

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ENVIRONMENT: CLAIMS AND CONTESTATIONS IN PUBLIC POLICY FORMULATIONS

SHILPA S.P. SINGH¹

¹Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Goa University, Goa, INDIA

ABSTRACT

The Public Policy deliberations in a democracy entails that competing and divergent interests are accommodated and consensus is reached through an informed and organised participation by all the sections of society. However in neo-liberal societies there is an inherent asymmetry in power relations and structures, where dominant market forces have acquired substantial power to influence Public Policy and decision making process in their favour as they command economic growth of the country, which necessitates rampant industrialisation and subsequent exploitation of natural capital leading to displacement of powerless tribal and poor people losing their land and livelihood which contributes in aggravating deprivations, inequalities and powerlessness which seriously interferes with their ability of political participation, thus restraining their say in Public Policy deliberations, which is by large more responsive to the needs of business than poor. Studies suggest that it is poor who will bear the brunt of environmental degradation and climate change to the greatest extent by being pushed further into grave threat of poverty, diseases, hunger and malnutrition etc. Moreover, the progressing unsustainable economic growth intensifies the powerlessness and poverty of marginalised rather than mitigating it as propounded by trickle-down growth enthusiasts, ensuring Human development is equally pertinent for robust participation in bottom-to top Policy making deliberations on Sustainable Development.

KEY WORDS: Democracy, Environment, Public Policy, Civil Society, Economic Growth, Inequality, Marginalized

INTRODUCTION

Democracy entails vibrant public participation in the political process, through which citizens contributes to the larger policy formulations in not only political domain but also in socio-economic domain. It is obligation of democratic state to bring a convergence in divergent social choices and interests of individuals so that collective decisions based on democratic ideals of freedom, equality and justice are taken for welfare of the people while framing the public policies. Therefore, The Public Policy deliberations in a democracy necessitates that competing and divergent interests are accommodated and consensus is reached through an informed and organised participation by all the sections of society. Lately with the onset of neo-liberalism in post-cold war world, the espousal of aggressive growth oriented development models across the democracies has led state to determine national interest in terms of economic growth prospects, where economic growth is perceived as panacea to achieve national power and human welfare. This over emphasis on economic growth is problematic as it largely negates the competing

and divergent perspectives and interests within public sphere represented by different classes such as poor, tribal, women and under-privileged, since accommodation of these diverse interests may have a negative impact on economic growth. The discourse on political economy of Environment is concerned with the political decisions shaping the modes of economic production and development and how this entails environmental degradation and subsequent social costs, which in turn elicit resistance and counter-demands shaping democratic politics. It has been lately recognised that Environmental degradation and ensuing climate change have been accidental casualty of economic Growth, which has evoked grave response from democratic politics led by civil society demanding urgent mitigation and management. Therefore, at present the main challenge before the policy-makers is to duly allocate the economic value of environment and its resources in such a manner which promotes efficiency and economic growth, at the same time such determination should also check environmental degradation. This mainstream approach of policy formulation is rooted in liberal perspectives which

ascribes environmental degradation to market failure, and provides the case for extension of market principles and inclusion of environmental values in pricing policies, which would in turn lead to an efficient allocation of resources and environmental conservation. (O'Brien:2007). Another divergent approach which contests the very nature of development policies of market economies is radical approach; they associate environmental degradation as an inherent vice of capitalism. They argue until and unless economic values and systems of capitalism break down, no policy can ensure environment sustainability. This alternative critical approach has found expression in form of 'New Politics' by civil society associations such as environment based social movements, environmental Non-governmental organisations and protest movements, who critique the very nature of environmental public-policy making exercise in neo-liberal democracies as elitist, statist and exclusionary, leading to displacement, alienation and marginalisation of masses dependent on environment to meet their livelihoods and overall survival. The policy on land-acquisition, forest clearance, natural resource auctions and other development related projects are attributed to be having a social cost and highly exploitative of environment and of the Poor people's interest. They demand greater voice of local and tribal and other marginalized communities in policy-making exercise on environment. This countervailing contestation is forcing many countries including India to balance out and do the tight-rope walking in harmonising economic growth and development with the cause of Environmental conservation by recognising the right of local communities over natural resources such as forests. The theoretical debates on political economy of environment can be furthered by philosophical ideas of anthropocentrism and eco-centrism which can provide divergent perspective in policy-making on environment, Anthropocentrism perceives that human needs are of overriding moral and philosophical importance, and therefore as per anthropocentrism human needs and ends precedes environment. Interestingly, from start of human civilization till the contemporary period this philosophical idea has been at core of defence of use and exploitation of Nature and Environment to fulfil human ends. The purpose of democratic state and its development discourse, and the entire debate for economic growth are rooted in seeking fulfilment of human ends, whereas Eco-centrism accords priority to maintenance of ecological balance over realisation of human ends, they vehemently attack consumerism and materialism inherent in capitalism which

