

Development over Environment: a Critical analysis of India's Path towards Sustainable Development

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Abstract :

The term development is very alluring both in case of individuals as well as in case of nation-states. Every country seeks development or growth and hence there is nothing wrong with having the urge to develop. It is the path chosen to materialize this objective that makes the issue of development both problematic and controversial. And a proper understanding of this aspect of development requires a holistic understanding of the crux of the matter. Accordingly this chapter begins with the paradoxical situation faced by the countries which came out of colonization or the developing and underdeveloped countries to focus more on development (which seems obvious given their economical plight) or opt for a more environment friendly or sustainable mode of development. It then moves on to discuss the debate between the developed North and the underdeveloped or the developing South on the issue of who contributed more to its degradation and who should volunteer to bear the greater responsibility. The chapter then focuses on the primary concern, that is,

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India by beginning with such instances where development seemed to overpower the ecological concern which ultimately led to widespread criticism and even protests. The chapter finally ends on a positive note focusing on the impressive efforts India is making so as to achieve sustainable development and thereby an environment friendly world.

Keywords :

Criticism, development, environment, movements, sustainable, India, anthropogenic

Introduction :

Anthropogenic interaction with environment is neither anything novel nor something artificial. This interaction and inter-relationship between nature and human beings is what sustains any living being on this planet. However, the problem started when this relationship become burdensome on the part of the environment as human beings started exploiting it to a level that it started showing signs of degradation. It is then that the issue of environmental protection and conservation started cropping up. In fact awareness regarding environment seems to be at least 5000 years old. It can be traced back to the ancient Indus Valley Civilization which back then started realizing the adverse affect that pollution was causing to human as well as to the Earth's health and resultantly practiced methods to mitigate the same. Again ancient Greek philosopher Plato, said the following about deforestation and the resulting soil erosion there, he said- "All the richer and the sifter parts have fallen away, and the mere skeleton of the land remains." Greek physician Hippocrates wrote a book entitled- "De aere, aquis et locis (Air, Waters, and Places)" which is considered to be the earliest academic work in Europe on "human ecology". These are but only a few excerpts of early environmental awareness. However, there is a stark difference in both the type and the intensity of these environmental issue in the earlier times as compared to the scientifically and technologically advanced modern times with a mammoth population. This population explosion and the resultant need to fulfill the demands of food, shelter and other basic necessities coupled with the need and the greed to achieve rapid economic growth by developed as well as developing countries alike has put indescribable pressure on nature leading to various made calamities on an enormous scale.

These and many other intricate reasons are responsible for the contemporary need to focus on such a mode of development that meets the genuine anthropogenic needs as well as be eco friendly in the long run and hence, the demand for “Sustainable Development”. However, it is easy said than done since various issues like political, economic, social etc both at the national and international level crop up in materializing such a mode of development and India is no exception. This chapter discusses these issues with particular reference to how it all started in India and the contemporary strands made by the government towards achieving sustainable development. It begins with the issue of “paradox” and “inequality” with respect to the developing and developed countries.

Statement of the problem:

The problem here is always to choose between the former and the later and take extremes rather than the middle path which even after so long has been difficult to achieve especially for the third-world countries like India to be particular which is the focus of this paper.

Objectives:

1. The first and foremost objective of the paper is to understand the word development as it has come to be known in the contemporary world.
2. To understand the dilemma faced by the countries of the South in choosing either development or environment.
3. To understand the crossroads of at which India was after independence regarding development.
4. To understand the North-South divide on matters of environment.
5. To take India’s efforts towards achieving sustainable development as a role model for other developing countries.

Scope and limitations:

The scope of the paper lies in the extensive research that has already been done in this field of study and ironically this very reason also stands as an obstacle or limitation in

conducting this study. Also because this paper depends entirely on secondary data there is limitation of personalization of the issue as well as accuracy of the facts and events.

