

Environmentalism in the Global South: Analysing Select Readings from Brazil, India and Kenya on Justice, Equity and Rights

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Introduction:

Environmentalism and its study for the longest time have been ethnocentric in the favour of Northern developed industrialised countries. This understanding was fed in small part also by the famous statement of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the Stockholm Conference 'Are not need and poverty the greatest polluters'. Positions of the developing countries like - Brazil, South Africa, India, China, at various international environmental negotiations also give primacy to economic development over 'environmental protection' in their national agenda (Najam 2005), at the same time emphasising the centrality of equity in them (Costa Ferriera and Tavolaro 2008: 165). Thus, giving rise to the idea that 'environmental awareness and consciousness was a full stomached phenomenon' (Guha 2006:1 in critique of Thurow 1980:104). However, history of environmental movements like the Chipko Movement in India, Green Belt Movement in Kenya, Struggle of Ogoni and Ijaw people in Niger Delta, movements against big dams in Philippines, Thailand, Laos, and India, movements against the bio-piracy of seeds in India, Ecuador, and Bolivia along with the work of environmentalists across the length and breadth of the global south on the issues that many in the global north consider strictly environmental – forests, rivers, wilderness - has in many ways redefined, reclaimed and expanded the notions of environment and environmentalism.

Work of some of the important thinkers like Anupam Mishra, Wangari Maathai, Chico Mendes, Anil Agarwal, Vandana Shiva, José Antônio Lutzenberger, Marina Silva, Ken Saro Wiwa, Micahel Werikhe, and many others has been significant in seeking the corrective and reclaiming the field of understanding and knowledge of what constitutes environmentalism. These environmentalists have worked extensively to record and highlight the causes of environmental degradation, role of power across caste, class, gender, tribal, and regional lines in dispossession of the people involved in environmental conflicts or situations, and also redefining conservation and role of indigenous and local communities in conservation of habitats and livelihoods. Additionally, a closer look at their work will also reveal the social bases that give rise to differing demands for conservation and preservation of ecological resources and thus, different environmentalisms.

The terrain of environmentalism in the global south is vast and encompasses different actors and stakeholders located in varied geographies and spaces that are involved in various contestations around environmental resources. These contestations are a result of uneven power structure and the non-linear and unequal effect of process of colonization, capitalism and contemporary globalisation. These actors and stakeholders also interact with their counterparts across the globe at various forums and inform the debate around environmental degradation and solutions that are being sought for it (Rodrigues 2004: 6-12). Notably, this conversation between actors in differential power positions and locations is not without its divergences and contestations.

Environmentalism in the global south is seen to be distinct from the kind practiced in the northern countries as its priorities are deemed not to be essentially conservationist but are focussed towards livelihoods. Thus, for the larger part it has been characterised as 'environmentalism of the poor' which is informed by a reading of the popular movements by peasants, farmers, fisher folk, displaced villagers global south. For example the Chipko movement in Garhwal, Uttarakhand in India; Narmada Bachao Andolan in Madhya Pradesh, India; Chico Mendes's National Council for Rubber Tappers (NCRT) in Brazil's Amazon forest; Ogoni and Ijaw movement in the Niger Delta against Shell; the peasant movement in Mexico

against the transgenic Maize; and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya to fight desertification (Martinez-Alier 2002). Juxtaposed against the environmentalism in the industrialised countries of the north, the impulse in these movements is not to save the pristine 'wilderness' (like in United States) or return to an idyllic landscape of the countryside (like in Britain) or a simple demand for effective environmental policies rooted in ecological modernisation paradigm (like in Germany).

Conflicts and contestations around environment in global south are organised around a very different understanding of environment from that which exists in the global north. This understanding is also not uniform across the terrain and differs according to the sites it is situated in, the actors involved in the conflicts and the ecologies that are changing. It can, however, be largely defined to be centred on the rights of community to access their immediate environments for food, firewood, and livelihood. It is seen as an approach that will go a long way in ensuring the balance of the ecosystems as opposed to the state-controlled sanctuaries in the west (Guha 2000, Bryant and Bailey 1997).

