

Making Environmental Issues more Salient in India's Politics

Lessons from the European Green Movement

Vijay Mahajan

Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies (RGICS), organized a dialogue on the above topic earlier this year at the Jawahar Bhawan, New Delhi. Over 45 people from different backgrounds including political leaders, environmental activists, academicians, and professionals attended the dialogue. The gist of the discussion is presented below.

Why Environment is not an Issue in India's Politics

- The high faith in consumerist and capitalist model of development. It is this model, which has accelerated degradation of environment. There is need to evaluate and question this model of development.
- Our policies are far from ground realities and local conditions. We must also think about the way we frame our policies. Developmental policies framed by national government at times undermine issues of local people.
- There has been high focus on large-scale projects, which undermines several environmental concerns. They do not directly benefit local community.
- Impact of environmental degradation on human health is an observed phenomenon but it is not being politicised.

Lessons from the European Green Movement

In this context, a European Green Movement activist, Mr Marko Ulvila from Finland, was invited to the consultation to give a perspective of the European Green Movement and how the environmental agenda was brought into mainstream politics in Europe over the last three or four decades. Mr Ulvila gave a succinct history of this process. Environmentalism is age-old. Its manifestation in earlier phase include:

- Spiritual and cultural restrictions on human consumption, management of commons, including conflict
- Management of natural resources moving public to private to public – from open forests to privates hunting grounds of rulers to modern national parks from 19th century onwards
- Environmental concerns in literature: Rabindranath Tagore and Mukta-Dhara / Waterfall 1922

- Modern responses to emerging problems: London pea-soup smog of 1952 and First Clean Air Act 1956

The origins of the movement that we now know as Greens can be identified in the radical student and left movements of the 1960s. The Paris Spring introduced a multifaceted transformative agenda where equality and individual liberties was at the core. General call was made for a society free of discrimination be for the sake of class, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. On the general political landscape anti-authoritarianism, ending colonial and neo-colonial wars, support to liberation movements, nuclear disarmament and environmental protection mobilised support.

Interestingly enough, in many of these movements ideas of Gandhiji and reference to him can be found. A well known case is how India's successful freedom struggle and liberation from the colonial rule inspired similar movements in Africa and elsewhere in Asia. Also Gandhiji as a champion of non-violence and inspiration for peace movement is an iconic role. For example, in 1952 one the first calls for nuclear disarmament was the Operation Gandhi held in London. From it numerous peace *padiyatras* followed and they continued with quite some popularity until the 1980s.

On environment, the links to Gandhiji are much less known. In year 1968 three seasoned scholars from Norway toured India for Gandhiji's birth centenary. They were Arne Næss, founder of the deep ecology school of thought, Johan Galtung, founding figure of the peace research movement and eco-philosopher Sigmund Kvaløy. Soon after returning to Norway they got involved in a struggle against a hydro-electric dam in Mardøla and introduced Gandhian satyagraha approaches to the movement. Næss run a course on non-violent resistance at his university to prepare ground for the actions that included chaining oneself to construction machinery. The dam was eventually built, but eco-satyagraha was introduced in Europe to be a central element of the Green movement in the continent thereafter.

These and many other movements such as ones promoting anti-authoritarianism, feminism and sexual freedoms surfaced in the revolutionary year of 1968. They mobilised large number of people and attention and pursued their goals through demonstrations, other



RGICS Dialogue on Making Environmental Issues more Salient in India's Politics

actions and independent media outlets. They became to be called the alternative or new social movements. Many of them found the existing parties or the whole parliamentary party system unpromising avenues for change.

After the 1968 movements, environment picked up as a theme in several ways:

- Civil Society: Foundation of Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace in 1969
- Governments: UN Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm 1972
- Business: Limits to Growth 1972

Only the party sector was still rather silent on the environment. However, towards the end of 1970s increasing number of activist saw also electoral politics as a necessary and useful avenue for action, and independents were set up successfully in local elections here and there. Because of the proportional representation system practiced in the elections in the continental Europe, such independents and alternative lists were able to pass the threshold of some five percent and got local representation. Such experiences eventually lead to creation of national parties, starting with German Green Party established in 1980.