Significance of the study:

The issue of development is an evergreen issue and something that is perpetual and so is environment and the nexus between the two. Its significance lies in this very issue and the fact that with time as the issue of global warming and resultant climate change is causing noticeable effects the importance of the matter increases manifold. As regards India which is the focal point of the paper, its ever increasing population and hence the increasing demand in every field makes it more difficult to carve out a road towards sustainable development.

Methodology:

This paper follows a mixed methodological approach comprising qualitative, descriptive and analytical methods to carry out the study. And accordingly the data is secondary and derived data from various authentic sources like book, websites and journal.

Plight of the third world or developing countries: a developmental dilemma

1.1 Meaning: Before understanding the developmental dilemma faced by the third world countries it is quintessential to know what the term “third world countries” stands for. In simple terminology, third world countries in modern times (since during Cold War the countries which joined neither sides and hence were neutral were generally referred to as third world countries) refer to those countries which are “poor or developing” (Team, 2021). These countries generally have certain common distinctive characteristics as compared to the other rich or developed countries- firstly, they are poverty stricken; secondly, these countries are characterized by instability both in the economic as well as political sphere and; thirdly, there is often a high rate of mortality in such countries. However, in the modern times it is generally preferable to use the words “developing” or “least developed” countries instead of “third world countries” on the ground that the use of such a term often lowers their importance in the international arena.

1.2 The developmental dilemma

The word dilemma refers to a situation where someone is at crossroads as to which path to take or which option to opt for. Third world or developing countries too were faced with similar dilemma as to prioritize rapid development or to opt for a more environment centric sustainable path. Given the fact that these countries are poverty stricken or poor, development (generally rapid economic growth) is their priority which is often believed can be achieved through intense industrialization or a more aggressive approach to development. And this approach has resulted in over exploitation of natural resources, pollution, deforestation etc. in short, environmental degradation. The dilemma before the developing or the least developed countries here is how to balance the dual goal of “development” and “environmental protection and conservation”. The reason being that environmental friendly or sustainable development though brings about a more perpetual and human friendly form of development, it requires time. Hence, may not be as quick in alleviating the problems faced by these developing countries, which at times require immediate solution and this causes what is referred here as the “development dilemma”.

1.3 India’s developmental approach immediately following independence

Like the other third world or underdeveloped countries India too was no exception. Coming out of almost a century long period of colonization Indian economy was in ruins struggling with deep rooted poverty, illiteracy, the trauma of partition and the fear of being captured by any other power and a situation of total anarchy. Hence, India had to plunge into such a mode of development, a road that can lead to “superfast” or “rapid” development economic growth and can lift the country out of poverty. Independent India was clear in its vision that this long struggled dream of Independence will be futile without achieving economic freedom. Hence, the main focus of development policy immediately following independence was “rapid industrialization”. This process of industrialization was sought to be fulfilled by focusing on “capital intensive” heavy industries. This approach or vision of development was clearly manifested in the “Five Years Plan (FYI)”. As regards India’s agricultural sector (the development of which is a prerequisite given that India is primarily

an agricultural economy), attempt was made to modernize it through the application of science and technology (Roffelsen, 2016).

A question of inequality: North-South divide

2.1. Meaning

Similar to the meaning of the first world and third world countries, global north refers to “countries in Europe, North America and the developed parts of Asia” (Dictionary) in short, it refers basically to the economically well to do and advanced countries while the global South refers to those “countries which are classified by the World Bank as low or middle income that are located in Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America and the Caribbean”. Hence, it too in common parlance refers to those underdeveloped or developing countries (Clarke, 2018).

2.2. The North-South debate on environment

This north-south divide here refers basically to the arguments given by both sides in their defence as to which side contributed more towards climate change in the past and hence who accordingly should take more responsibility in mitigating the same now. This debate comes to the fore in discussions about restrictions that should be applied by the countries so as cap the destructions caused by climate change. The argument put forward by the developed countries of the North is that the environment serves all irrespective of rich and poor and hence the responsibility of maintaining its health should also be borne by all. Another argument put forward by the global north is that countries belonging to the “Global South” lack proper environmental awareness, literacy, poverty, population which too contributes to pollution and thereby environmental degradation. Apart from this another argument is that the developing countries within the Global South like India are also contributing towards climate change through extensive industrialization etc. However, these very arguments are used by the Global South, arguing that though environment serves all it is the developed countries which have historically contributed more to climate change in their urge to development as industrialization originated there much ahead of when it did in the developing world. Again the argument regarding underdevelopment and poverty put

forward by the North is what the South is working to improve through industrialization. And that the developing and underdeveloped countries should “now” be given the chance to develop like the Global North countries did.