Definition, Rationale and Scope of the Study:

Environmentalism as a phenomenon is the social and political movement that seeks to protect the natural environment by limiting or stopping the harm done to it by the range of human activities undertaken in its quest for subsistence, continuation and progress of the human race. Thus, there is an argument of reconsideration of our economic, social, and political system and organisation that are conducive to the benign treatment of the environment. Environmentalism in the global south, thus, tries to understand and analyse the movements, ideologies and processes that seek to preserve environment while at the same time dealing with the questions of livelihood and development.

Environmentalism has become an important issue theme in international politics ever since the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment of 1972, also better known as Stockholm Conference. Politics around it has also intensified. Given widespread natural resource depletion and cases of pollution – air, water, land, soil- the concerns regarding environmental degradation and destruction has resulted in environmental activism and movements. Environmental goals are nearly always factors in wider campaigns for greater political and economic clout (Haynes, 1999:222). Over the last quarter century, tens of thousands of environmental groups have emerged in the developing countries (Fisher, 1993:209 in Haynes, 1997:223) with majority located in Latin America or Asia fewer in sub-Saharan Africa and hardly in the Middle East.

These movements and activisms are instigated and informed by various watershed events and are carried forward by leaders and thinkers who try to conceptualise on these so as to understand the processes at work and also seek solutions. Therefore, a systematic reading of the work of the environmentalists and including the context of their situation can add to understanding of central themes and underlined bases that guide environmental thinking.

Anupam Mishra, Wangari Maathai and Chico Mendes are the three important environmentalists who have impacted the work and activism around environmental issues in their respective countries. Their work has not been studied in detailed fashion to derive their environmental philosophies. This study aims at understanding their philosophies, locate it within the larger environmental discourse, and investigate how it has shaped thoughts on Environmentalism in Brazil, India and Kenya. Works of other important thinkers like Anil

Agarwal, Vandana Shiva, Helen Gichohi, Marina Silva, Jose' Antonio Lutzenberger and others engaged in the debates around equity, justice and rights of people in management of natural resources and ecosystems in the three countries will also be analysed in a conversation with those of the selected environmentalists.

One of the major motivations for undertaking research on the topic was to highlight the diversity of environmentalism across the world, especially by focusing on the 'varieties of environmentalisms' in the global south. An effort will also be made to capture the voices and concerns of the newer actors that are located in the urban spaces and have concerns that many deem 'bourgeoisie' in nature. The extent to which livelihood concerns and issues of justice, equity and rights find reverberations with these newer actors will also be assessed.

The body of work of the thinkers also aims to understand the nature of environmental problems and conflicts; the location of these in the social, economic, political and cultural bases; resilience of the traditional knowledge systems in providing with the broad range of context-specific solutions for dealing with the environmental problems of both global and local nature like that of climate change, biodiversity and water scarcity.

Research Questions:

1. What are the connections, linkages and differences between environmentalism in the global south and environmentalism in the global north?
2. Whether the concerns around environment in the global south are predominantly about the livelihoods?
3. Where are the different concerns regarding environment located?
4. What are the different social bases from where varied kinds of environmental concerns are emerging?
5. How does the socio-economic-political context from which the work of Anupam Mishra, Wangari Maathai and Chico Mendes emerges define their work?
6. How is the development vs. environment debate addressed in the work of the three environmentalists?
7. What alternative visions of development do the three environmentalists provide?

Some of the most important questions (in addition to the questions included in the research proposal) guiding my research at the Wangari Maathai Institute will be centred on understanding the following:

- 1) How closely are the concerns of the environmentalists located in different spaces tied to the questions of livelihood and justice?
- 2) How are the actors and stakeholders working with Green Belt Movement articulating the concerns and demands of the communities they belong to and work with?
- 3) How do different actors and stakeholders in Kenya propose to address the demands for justice and rights post the 2010 Constitutional reforms, and under the new dispensation?
- 4) How the legacy of Wangari Maathai is understood and interpreted
- 5) Is there a wider political demand to urgently address the violence and threats that the environmentalists working in Kenya?
- 6) What are the different movements that have come into being in Kenya and Africa as a spill-over effect of GBM?