The diverse German movements that joined hands in forming the Green Party agreed on **four pillars** as the common minimum standing: social justice, ecological wisdom, grassroots democracy and nonviolence. Of these social justice can be considered as a direct continuation of the European left parties while the three others emanate from the new social movement priorities. The spearheading theme of the founding times was opposition to nuclear power with vibrant local movements mobilising ordinary people to prevent plants built in their localities. In early 1980's the peace movement in Europe mobilised in grand scale against placing American nuclear missiles in Europe.

The German Green Party fully supported the demands of the movement. By taking this popular stand in contrast to other parties, the Greens got in the 1983 federal elections the required 5 percent of the popular vote and got its first 28 MPs in the Reichstag or the German federal parliament. In 1985 Greens became a junior partner in the state government of Hesse, thus ascending to a state power within five years from the establishment of the party.

Two innovations of the German Greens:

- 50 percent quota for women
- Quota used also to accommodate various alternative views within the movement.

During the next decade three important events or processes took place.

1. The UN Commission on Environment and Development, set up in 1983 with former Prime Minister of Norway, Ms. Gro Harlem Brundtland as the chair. Its aim was to “propose long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development”. The commission was a response the environmental movements and concerns. While the commission with its 1987 report “Our Common Future” increased the awareness and commitment to the environment, it at the same time presented the questionable case that the three pillars of sustainable development - economic, social and ecological - are mutually compatible and supportive. In the 1970s there was strong transformative demand identifying growth as a source of environmental problems. Now Brundtland commission said that not only is growth

compatible with environmental concerns, but absolutely necessary for sustainable development. Finnish ecological economist Jan-Otto Andersson has written about the trilemma of sustainable development where he argues that two of the three goals can be achieved simultaneously, but then a third one will be inevitable undermined. And this we have seen in the three decades after the commission: strong advances on social progress and economic growth and destruction of the global environment.

2. German election result 1990 where the Greens had very ambitious environmental agenda and fell below 5 percent threshold and got no MPs to the parliament. The party was emboldened by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the environmental wave partly caused by the Brundtland commission and build-up towards the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.
3. Collapse of the Soviet Union: Green movements played also important role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Environment was one of the few things where debate and even popular activity was tolerated in the Soviet Union, especially after Gorbachov was elevated to power and he introduced glasnost and perestroika policies. During that time the central government had produced massive river diversion plans and scientist were questioning these in public. Several leaders of the environmental movement became in the Baltic countries also political leaders, though the green parties in the former eastern bloc have not had stable strong presence.

Now thinking about **achievements of the Green Movement in Europe**, there are notable things to mention. Much of these are outcomes from electoral victories and Green joining national coalition government. Most important is the ten year period when German Green Party ruled with social democrats from 1998-2005. The achievements include:

- Preventing the massive building of nuclear power envisioned in the 1970's and turning the tide for phasing down of nuclear power production.
- Cleaning up local environment through regulation of air and water pollution as well as waste management.
- Small advances in protection of natural environment and biodiversity.
- Promotion of renewable energy, most notably through the feed-in tariff introduced in Germany that brought down the price of solar and wind power construction.
- Relatively consistent commitment to climate protection internationally, though clearly inadequate.

Marko Ulvila then presented the 2019 Manifesto as adopted by the European Green Party Council. This is reproduced below:

Time to renew the promise of Europe: The 2019 Manifesto as adopted by the European Green Party Council, Berlin, 23 – 25 November 2018

- A vote for the Greens is a vote for change. It is a vote to not let go of Europe, but to make it into what it was promised to be: a union not of selfish interests, but of shared responsibility. A union not for financial gains for the few, but economic and social progress for all. A union that leads the world by protecting people and the planet. Now is the time to fulfil that promise. Now is the time for change. We are a truly European movement united by our vision, mission and passion. From Ireland

to Georgia, from Norway to Malta, we fight for human dignity, sustainability, equality, peace and solidarity. We do it in the parliaments and we do it on the streets.