2.3 “Common but differentiated responsibilities”

The “North-South” debate discussed in the previous section has given rise to this principle of “Common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR)”, which was given formal recognition in the year 1992 in the famous “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). This principle recognizes the fact that though all countries irrespective of the “North” or “South” are responsible to do the needful for the upliftment of the environment yet this responsibility is not equal given the inequality in their contribution in the past to environmental degradation as well as the abilities of these countries to tackle the same.

3. Issues with the developmental approach to development in India: movements and protests

Issues with development leading to criticisms of government policies and protests and movements are nothing new and India too is no exception. This section discusses the beginning of discontent and then moves on to discuss some common complaints spanning most of the ecological movements in India.

As already mentioned, discontent over development from an ecological point of view is nothing new, but, there is a minute difference in place as compared to the West. In the West, it mainly arose out of the fear of nature being on the brink of destruction or animal species getting “endangered” etc. However, in India it arose mainly out of the anthropogenic instinct for survival.

In India it was not just an ecological struggle but one which combines issue of social justice with the need for sustainability. It was generally argued that the path that was followed for development was a double edged sword, harming both the poor and the environment in its entirety. Movements like Bishnoi (pre-independence period), Chipko (1973), Silent Valley (1978), Appiko (1983), Narmada Bachao (1985), Jungle Bachao Andolan (1982), etc., can be mentioned here. With the growing intensity and the persisting

nature of these movements they found mention in school textbooks as well as “college pedagogy”. Specialized courses on ecology started in Universities, these movements got coverage in media stories and journals (Guha, 2013).

Things started to change with the dawn of liberalization in India since the beginning of the 1990s. This period marked a shift from the state controlled economy to a free market economy. However, unexpectedly the proponents of this road to development scored an even greater attack on the environmental movements as a whole and also on the environmentalists and the leaders of these movements came under the radar of criticism. They were seen as obstacles in India’s path to development as they questioned how the path that has been adopted to achieve rapid economic growth or the quest “catching up with the West” was actually plundering India’s natural resources and ultimately degrading the environment (Guha, 2013).

The proponents of environment friendly mode of development in India question the fact that this “catching up with the West” needs to keep one thing in mind that unlike the colonial powers which had the opportunity to exploit resources from their colonies and use it for gearing up their process of industrialization while it was not the same for India. Again, though every environmental movement have their own specific criticism and discontent with the process of development, some recurring questions crops up. These include- “Before approving the rash of mining leases in Central India, or the large hydel projects being built in the high (and seismically fragile) Himalayas, had anyone systematically assessed their social and environment costs and benefits?” (Guha, 2013), Was proper Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the developmental projects undertaken before approving these projects?, Were the opinions of the indigenous people or the people most likely to get directly affected by the projects taken into consideration? Has proper rehabilitation of the people displaced been actualized? Do the benefits of the developmental projects outweigh the disadvantages or is it the other way round? Was or is it not possible to opt for any other eco friendly alternative that will on one hand bring about development and also benefit humankind in the long run?

4. India's Efforts towards Sustainable Development

4.1. Meaning

Before understanding India's efforts towards attaining Sustainable Development, it is imperative to comprehend what is referred to as Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development refers to such a mode of development that meets the need of the present generation without plundering the same for the future generation. This form of development seeks to preserve nature for the future generation so that they too can utilize it to the fullest and have a safer and greener planet to live in. This idea of Sustainable Development got formal recognition in the "Earth Summit" held in Brazil in the year 1992. Then to further this aim of Sustainable Development, the "United Nations General assembly (UNGA)" adopted the "Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015-2030)" in the year 2015. These goals are 17 in number which includes- "no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace, justice and strong institutions and partnerships (Goals).

