to the all spheres of life. With the active participation of NGOs, a new actor entered to the international system apart from the traditional actor -State, this change was reflected even in the international environmental governance. As a part of this change, international bodies for environmental protection became more accessible and representative in nature and concept called ‘sustainable development’ was popularised and recognised globally. Second thing is the increased awareness of environmental degradation and its consequences up on future generations. NGOs organising massive level campaigns about preservation of the ‘ecosystem’ and, alternatives to the development models existed in the present world. This concern is not only reflecting upon the policy makers but also on the general public as a whole.

¹¹ Farhana Yamin: NGOs and International Environmental Law: A Critical Evaluation of their roles and Responsibilities

¹² Owen Greene: Environmental Issues in Globalisation and World politics. Oxford

Participation of Non-Governmental Organisations in International Environmental Governance: Legal Basis and Practical Experience. Final report: 2002

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¹⁴ *ibid*

United Nations Organisation and Environmentalism

Consequences, exceeding boundaries of nation state, of the environmental degradation made environment in the centre of international politics in the latter half of the twentieth century. Transboundary air pollution, acid rain, global warming etc. creating tensions even in relations between nation states and generally the state of world peace, an organisation like UNO established to keep world peace and friendly relations between nations is only possible through a system free from the environmental exploitation. Such a way environment security is a prime concern of UNO. It worked a forum for protecting natural resources, through a conservation agenda, from its beginning through the Food and Agricultural Organisation. Latter period witnessed the more complex character environmental character with a global nature. On this context UNO took initiations to form international frameworks to tackle these issues, Stockholm Conference was first among them.

Stockholm Conference: United Nations Conference on the human environment was organised in 1972 at Stockholm, this was a clear sign of the environmental concerns developed in nineteen sixties. Aim of this conference was to build an international framework for talking environmental problems, the conventions formed some institutions and principles in this regard. In certain an extent it was successful in two ways, first, the issue of environment got an international focus and the concern is institutionalised. Secondly, a consensus was formed that global common should be protected and the state have a responsibility for this. Stockholm conference established institutions like global and regional level environmental networks and United Nations Environmental Programmes (UNEP) with an aim of monitoring environmental problems and coordinating environmental activities of UN agencies in this regard. Another important change done was the development of international network of environmental NGOs and they started to engage in the developmental activities of the third world countries.

Rio conference: United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, this attracted increased public attention and media coverage. It was convened on the twentieth year of the Stockholm conference, to address the problems of environmental protection and socio-economic development. “Assembled leaders (at Rio Conference) signed the Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity; endorsed the Reo Declaration and the Forest Principles; and adopted a comprehensive ‘Agenda-21’, which was a plan for achieving sustainable development in the twenty-first century”¹⁵. A commission on sustainable development (CSD) was created in 1992, for effective follow up and monitoring the implementation of agreements of the Rio conference.

Rio+20 Conferences: United Nations (U.N.) Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) convened in 2012 at Rio de Janeiro, on the background of failure in achieving the objectives of Rio Conference in 1992. The principal objectives of the conference were, renew political commitment to sustainable development, assessment of the progress and implementation gaps in already decided agendas and addressing new emerging challenges. The conference renewed commitments to sustainable development by assuring the socio, economic and environmental development of the present generation without compromising the future one. UNCSD

¹⁵ Amitha Singh; The Politics of Environment Administration. Galgotia publishing company.2000.Newdelhi

emphasized the importance of green economy in the context of sustainable development, as a tool for attaining the eradication of poverty and sustained economic growth by ensuring healthy environment. The conference reached in a consensus about the need for strengthening intergovernmental arrangements for a sustainable development, like strengthening of Economic and Social Council, United Nations Environmental Programme.

The above mentioned three conventions are the most important in the efforts of the United Nations for protection of environment and sustainable development. At the same time UNO working many of the sectors like climate change, energy security, health sector etc and numerous agreements, treaties, and conventions were made, which have a close relation with the protection of environment. Montreal Protocol for the protection of Ozone Layer, Vienna Convention for the Protection of the ozone layer in 1985, Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change in 1997 etc were good examples in this regard.

UN efforts like the establishment of World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 and its report popularly known as 'Brundtland Report' made huge impact upon the international community, and concept of sustainable development got a worldwide recognition through this report. The frameworks which are established through the Stockholm in 1972, Rio in 1992 etc led to the change in the political frameworks and institutional mechanisms of member nations with a view to incorporate the concepts like sustainable development. Such a way UN's efforts in this regard created immense influence not only the individual nations but also the outlook of the world as whole, while many of the limitations existing.