- But today powerful forces are trying to steer us back. On one side, new groups are using aggressive tactics and the temptation of hatred to trick and force their way to power. On the other, status quo politicians are failing to enact real change in a time that calls for ambitious action. The UK has decided to leave the Union, and other forces want to weaken it. Authoritarianism, racism, neoliberalism, terrorism and wars in our neighbourhood – all in different ways – have eroded the sense of security for many Europeans. The financial crisis and austerity policies left millions in poverty, while big multinational corporations avoid taxes. People fleeing war and persecution exposed governments unwilling to help, while Europe as a whole is wealthier than ever. The climate crisis threatens to rapidly undo the very foundations of our civilisation. Europe's future is at jeopardy. Now is the time for change. Now, more than ever, we need to act. We need to build a democratic and inclusive Europe that is socially just and environmentally sustainable. We need an economy that serves both current and future generations. We need a Europe that bears its global responsibility and leaves no one behind.
- In today's globalised world, no country is big enough to tackle problems alone. We can only take back control by working together and looking to the future – not by building walls and retreating into the past. We are guided by the Sustainable Development Goals, providing a roadmap for all countries. The European Union is far from perfect, but it can be a powerful force for good. We can build on what has been achieved – and change what has not worked. By working together, Europe can reduce poverty and create jobs, tackle the climate crisis and restore our nature, fight discrimination and defend freedom. We know that building this Europe will not be easy. Old status-quo parties have long resisted calls for progressive reforms. But we are committed to working hard every day with people, organisations and movements fighting for change.

[Editor's note: Marko later informed us that in the general election held in Finland in April 2019 for the 200 member Parliament, the Green League got the best result ever with 11.5 percent of the vote (+3 percent from the previous election) and 20 MPs (+5). The party leader Pekka Haavisto ignited an energetic campaign with a positive content highlighting climate, education and equality. Nationally Greens ended up as the fifth, in Helsinki they were the most popular one. Of the twenty Green MPs 17 are women!]

Back to India, the consultation came up with the following strategies for making environmental issues more central to India's politics. These are sub-divided into six different sub themes.

Clarifying the environmental aspect of everyday problems

- Local and every day issues of life and livelihood have more potential to mobilize people.
- Ground water is contaminated, surface water is highly polluted, forest cover has decreased, air has been polluted to the dangerous level and these evidences are enough to mobilize people.
- Communities see environmental issues from different perspective, depending on their location and their direct and indirect dependency on natural resources.



Mr. Marko Ulvila, European Green Movement activist describing journey of the European Green Movement

- Farmers is a big group and drastically affected by changing environment. Their problems such as low productivity, inadequate returns, and indebtedness, need to be defined in the context of climate change and environment.
- The degradation of environment and scarcity of resources is leading to conflict.

Research and evidence-based arguments

- Research is important aspect to find evidence of the impact of environmental degradation on the people.
- Mapping of distribution of natural resources and calculating monetary value of these resources can be effective way to share consciousness of common people.

Communication and dissemination of information in effective manner

- Environmental issues needs to be re-defined in local language. Our vocabulary must capture popular imagination of common people.
- There is need to use effective and modern communication system to mobilize people. The communication should also provoke people to actively engage. Local or folk ways of communications do also have far reaching impact, such methods should also be used for effective communication.
- Climate change and degradation of environment is affecting both rich and poor. Each of them is concerned about it. However, popular imagination of both the group is different. There is need to bridge this gap through effective communication.
- The big task is to convince our political leaders that climate change is not an external issue. It is our people who will suffer most from climate change.

Organizing, Mobilizing and Networking masses

- People must be mobilized on their different issues such as youth on jobs, farmers on agrarian crisis, tribal on forest and Himalayan people on mountain issues and link all such issues with the umbrella issue of the environment to build constructive opinion.
- Integration of social, economic and environmental issues is essential to address the complex issue of environmental degradation and its impact.