is over-powering human wants over human needs leading to over exploitation of nature. However, even though Anthropocentrism appears to be preceding public policy deliberations on environment, continuing with unsustainable public policies on environment on this anthropocentric premise is highly misplaced, since such policies have potential of jeopardising fulfilment of the basic needs of humans in long run, especially marginalised and poor communities by aggravating environment degradation, resource depletion and climate change. The present environmental crisis necessitates that eco-centrism also has to be factored into public policy deliberations towards management and conservation of environment. The main challenge facing public policy deliberations is to evolve and tread the path of golden mean, balancing the human needs and wants with the ecological harmony.

ASYMMETRIES OF POWER, INEQUALITY AND QUESTION OF PARTICIPATION : A CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY

Democracy cannot be simply understood as rule of majority marked by regular elections, rather it's a complex system processing multitudes of demands. Politics can be perceived as struggle among diverse groups over allocation of scarce resources and power can be perceived as ability to influence the decision-making process in their favour. In Liberal democratic states, a complex process of bargaining takes place between the state and the various groups, in which the most influential segment dominates, influencing the public policy, rules and regulations. For instance, India is described as the world's largest multi-ethnic democracy, its irrefutable fact; this entails that India as democratic state is an instrument of reconciliation of competing and conflicting interest of the various groups of society. Since democratic state is based on egalitarian principles, it cannot stand for serving the interest of particular class but to serve the interest of entire society. Here Interest can be described in terms of satisfying the wants and needs and improving lives of all the people through just allocation of scarce resources which requires a fair procedure of redistribution in order to suffice the ideal of social justice on which a democratic state is based upon. The capacity of democratic state to accommodate the demands from diverse set of groups especially that of marginalized groups determines the strength of democracy. Therefore, the task before the state to build the consensus of all the groups towards the larger public policy formulation presents the most intricate challenge. However, in neo-liberal societies there is an

inherent asymmetry in power relations and structures, where dominant market forces have acquired substantial power to influence Public Policy and decision making process in their favour as they pose economic power and command economic growth of the country measured in terms of economic value of Gross domestic product. The developing countries that had recently opened up their economies were also not aloof from this phenomenon. The lobbying strength of business has increased manifold with the onset of era of globalisation particularly aiming to expand economic activities to remain competitive which necessitates exploitation of natural resources; on many instance such business interest even pressurize government to determine economic value of vital natural resources at much lower rate to make greater profits rather than determining at market value, coal block allocation scam in India is case to the point. It can be argued that globalisation led to shift of a substantial power from the aegis of state to market; In globalised world, it is market that determines value and allocation of resources along with the state, and it is collusion of state with market forces popularly called as crony capitalism that is hijacking market mechanism of determining value of environment by favouring specific business house and thus flexing competition which may have led to greater efficiency and lower wastages. The business elite being the main drivers of economic growth got concessions via deregulation mechanism of the state, with the state's nod corporate sector went on the spree of acquiring and exploiting land and forest resources for mining of natural minerals, Special Economic zones, exploration of natural resources especially Hydro-carbons, and infrastructural development projects leading to rampant acquisition of forest land and other natural resources and subsequent exploitation and misappropriation of natural capital leading to displacement of powerless tribal and poor indigenous people losing their own land, control over natural resources, means of livelihood and cultural identity which contributes in aggravating deprivations, inequalities and powerlessness which seriously interferes with their ability of political participation. Considerably, these socio-economic inequities gravely interfere with their human capabilities, as powerlessness related to deprivations, lack of livelihood, caste, gender, health, poverty and education can in many situations make the socio-economically under-privileged also politically marginalized having minimal say in Policy making (Sen., Dreze:2002). As a consequence, Tribal and other marginalised communities lack capabilities and access to power centres which may restrain their say in Public Policy deliberations,