4.2 Sustainable Development efforts taken in India

The need and importance of Sustainable Development is well known to everyone in the contemporary times and hence it has not been discussed in details in this chapter. Rather this chapter focuses on the strides made by India in achieving Sustainable Development.

In the year 2015 India together with 193 other countries committed towards achieving the 17 SDGs adopted by the UNGA's resolution entitled "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". And since then India has been working hard in fulfilling its commitment to these goals. In fact in the latest National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog's "SDG India Index & Dashboard 2020-21" India's rank went up from 60 in the year 2019-20 to 66 for the period 2020-21 (budget). This

progress can be better understood from the following commitment of the government of India:

- a. “Sashakt Bharat- Sabal Bharat: under which India was successful in alleviating almost 271 million people out of what is referred to as “multi-dimensional” poverty which can be seen to fulfilling the first SDG which is “No Poverty” (GOALS).
- b. “Samagra Bharat- Saksham Bharat”: which seeks to create an “inclusive and entrepreneurial” India. This can be seen to coincide with a number of SDGs mentioned above (GOALS).
- c. Swachh- Bharat- Swasth Bharat: which seeks to create a cleaner and thereby a healthier India. This coincides with the SDG 3 and 6- “good health and well being” and “clean water and sanitation” respectively (GOALS).
- d. “Satat Bharat- Sanatan Bharat”: which literally stands for creating a sustainable India through focus on issues such as “climate action strategies”, renewable energy sources etc. and this can be seen to be covering the whole of the SDG (GOALS).

Also for the decade 2010-2020 India was ranked “third” on the global level in “increasing its forest cover”. Then again in the month of August 2021, “Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules, 2021”, aimed to end the use of “single-use-plastic” by the 2022. Also in the year 2015, India announced its 1st “Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under Paris Agreement. Then again in the year 2015, India took a significant step towards Sustainable Development by announcing “International Solar Alliance (ISA)” and it continues making strides in this field till date (budget).

Discussion:

It can thus be said here that the concept of development has been conceptualized much around its understanding in the West and hence this race of achieving “development” in most cases echoes the desire to catch up with the west. This itself is the root cause of the issue today. Again there is no doubt genuine need for taking certain paths to development by the countries of the third world given their very much visible constraints of time, resources

to demand ratio and their historical exploitation to name a few. However, given the demand of the hour developing countries in general and India to be specific is taking steps towards a more eco-friendly mode of development within simultaneously keeping in view the uniqueness in terms of the social, spiritual and emotional attachment of its people to nature and also the supply-demand chain given its mammoth population.

Recommendations:

1. Firstly, a common suggestion would be that the developed countries should play a bigger part in undertaking steps for a greener globe than the developing countries because of obvious historical reasons.
2. The developing countries too should not use the above mentioned reason to carry out such extensive environment exploitation activities.
3. This can be achieved firstly by developing their unique notion of development rather than taking the “Western model” as an ideal one.
4. Most importantly “consent” of the affected should be the first priority when it comes to any developmental project.
5. Related to this is the fact that “environment” should be considered as a concern of the globe not as something that is limited within national boundaries.
6. Environmental laws should be made more stringent and stakeholders made more accountable.

Conclusion :

Mahatma Gandhi once said “God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare locusts” (Guha, The Guardian, 2007). This was way before India attained Independence and Gandhi already had the apprehension that India after independence might seek to become like the West or what is called in common parlance “catching up with the West”. This desire has created untold pressure on the environment and it is high time that India modify its developmental strategy

for a greener and safer future. No doubt much effort has been taken and attempt has been made not just to achieve sustainable development for India but also through these efforts inspire other developed as well as developing countries towards the same. Applauding the strides that India is making in the field of sustainable development, it has to be kept in mind that much still needs to be done if the future generation is to be protected from the wrath of nature. Because ultimately if there is “life” there will be everything else including development. Hence development and environment should be considered as complimentary to each other rather than contrary. □

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