- Farmers can be mobilized for ecological farming; it is one of most vulnerable group.
- Issues of young people especially jobs has lot to do with environment and climate change. This group is also important and can be mobilized.
- Women especially in Himalayan region are more close to the nature; we have history of women's role in protecting environment. This group needs to be given due share in representation and decision making.

Networking of organizations

- Social, economic and political organizations working on issues of common people must come together to form coalition to fight this common problem.
- There are contradictions in the way of looking at the problem of environment between village, state, national and international level. There is need to understand and engage with these contradictions.
- A real bottom-up approach of developmental planning is required. So, the focus should be on strengthening and reviving District Planning Committees (DPCs).

Sensitizing political and other leaders

- Policy makers must acknowledge that millions of underprivileged people are highly dependent on nature for their life and livelihood.
- There should be more dialogues between scientists, activists, policy makers and political leaders. Such dialogues will help in deepening knowledge of politician and developing and political discourse.
- Interaction among stakeholders including politicians is important to discuss environmental issues, comprehensive planning and effecting implementation.
- Political parties in India should also promote and support leaders in their organizations who have genuine concerns for environmental issues.

We end with some excerpts about the sayings and doings of various Indian political leaders on the issue of environment.

The UN held the first global conference on the human environment (UNCHE) in Stockholm in June 1972. [Indira] Gandhi used her platform to express the inextricable goals of poverty alleviation and environmental protection. "There are grave misgivings that the discussion on ecology may be designed to distract attention from the problems of war and poverty," she said. "We have to prove to the disinherited majority of the world that ecology and conservation will not work against their interest but will bring an improvement in their lives."¹

"As Prime Minister, there was in Indira Gandhi, a sense of engagement with issues of the environment...in 1973, Project Tiger was launched...No one living in Delhi is unaffected by the fate of its city-forest, the Ridge. In the flurry of activity in courts and in the media, it is easy to forget that she was the first prime minister who gave it a mantle of protection in the summer of 1980, when petitioned by a student group from the city, Kalpavriksh"²

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/may/06/indira-gandhi-india-climate-change>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/2011/jul/13/jairam-ramesh-india-environment-ministry>

Rajiv Gandhi's interest on preserving natural resources and the environment was visible through his actions. In 1985 he announced the setting up of a National Wastelands Development Board (NWDB) in 1985 with a mission of greening five million hectares of wastelands every year, which if achieved would result in one-third of India acquiring a green cover by the year 2000 A.D. Sensing the danger to the planet and life, he brought about the Environment (Protection) Bill, 1986 before the Parliament.

"Jairam Ramesh was named India's Minister for Environment and Forests in 2009 in the UPA Government led by Dr Manmohan Singh. As Ramesh ...observed: 'India needs to be liberated both from the 'high GDP growth hedgehogs' and the 'conservation at all costs hedgehogs'. What India needs, he said, is a smooth, cunning and crafty fox that balances high growth and conservation. 'The hedgehog view' (sticking to one big idea) is unresponsive and inattentive to the untidiness and complexity of real life."Ramesh held public consultations, raised environment-related objections, and cancelled some projects. He set up a national green tribunal, and worked on forest dwellers' rights. In 2010 he imposed a two-year moratorium on India's genetically engineered aubergine, [but] Ramesh lashed out against what he saw as 'politicisation of climate science'".³

KN Govindacharya, former RSS ideologue and former BJP General Secretary said, in 2011 "Allowing indiscriminate globalisation is not conducive to our environment and we will not be able to cope up with its ill effects. We have seen the example of Brazil which started off economic reforms ahead of India, the ill effects of indiscriminate urbanisation despite the fact that their population is much less and they have double land mass, if India treads the same path the impact will be catastrophic."⁴

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/2011/jul/13/jairam-ramesh-india-environment-ministry>

⁴ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/fdi-policy-changes-former-rss-ideologue-cautions-modi-govt-against-allowing-indiscriminate-globalisation-1136210-2018-01-11>