which is thus by large more responsive to the needs of business than poor. It can be inferred here that unsustainable growth and development policies leading to displacement, pollution and alienation can further enhance vulnerability of marginalised poor and tribal communities since they have a direct dependence on natural resources and capital for livelihood and cultural ends such as land, forest, water, common forest resources rich in bio-diversity. The failure of state policy and market mechanisms in mainstreaming marginalised communities and providing them alternative means of livelihoods defeats the very purpose of developmental policies which pretend to aim at achieving human welfare. Therefore, claims of anthropocentric under-currents in unsustainable and inequitable development policies are gravely misplaced, as it selectively seeks to promote interest of elite business as the expense of marginalised. Exclusion, Loss of control over land and forest rights is compelling marginalised communities to migrate to cities and live in inhuman conditions. The growth of violent movements such as Naxalism in India has been able to sustain on backing of exploitation, displacement and alienation of tribal people. Such pattern of lopsided development and heavy concentration of power in hands of influential and elite class is against the basic egalitarian principles of democratic states. The dearth of democracy in policy-making related to environment is facing stiff resistance from marginalised communities mobilized by civil society associations. The economic growth enthusiasts ridicule and associate entire civil society activism for environmental concern to post-materialist ethics aims at sacrificing interest of humans by negating positive aspects of growth for maintenance of non-human world and ecology. It is virtually evident that the interest of business and marginalised communities are antithetical to each other, and that interest of elites prevails over that of marginalised communities and thus presents a crisis of legitimacy in policy-formulation exercise in democracy; this forces state to evolve a participatory approach to policy-making which balances out the interest of business class with that of the marginalised communities especially tribal.

CONTRADICTION OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN ADDRESSING POVERTY

Since Inception of Globalisation, India embarked on path of free market economy and gained substantially in form of growth as measured in terms of GDP, it was presumed and supported by economist that double digit growth for a decade will be enough to mitigate poverty

from India, as Chinese example had shown. The run-up to the achieve higher growth trajectory and economic development in India necessitated aggressive utilisation and exploitation of natural resource base, which had negative repercussions on carrying capacity and preservation of environment. The environmental degradation and climate change occurring all over the world is posing severe threat for intensifying and aggravating poverty. The developing countries have been long demanding and defending preferential treatment to be not bound by international treaty to cut greenhouse emissions contributing to global warming and climate change on premise of need to have a robust economic development in order to eradicate poverty and enhance living standard of masses. The question arises here is whether Progressing with unsustainable environment practices can effectively tackle or eradicate poverty? The answer is quite pessimistic and studies suggest that there is a direct link between poverty climate change and environmental degradation; and it is poor who will bear the brunt of environmental degradation and climate change to the greatest extent by being pushed into grave threat of malnutrition, loss of livelihood, displacement, Hunger, conflicts, diseases etc. Climate change leads to temperature extremes which negatively affects the food system by disrupting crop yields and thus pushing up the food inflation which leads to greater food insecurity. A recent study by Harvard school of public health reveals that rising levels of Carbon dioxide are reducing vital nutrients from staple food crops, which may increase instances of hunger and malnourishment among poor people aggravating their poverty. Climate change is leading to rising instances of drought and natural disasters forcing climate migration, displacement and loss of livelihood for millions of people every year forcing them to live in conditions of abject poverty. Recently climate change is also being regarded as a public health issue, since pollution, contamination is leading to life-threatening diseases such as cancer and extreme weather conditions are supporting growth of pathogenic organism which is causing multitude of diseases. As a consequence, poor people are forced to spend a large amount of their income towards health expenditure. Therefore, even inclusive growth may not lead to reduction of poverty until and unless growth is sustainable. Besides economic growth, poverty alleviation also requires a multi-pronged strategy which includes natural resource management approach which can be done by adopting sustainable use of basic resources such as agriculture, water and energy. (Malhotra: 2014), Thus argument of continuing with unsustainable

growth for poverty reduction is fallacious, hence there is task before public policymakers is to harmonise and integrate the agenda to develop and preserve social, Cultural, natural and human capital, rather than only prioritizing GDP centric economic capital.

THE CHALLENGE OF PUBLIC POLICY FORMULATIONS: CONTESTATIONS OF PUBLIC SPHERE

As mentioned Earlier, the Policy formulations in liberal democracies has been long held hostage to existing asymmetrical power structures, where the dominant state and its influential power lobbies dominated and thus determined the majority of policy outcomes. It reduced policy-formulation to mere extension of state's agenda and thus failed to articulate and take into account views and interest of public sphere. The failure of state to align policy-formulation to public interest and opinion led to brewing of dissent, which was further mobilised and concretized in form of new social movements and civil society associations. The civil society activism aimed at pressurizing state to consider a more participatory and inclusive approach towards governance and policy making. The knowledge and wisdom of state was challenged over the question of development and environmental policies. The viability of development projects disrupting the livelihoods and survivability of marginalised were scrutinized, and the narrative of displacement, alienation, dispossession, rehabilitation, forest and land rights gained prominence in policy impact assessment discourse due to civil society activism. The resistance offered by civil society against policies of forest clearance, development projects in eco-sensitive zones, ill legal and unsustainable mining became a flashpoint of contestation in ensuring environmental justice to the forest dwellers and other marginalised communities whose rights and interests were affected. The resistance of marginalised communities mobilised by civil society associations against the state-centrism in governance was co-terminus with realisation within the state systems that economic growth and development depends on good governance, which prioritises inclusion, sustainability and participation, which led to emergence of new understanding of governability which involves greater participation of citizens and civil society associations in decision making process where diverse perspectives and contestation challenge and asses the conventional knowledge and public policy impacts (Vishwanathan:2014). As a result, the public policy formulation has become more open and accommodative of contesting claims within public sphere.