Literature Review:

Starting point of the work of the environmentalists selected here has stemmed from their involvement with the grassroots communities for their empowerment, which then informed their understanding of socio-political processes that led to degradation of natural resources base affecting livelihood. Anupam Mishra, along with the other noted environmentalist like the Anil Agarwal and Vandana Shiva, is known to have started his journey from studying Chipko that shaped his understanding on issues surrounding ecological resources (Agarwal 1975, Shiva 1988, Mishra 1978). Initiating and sustaining the Green Belt Movement involving rural women from 1977 in planting trees to fight desertification is what informed Wangari Maathai's environmentalism. Chico Mendes started as a labour union activist of the Rubber Tappers of Amazonia in state of Acre. His life-experience as an impoverished tapper dependent on rubber produce from the forest defined his ideas (Drummond 1996, Rodrigues 2007). Thus, the predominant priority in these movements remain the livelihood issues, an assertion of traditional and customary rights of people over natural resources, issues of displacement due to large-scale development projects, changing land-use patterns and a diminishing of life conditions due to degradation of land-soil-forest-water resources.

The predominant priority in these movements remain the livelihood issues, an assertion of traditional and customary rights of people over natural resources, issues of displacement due to large-scale development projects, and a diminishing of life conditions due to degradation of land-soil-forest-water resources. However, given the neo-liberal character of world economy and changing landscape and social-political realities in countries of the global south, in the recent years, especially in Asia and Latin America, the field of environmentalism has broadened and come to include newer actors and constituency within its folds.

There are multiple issues and concerns that these movements have raised and several stakeholders and actors (state/individual/communities) have been in conflict over the ownership of a natural resource. We see in most of these movements, firstly, an assertion of the communities to the rights over the natural resource base, thereby making a demand for justice; and secondly, these are in conflict with the state apparatus that have through the development projects sought to bring in modern technologies and management practices for the management of natural resources. Below is a short synopsis of review of literature on Wangari Maathai.

Wangari Maathai

Wangari Maathai, the late environmentalist, is known internationally for her fundamental role in initiating and sustaining the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. She worked tirelessly and against much political opposition and at great personal peril towards afforestation through the Green Belt Movement. The movement involved rural women planting trees as part of the soil conservation effort to fight desertification of their land. It started in 1977 and aimed to solve the problems of fuel, fodder, soil erosion and creeping desertification by surrounding each village with at least a thousand tree that would form the 'green belt' (Salman and Iqbal 2008: 859). The movement under Maathai also in the late 1980's became pro-democracy – asking for freedom of expression and constitutional reforms, and registering voters. This led to Maathai facing severe political persecution for her role in the movement coupled with a very trenchant gendered attack from the government establishment. Her work that involved rural women and empowered them has been broadly defined as eco-feminist (House-Midamba 1996, Salman and Iqbal 2008).

Through her work *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the approach and the Experience* (2003), she sought to show the challenges that the movement encountered in organising and campaigning with a view to provide people with know-how to manage a movement and build organisations that empowered people and helped create fuel, fodder and livelihood for themselves. Further, elucidating ‘key principles and concerns involved’ in running an environmental non-governmental organisation.

Unbowed: A Memoir (2006), she again sought to underline the challenges that the movement faced as well as detailed her own motivations for initiating the movement and how it developed and came to empower and train capacities in the communities, especially of women, through planting of trees. The book also outlines questions of state power and ethnic politics in an authoritarian regime which distributed public land including forests for political gains. It made the simple act of planting trees on public land by network of women and men an act of rebellion and protest against the government’s corrupt means (House-Midamba 1996: 300).

Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World (2010), outlines her vision and values that also came to inform the Green Belt Movement. Her stress on the traditional spiritual values such as love for the environment, self-betterment, gratitude and respect, and a commitment to service are seen as guiding towards self-empowerment as well as conservation. She draws from different faiths and traditions and seeks a re-avowal to these for healing of people and the planet as a whole.

Methodology:

The study would be analytical and interpretative in nature. It would use qualitative methodology by using a combination of methods –interpretation of the texts and interviews with important actors and stakeholders in environmental movements. Thus, it would involve a thorough hermeneutical reading of selected texts of the thinkers in the study, as well as discourse analysis of the interviews done with the environmentalists. It will also make use of the vast amount of secondary literature available in form of books, journal articles, interpretative essays, speeches, addresses, reports in the popular media like newspaper pieces and so on.

Potential Interview partners: 1) Environmental activists (specifically women) at GBM to see how the legacy of Wangari Maathai’s work is reflected – firstly in the lives of the women, and secondly in the different projects and works that they do. 2) Different actors and stakeholders that GBM is involved with to study how it has shaped and influenced their ideas and discourse.

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