The conventional understanding of growth development and environment has been challenged and this contestation is proceeding for consideration of alternative notions of these terms. The anthropocentric and Universalist ideas related to growth and development are being fiercely debated and are being provided with alternative ideas of eco-centrism and cultural relativism. As a result, Universalist and anthropocentric perception of growth and poverty and nature are being deconstructed. Poverty is now understood not just being non-fulfilment of material needs but also non-material needs comprising issue of community, culture, spirituality and identity. Both needs are equally important for overall welfare of humans, for tribal communities' non-material needs may be even more significant owing to their traditional lifestyle. Same way human's importance over nature is debatable, nature being closely associated with cultural sanctity and spiritual beliefs of tribal people. For instance, the proposal for bauxite mining in *Niyamgiri* hill of Odisha invoked a fierce resistance by *Dongria* and *Kutia Kondh* tribes inhabiting the hills for centuries, *Niyamgiri* hills had a deep spiritual and cultural value for these nature worshipping tribes since they considered the hill tract as their deity called as '*Niyam Raja*'. The bauxite mining would have led to death of mountain and along with it the demise of cultural and spiritual beliefs of these tribes. The Odisha Government and Central government policies failed to consider the cultural right of these tribes despite enactment of forest rights act which empowered local Gram Sabha as final authority to consider approval for developmental projects in notified forest areas as a result civil society associations had to approach Supreme Court through mechanism of public interest litigation, and it was after intervention of supreme court justice was restored to these marginalized communities. As evident from the above case the policy of state that gave priority to development project over interest of nature worshipping community, was lopsided, inequitable and abhorrent.

For a policy maker evaluating whether cultural, spiritual and community wellbeing of tribal people associated with preservation of nature is less significant than a development project or vice-versa is bound to be fraught with complex predicament. This presents the most significant challenge for the public policy formulations, as reaching a balance between nature and growth involves highly multifarious processes and dynamics. Prioritizing one human end over other without engaging them through public hearing and consultation is unethical and is bound to attract dissent and resistance; this provides even larger case for making public policy formulations more

participatory and inclusive to reach a level of consensus. The enactment of forest rights act which empowered forest dweller by recognizing their right over forest resources, and Environment impact assessment notification of 2006 which entailed a standard process used to foresee and assess the biophysical and social impact or environmental consequence of a policy, plan or developmental project before implementation, were attempt on part of Indian state to achieve the balance between need of economic growth and environmental conservation.

CONCLUSION: A NEED FOR CONSENSUS BASED APPROACH

The Political economy of environment wields a complex ramification on public policy deliberations, which is simultaneous with changing dynamics of democracy, where owing to popular demands and pressure state centrism is receding to accommodate greater contestation of ideas and interests emanating from public sphere. Due to diverse and competing nature of demands, interests and opinions, consensus building by aggregation of interest is very vital for public policy formulations in order to ensure acceptability and avoid resistance which may contribute to smooth implementation of policies. The competing interests of business and marginalised communities over the question of environmental conservation and sustainability can be best reconciled by ensuring a sustainable economic growth. Building a sustainable growth model is the most pressing challenge before the state which seeks harmonious integration of environmental conservation and economic growth.

The state has to provide equal democratic spaces to all the stakeholders to participate in public policy deliberations by creating awareness and undertaking a participatory and inclusive consensus building process towards idea of sustainable development. However, Articulation of interest of marginalized sections towards consensus building is most taxing, since for long civil society activism claims to provide voice to marginalized against the state and market atrocities, however such claims may not yield substantial gains in improving the lives of marginalized and enabling positive outcomes until its resistance and demands translates into a coherent action by the policy-makers. Moreover, The Civil society groups cannot claim monopoly over aggregating the interest of marginalised groups, as the real interest of marginalised may differ from the perceived interest due to their inability to comprehend self-interest due lack of human development and capabilities. The social choice of marginalised over question of environment conservation,

culture or development cannot be monopolised by either state or civil society until their human capabilities are developed. Thus ensuring Human development is equally pertinent for robust participation in bottom-to top Policy making deliberations on Sustainable Development.

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